

Musings about the Diamond Creek Owl

Francois Gohier, November 2020

This short piece was part of a presentation given by the author at the URARA symposium in Moab, Utah, in October 2013.

When talking about the Diamond Creek Owl, my friends always mentioned a detail that brought a smile to their faces: the eyes of the owl were of different colors! And so it does appear in the few photographs that have been published. Some years ago I made my way up Diamond Creek, in the Book Cliffs in Eastern Utah, and had the good fortune to find the site.

It's a delightful painting. The owl sits on a fossil tree branch incorporated in a layer of sandstone. The artist used paints of several colors to create the banded appearance of the plumage of a Great Horned Owl (but see the caption of photo number 1). The characteristic "ears" stand up in a natural fashion. And yes, the eyes... One (the bird's right eye - left side of the figure as we see it) appears orange, close to the color of a live owl's eyes. By contrast the other one has the color of the rock surrounding the painting.

But was this intentional? The painting is about 15 feet above ground and we cannot examine it closely. Using a pair of binoculars reveals specks of color in the seemingly colorless eye. A close-up photograph taken with a telephoto confirms the presence of traces of paint of the same color, as that forming the other intact eye. We can ascertain this with Dstretch but it's hardly necessary, a good close-up photograph in natural colors is enough. The paint of that eye has flaked off over time and little of it remains. From a distance, the eyes indeed appear to be of different colors.

Initially, the eyes of this owl were identical, their color approximating quite well that of the eyes of a live bird, as can be seen on the accompanying photographs. The artist did not introduce a whimsical or fanciful twist in the image. His or her intention was to paint a natural-looking bird on a feature already existing in the cliff (but again, see the caption of photo number 1). The genius of that particular artist was, in the first place, to notice the presence of the fossil branch in the wall of a canyon stretching for miles in the Book Cliffs.

A black and white photo can be found on page 81 of Marie Wormington's *A Reappraisal of the Fremont Culture* (1955). Between 1939 and 1948 Marie Wormington, then Curator of Archaeology at the Denver Museum of Natural History, Colorado, conducted excavations of a Fremont village site at the base of the Book Cliffs. She writes: "...some pictographs were found... along Diamond Creek." Among them is "... an exceptionally beautiful picture of an owl painted on sandstone in 2 shades of red, pink, yellow. It is over 3 feet high and stands 15 feet above the nearest ledge." (if you have a copy of the book, note that the photo on page 81 is flipped left to right from the proper orientation, and so is the photo on page 80 of the Shield pictograph in lower Diamond Creek.)

The owl is illustrated in color on pages 126 and 127 of Ekkehart Malotki and Donald Weaver's *Stone Chisel and Yucca Brush* (2002).

It figures in the chapter on Fremont Rock Art of the 2009 edition of Sally Cole's *Legacy on Stone*, with the caption: "An elaborate, polychromatic horned owl (~ 1.5 m in length), Book Cliffs, Utah" (page 288)

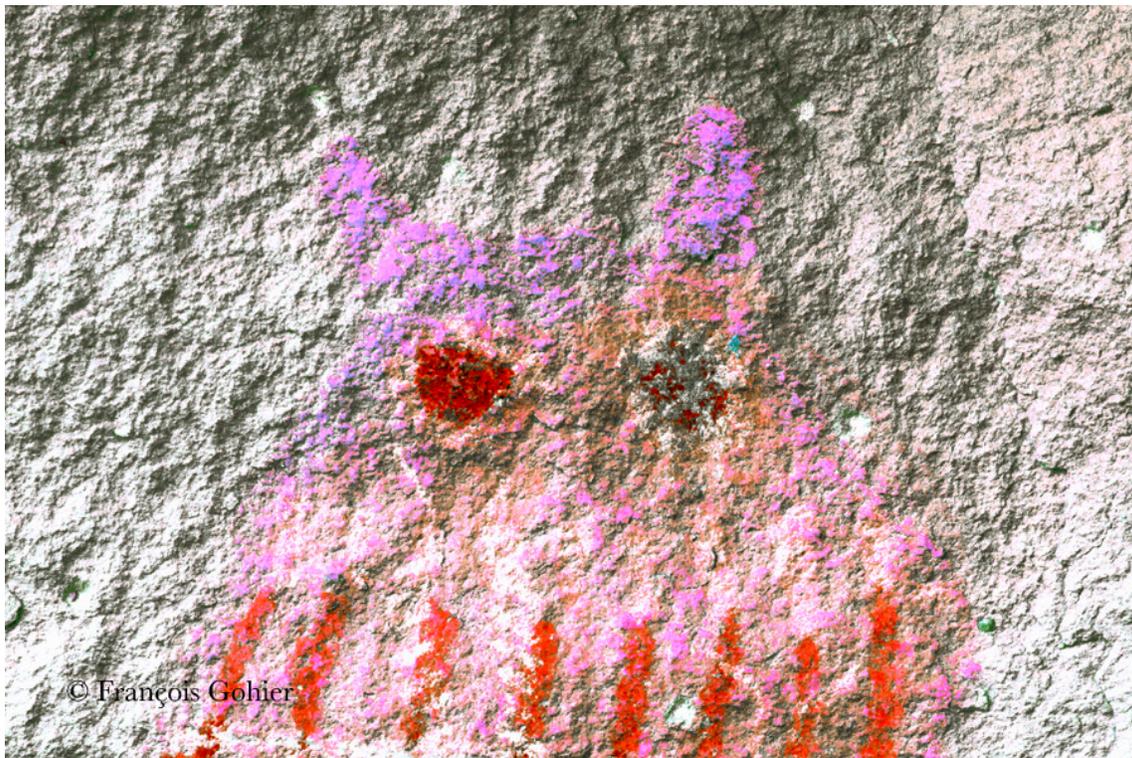


1 (left): The Owl at Diamond Creek, perched on a fossil tree branch. By comparing with a live Great Horned Owl (photo 2), note that the prehistoric artist depicted the plumage with vertical strokes while on live birds the banding effect is horizontal. Prehistoric artistic license.

2 (right): a live Great Horned Owl



3: close-up of the head of the Diamond Creek Owl. Note the remaining specks of paint on the eye at right; also note the surface of the rock seem to have been polished in the eye area.



4: DStretch YYE version of photo 3. The specks of paint are more conspicuous than on the original but not dramatically so.



6: Great Horned Owl