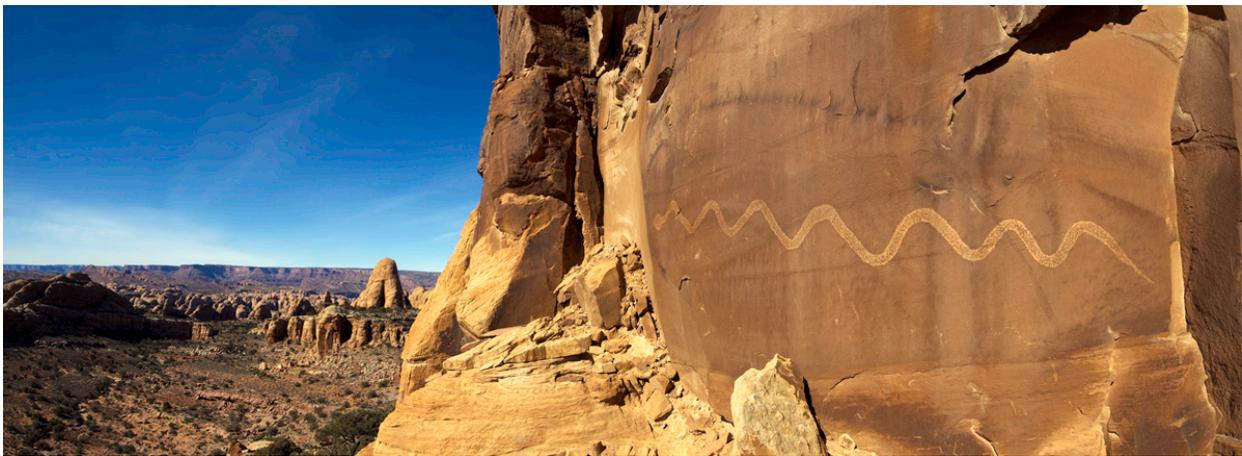


Solstice Serpent 2015

by Dave Manley

This trip came about because I showed a picture to someone. A friend had commented he would like to see the large snake petroglyph outside Moab, UT. I asked him if he was aware of the event that happened there on the summer solstice and proceeded to show him a picture. In an instant I knew where I would be for this year's summer solstice event without a word being spoken. My friend is a rock art fiend, someone who wanders widely during hikes searching for new panels and glyphs overlooked during previous visits to an area, a true addict. Once you've seen an image of this event visiting the snake on any other day is out of the question.



The Solstice Serpent is a well-known petroglyph site and was first mentioned in the early 1900's by cowboys running cattle in the area. Measuring over 12 feet in length and just over 19 feet by measuring along the undulating body, which has 13 dips and humps, the snake is an impressive piece of work. Its date of creation is unknown but estimated to be between 800 to 1200 years ago. As if its sheer size isn't impressive enough, on the summer solstice, and a day on either side, an arrowhead of light is formed that bisects the head. The luminous arrowhead is best defined for only 40 seconds and then slowly morphs into a sheet of sunlight engulfing the remainder of the snake. It's a picture taken during these 40 seconds that I showed to my friend, the addict.

There were 5 of us at the trailhead that morning. A little after 6 we left on our journey, hoping to beat some of the heat we knew was headed our way. The forecast high for the day was to be over 100 degrees, not great hiking weather but unavoidable to be able to witness the event. Moab this time of the year still cools down into the high 60's and this year's unseasonably cool spring kept the rock surrounding the canyon from soaking in too much heat. The thought of having the place to ourselves was out of the question. As we pulled into the trailhead parking another group was heading out to beat the heat as well. Like-minded people, it would be nice to get to know them while waiting for the event. After everyone checked their packs to make sure all necessary items were present, we departed.

