

Mini-Reports

Pinenut Mountain's Secret Stash



Figure 1: Semi-circular rock alignment surrounding a shallow depression marks the pinyon cache. Photo by Steve Stearns.

A DESCRIPTION OF A POSSIBLE REMNANT PINYON CACHE IN THE PINE NUT MOUNTAINS, DOUGLAS COUNTY, NEVADA

BY STEVE STEARNS

Post retirement opportunities to explore my backyard, with my Labrador Retriever puppy "Illy", along the western slopes of the Pine Nut Mountains northwest of Minden lead to the discovery of a possible remnant pinenut cache (*Pinus monophylla*). It is situated in the ethnographic homeland of the Washo Indians along the eastern

edge of Carson Valley a short distance from Hot Springs Mountain. This feature lies on the western edge of a narrow ridge line in a pinyon-juniper woodland at 5,400 feet above sea level. No other cultural material was found to be associated with this feature.

The Remnant Pinyon Cache

The feature is 1.50 meters in diameter, situated under a tree limb canopy formed by two 12 foot tall juniper trees (Figure 1 and Figure 2). A distinct semi-circular rock alignment comprising four small (basketball-size) boulders partly surrounds a small (20 cm+) depression with a large flat boulder forming a portion of it. A small, partially encircling berm rises against the trunks of both trees. Paralleling both berms are detached branches that have been woven between live limbs (Figure 4) along the east and west berms (see Figure 2 for the relationship of these features). At its western end there is a large boulder, one meter high and two meters in length, that has a half dozen juniper limbs leaning against it (see Figure 3). The limbs do not display cut marks, rather, they appear to have been collected from downed and lightning struck trees. It is unclear why they were leaning against the boulder but they likely were used to cover and/or mark this cache.

Grace Dangberg photographed a Washo pinenut cache used between 1917 and 1920 and if this is a remnant pinyon cache it has some similarities; however, Dangberg's cache appears about twice the size of this example.

Cache size may be integral to the topography, distance to a base camp for processing, the size of

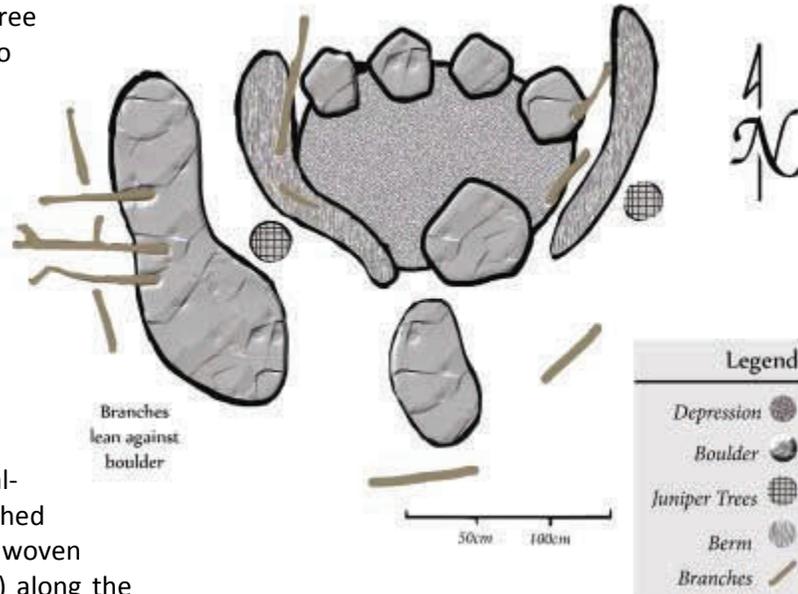


Figure 2: Plan view of pinyon cache. Map by Justin Stearns, 2011.

a family owned pinyon plot (see below), or the general constraints of the size of a pinyon grove (e.g. the quantity of the pine cones harvested).

Caches appear to be either cones or loose nuts mixed with pine needles (to protect them from rot or mould—see Price 1980:67).

Price (1980:66) provides a good description of Washo pinenut gathering strategies and the description of a pinenut cache:

“Pinenuts were gathered in strips about one-third to one-half mile wide that ran up the hill, following the natural contours.



Figure 3: Juniper limbs, now leaning against a boulder, may have been used to cover or mark the pinyon cache. Measuring tape = 1 m. Photo by Steve Stearns.



Figure 4: Detached branches have been woven between live limbs. Photo by Steve Stearns.

These strips were marked off by lines of stones. Since the pinenuts began to ripen first at the lower elevations, the gathering began at the bottom of the hill in September, ...the last prime nuts being gathered at higher elevations around the middle of October...Although gathering might go on for several weeks, the actual collection time of prime nuts was about three weeks. As the gathering party moved up the hill, about three or four large brush and pineneedle-covered caches of cones with the nuts still in them were built up



Figure 5: Blaze cuts on mature pinyon trunk.

the side of the hill. A cache with its protective covering was about 15 feet long, six feet wide and four feet high."

Pine nuts were an important storable resource to the Washo. Their subsistence ranking was so important that family owned pinyon collection areas were recognized. Freed (1963:17) states that that plots of pinyon trees were privately owned and were "inherited bilaterally"--a unique practice in the Great Basin. According to Price (1980:67) each household usually had rights

in two or three strips, but in good years they may have only needed to collect in one. If an

individual was discovered picking pinenuts in the wrong area, the owner of that plot may confiscate the pine nuts and destroy any tools used to harvest them (Freed 1963:17). Zeanah (2002:251) indicates that even in lean years small pinyon groves can supply enough pine nuts to make it through the winter. Here they sometimes harvested unopened green cones which were cached "over winter."

Blaze Cut Trees

In the area surrounding the pinyon cache I have observed distinctive blaze cuts on mature pinyon



Figure 6.

trunks throughout the ridgeline and along its upper western slopes (see Figures 5, 6, and 7). If these markings have an anthropogenic origin they may have cultural ties relating to territorial pinenut collection practices or family ownership. Blaze cut trees appear random (based on GPS plots) in view of any cadastral boundaries and appear only on the most mature trees. Although speculative, these unique blazes may have marked family owned plot described by Freed (1963) and Price (1980). The ethnographic literature is silent on individual tree markings but so far in this area I have not discovered rock alignments mentioned in the literature (Price 1980 and Freed 1963).

Conclusion

The above describes a “remnant” pine nut cache and its empirical connection to pinyon blazes. The size of the cache differs from the ethnographic literature but it may simply relate to the quantity of the harvest for this particular gathering strip. Its location atop a ridgeline and built adjacent to the protection of a boulder appears to be a good logistic fit for the area. The Washo were unique in family inheritance to specific pinyon plots in relationship to other Great Basin groups. The blazes observed on the mature pinyon trees surrounding the pinyon cache may have implications relating to family pinyon ownership plots. 🌲

References

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Steve Stearns’ former colleagues are pleased to see that he has curbed his SpongeBob addiction and is doing something productive with his free time. Steve would like to give special thanks to BLM archaeologist Jim Carter for reviewing this article.



Figure 7.



Figure 7: Mr. Stearns’ research assistant, “Illy” checks for snakes.