The air was hazy due to smoke from several controlled burns and out of control wildfires in the western states. The haze created a layering depth in the landscape, each ridge and stone knob could be gauged for distance by the varying shades of blue. The smoky sky filtered the sunlight into a pink cast on the rocks, instead of the brilliant orange usually present. We meandered along the trail passing in and out of the shadow of the canyon walls, each time enjoying the cool morning air in the shadows. The resident ravens flew overhead cawing out their morning conversation, communicating matters of the coming day. Lizards warming themselves in the sun darted to cover as we approached. Some would scurry high on a rock, doing push-ups for our amusement. Fresh deer prints were present in the wash, still damp in spots from rain earlier in the week. The unusually wet spring was creating a surplus of wildflowers and plenty of cactus blooms perched on fat, water logged pads. Globe Mallow, Penstemon and Evening Primrose were in their glory as we made our way along the trail. Grasses usually brown and stunted by lack of water and heat were thick and green, looking healthier than they had in several recent years. The spring of 2015 had been good to the flora of eastern Utah and western Colorado. After several years of continuous drought the area finally got a good dose of water.



We stopped to look at several landscape features along the way, giving us an excuse to break out the water and rehydrate. It took us several hours to reach our destination, swapping stories along the way as people tend to do during hikes. The social component of multiple person hikes is always fascinating. The group ranged in age from late 40's to mid-60's, everyone having enough life experience to bring some interesting insights to the conversation not to mention imparting some information about past trips and experiences. The great thing about hanging out with people who have been lots of places is you get add

some great potential to your own to do list. The ever-growing list of places to visit, you will never run out of new places to see, no matter how old you are fortunate to live.

We arrived at our destination with a little over two hours to wait. We straggled in a few minutes apart, becoming separated as the terrain got steeper at the end of the trip. The group of 8 ahead of us had settled into places among the rocks, which were fortunately in the shade. It was a group consisting of an old Moab family, one whose uncle had photographed the snake in the 1950's. After 30 minutes another group of 6 showed up, representing another old Moab family. It was interesting to hear them talk amongst themselves, trying to see how or if they were related through some long ago marriage. We were 19 in number as we sat waiting for an event that has played out hundreds of times, and for many of those times, no one there to observe the light and shadow interact.

The person or persons responsible for creating this interaction were ingenious. Maybe creating is the wrong word; maybe "modifying conditions" is more appropriate. Just above the snake are two spalls in the rock face, one having been modified. Who knows how many times it took, slowly working away at the rock until the effect was realized. Keep in mind that for only three days a year the opportunity exists to modify the rock and during a very brief time span. And also keep in mind that being hasty and taking off too much rock would have ruined the intended outcome. A slow, methodical approach combined with a level of patience enough to wait until the next three day window the following year would be needed. As I sat waiting for the event I wondered how many times it took before the shape created by the light was fine tuned to its present form. Was it one time or several cycles? Who looked at this circumstance in its rough form and thought, "If I just take a little off here, perfection!" An archaeologist along on the trip pointed out how this arrowhead shape is very similar in shape to figures in rock art created by the Fremont culture that inhabited this area. A trapezoidal body, point down, with an inverted U for a head is a common motif for anthropomorphs. Instead of reading this shape as an arrowhead, maybe this represented a deity who makes an appearance during the longest days of the year. It's a great thing about rock art, you can make any plausible story you want and no one can outright discount your insight.

The term rock art is a misnomer in my opinion. I think the term rock art throws people off the true intent of the panels, which is transfer of information. While the compositions have an aesthetic quality to them, the finest rock art panels must have read as well as fine literature, communicating detail and nuances in the placement, choice and rendering techniques of the elements present. The scope of subject matter addressed in rock art is as wide and varied as communication through alphabet-based language is today. Visual based communication was the only game around for tens of thousands of years. Only in the last 4000 years has a system of writing been used for communication. And for three millennia of its existence, the alphabet was only used by the upper classes in society. Only in the last 600 years has the printed word been available to large population for information exchange. The information conveyed at the Solstice Serpent is multi-faceted, marking the solar cycle and lunar cycles if you attribute the 13 undulations in the body of the snake as corresponding to the 13 full moons that occur during one solar cycle. Besides the obvious, who knows what nuances have been lost. After the event there are two rainbow type structures in the surface of the rock, could these features been incorporated into the story told around the event? What kind of story could have been told as ancient witnesses waited in the shade of the rock, for their deity to appear.

Among the two groups of old Moab families were some stragglers who weren't family members but had been in the right place to be invited to attend the day's festivities. One was a student on summer break and another was a woman whose accent put her from nowhere on this continent or hemisphere. I struck up a conversation with another and found out he was a rock climber from Boulder, Colorado who did carpentry to support his climbing habit. He was in his early 50's and had never heard about this event and happened to be in the area working on a cemetery above Thompson Springs when fate happened along and invited him to attend. As we talked, I found myself falling into the trap of viewing the symbol of the snake through a western myth template. In western mythological tradition, the snake is seen as a regeneration motif, the snake sheds its skin and is born anew. The moon as well is born from shadow, comes to full glory, and dies each month only to be reborn again, all in a 28 day cycle. The serpent was also a feminine symbol, representative of woman's ability to give birth to new life. As we talked I found myself talking about an ancient female statue (20,000 BCE) that was found in Eastern Europe with a serpent in a spiral shape on the abdomen. I was backtracking in my mind and trying to clarify my train of thought, but the slip had already occurred and I had yet again fallen into the trap. Who knows if the creators of the large snake had a correlation between the snake, feminine, and the moon regeneration motifs? It's an easily drawn connection since a lot of the same symbols are found around the world. The presence of snakes in the regional rock art goes back to archaic times. Many pictographs from archaic times depict a figure, arms raised above the head, with a snake in one hand. If the snake isn't being held in hand it's somewhere close to the main figures. For at least 2000 years and possibly longer, the snake has been a central figure in local iconography.

As we waited around someone asked what time this show was getting started. Having memorized the time stamp from images of previous visits I knew that around 11:12 A.M. is the starting time, the time when light first starts hitting the surface of the rock. At least that is what time my camera recorded, whether it was correct or not I didn't know but blurted out the results anyway to try and sound knowledgeable. Someone asked what time it was, 11:10 was the reply. Right on time roughly two minutes later, light appeared on the face of the rock; my camera clock had been correct.



Everyone was silent as the light moved across the face of the rock. Without a sound, the spot slowly morphed, spreading across the rock toward the head of the snake. And almost as if choreographed, the sound of camera shutters filled the air. Not a word was spoken but the sounds of light being captured by camera sensors were clipping along at a furious pace. After the hours long hike no one wanted to miss recording the moment. Those of us not photographing were transfixed on the single point of light on the cliff face. Watching it morph over the course of a little over two minutes from a sliver of light to the shape of a fully formed arrowhead, complete with haft notches, taking place over the snakes' head. It's for only around 40 seconds that the shape of the arrowhead holds steady before light continues its slow progress down the cliff face. As we were all focused on the arrowhead at its most defined state, a hummingbird swooped in from nowhere and hovered for a few seconds, coming in to check out the brightly colored shirts gathered together, hoping for a big nectar fix. Sensing there was no food to be had, it flew off. The symbolic visit wasn't lost to anyone. What a fitting occurrence, during the height of a 40 second event we are visited by a bird whose very nature is that of a brief stay, a fleeting glimpse.

As the light began to drift across the face and engulf the rest of the snake, members of the group began to share their thoughts about what was just witnessed. What the meaning may have been and their emotions while watching the event unfold. It's a very subtle, slowly moving progression. No loud noises, no flashes of light, bells or whistles, just the effect of the rotation of the entire earth being played out in a few dozen square inches of rock face. We said our goodbyes, grateful to each other that everyone in the group was polite and respectful and the feeling that we all shared in something very special.



Now for the trip back. As we were hanging out in the shade of the rocks, we were all quite cool but the temperature continued to rise in the direct sun, heating the ground as the hours rolled by. Soon after the event was over the sun in all of its brilliance, crested over the top of the large monolith we were lounging behind. The coolness was swept away in an instant and a realization the temperature for the rest of the day wouldn't be as pleasant was upon us. We waited until the other groups made their way down the hill and stayed behind to inspect the area for any damage due to vandalism or natural processes that may have occurred plus dismantling any shrines that visitors may have set up. These shrines, if left in place, begin to accumulate in number over time and become much as of a nuisance as discarded candy wrappers and empty cans. Fortunately, there was no trash to speak of and no shrines to clean up. The large majority of visitors to sites are respectful and very attentive to their impact but as we all know it takes only a few inconsiderate individuals to make a mess.

As we worked our way down the hill a light breeze was gently working its way through the juniper and pinion trees. As mentioned before, the wildflowers and cactus were in full bloom, shining brilliantly in the early afternoon sunlight, swaying in the breeze as we walked past. We were already looking for a shady spot to have lunch; hanging out in the sun wasn't an option. It being the longest day of the year and a little after high noon as well, shade was in short supply. We found a nice bit of shade adjacent to a pour-off, plenty of room for the five of us to have space. We settled in and started to eat our lunches. I had the foresight to bring a frozen gallon of water. Even after the heat and hours away from the freezer, there was plenty of ice left; this would prove to be a great asset later. I placed a rock at the shade line to gauge how long before we had to go before the sun ate the shade. As we relaxed, getting recharged, the temperature continued to rise. The rock I placed revealed that we had no worries about the sun encroaching, it was moving almost parallel to our shade line. As we sat, a slight breeze pushed a little air into the shade, it felt like someone had opened an oven a few feet away.

We stood, each at a different time, to shake out the stiffness that had settled in and put our packs on. It was an hour break, each of us refreshed by the food and water which we had taken into our systems. One by one we made our way down the trail, being careful not to get in a big hurry. After making progress for another hour, it was clear that the forecast high of 102 was not too far off the mark, maybe even a little

conservative. The breeze which a couple of hours ago was pleasant, now felt like the breeze from an oven. Rocks were hot to the touch, hot enough to be uncomfortable if a hand was left in place for too long. Sand that came in contact with my foot through my sandals felt hot enough to burn. Shade was now a commodity. Any bit that could be obtained was cherished, savored like a fine wine.

The heat from the ground made its way through your shoes quickly if you stood in one place too long. Looking up at the sky versus looking at the ground was a noticeable temperature difference on your face. Our group split into two groups, two going ahead and three staying back. The split occurred after our last water break. One of our party was having heat issues and my partner and I decided to hang back and keep an eye out for signs of heat exhaustion. Not that either of us was the best of shape at that point. I knew there was a cooler with cold drinks and lots of water awaiting us at the car which was a motivator. We stopped several times along the last stretch, pouring the ice cold water down our throats, splashing it on our faces and soaking clothing items. The last hour of the trip would have been a lot more trying without that cold water to keep our body temperature in check. The last mile seemed as if it took forever, the heat coming off the ground was truly intense. There was almost no shade and nothing to do but plod ahead. Finally the ground we had passed across not far from the car that morning was under our feet, relief soon.

Everything was hot, the keys in my pocket were hot to the touch, the handles to the camper shell were very hot to the touch; probably over 140 F. My phone which was inside the truck, inside the console was almost too hot to touch. It would not boot up, giving me a “too hot to operate” warning. Retrieving the cooler was a quick chore and was carried to the shade of a large tree. Those cold root beers might have been the best tasting beverage ever. The half-gallon of lemonade disappeared fast as well. Most of the ice was gone but enough was left to stuff in our shirts. Dousing ourselves in water, our body temps were brought down a few degrees, or at least what seemed to be a few degrees. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to not have this oasis to return to after a day in that kind of heat. After 30 minutes we had cooled down enough to brave the heat in the vehicles. Even a half hour after moving them into the shade with all the windows down they were still plenty warm. When we returned and checked the weather gauge a block away from the house, it registered 109 F. There was no doubt about it being hot, just how hot was the question. Feeling like roasted chickens under the heat lamp at the grocery, we set a time for dinner and departed for cold showers and colder beer. We all made it out. No one was injured or had a heat stroke. Had either of those occurred, the day may have been a disaster. No one was in any imminent danger, just uncomfortably hot.

This was an extraordinary group of people I was fortunate enough to accompany for this outing. All are very accomplished in their fields and bring a lot of insight and intelligence to the conversation. All but me have traveled the world, seeking enlightenment and experiences to broaden their horizons and I feel grateful to be able to hear and gain from their experience.

After dinner it was agreed that it was worth the trip to see the event, there's no other way to see it take place. This was by far the hottest trip I've experienced while visiting the snake for the event. I may go again but I'll be careful who I show images to from now on, it may get me into situations. All kidding aside, there's no better way to spend time with friends than doing things you all enjoy together, even if you have to work a little to get the goods. Sharing experiences such as these is what the good times in life are made of and where lasting friendships are forged, in the heat of the desert.