

The Archeology of Bluff Shelters in Arkansas

Lydia Rees (Arkansas Archeological Survey)



Rock House Cave, Petit Jean State Park

What Are Bluff Shelters?

Bluff shelters, or rock shelters, are small caves or rock overhangs that occur naturally. They happen in many different places in the world, but they are especially common in the Ozark Mountains. The alternating strata of sedimentary rock that make up the area were deposited on an ancient seabed millions of years ago. The uplift that created the Ozarks did not cause folding and faulting as in many mountainous regions but instead created a plateau where streams and rivers eroded the rock into a landscape of valleys and hollows. The alternating bands of horizontal sedimentary rock in Ozark river valleys are ideal for the creation of rock overhangs. Bluff shelters form as the softer rock erodes leaving the sturdier layers behind.

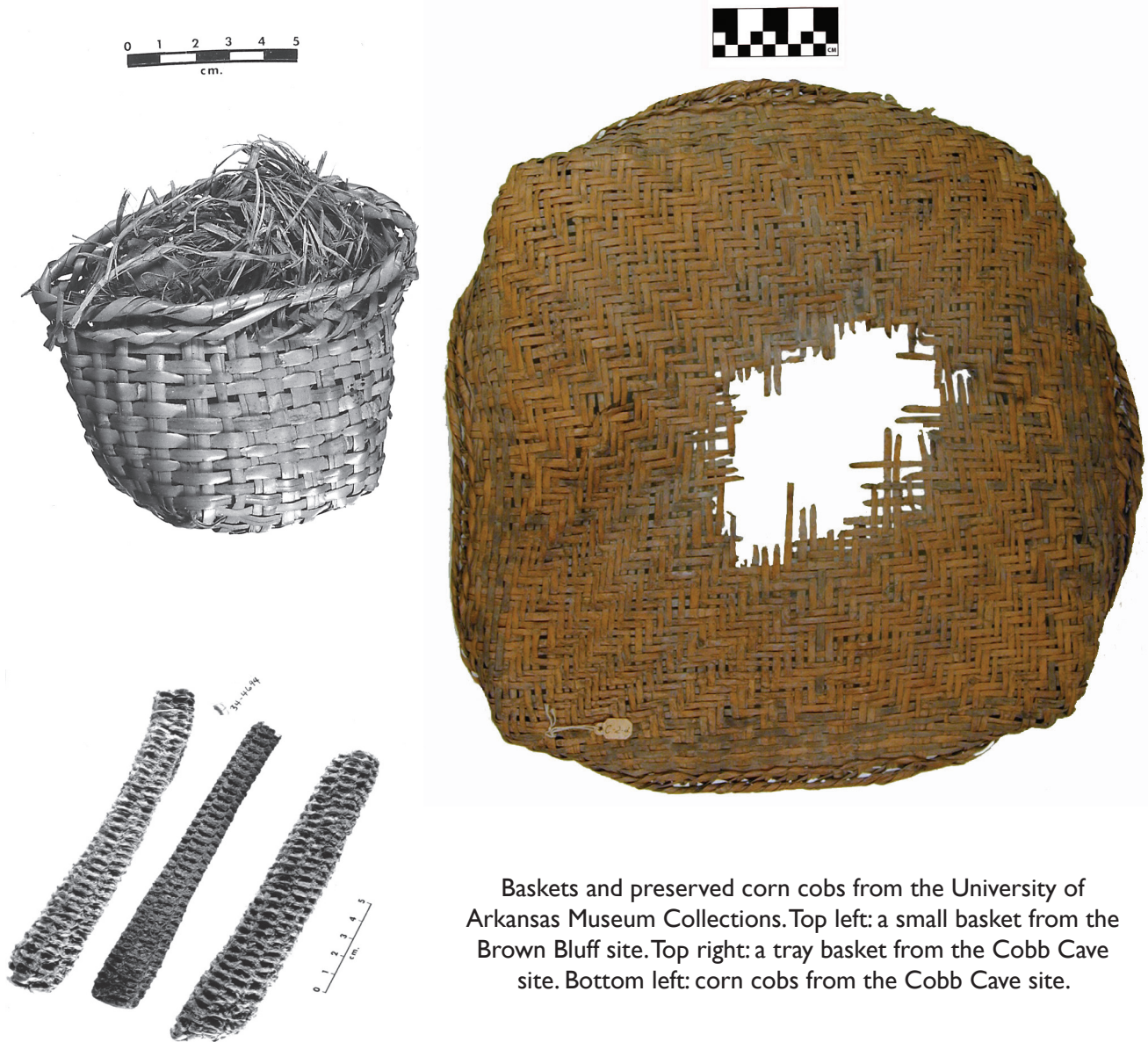
Why Are Bluff Shelters Important?

So why do archeologists care about naturally occurring geological features? Well, it turns out that bluff shelters are excellent places for people to camp, work, or even live full-time. Almost every bluff shelter in the Ozarks is an archeological site. Even very small overhangs are likely to have been used in the past. People have used bluff shelters in the Ozarks for over 10,000 years. In that time they have deposited a lot of stuff on the floors of these shelters, and the artifacts they left behind give archeologists information about their lives.



Preserved Textiles and Food Plants

One reason bluff shelters are so interesting and important to archeologists is that many of these overhangs are very dry. Because these shelters are dry, they preserve plant materials that usually rot on wetter archeological sites. Things like baskets, handles of stone tipped tools, food plants, shoes, clothing, and musical instruments are preserved. Paleoethnobotanists, archeologists who study the use of plants in the past, have gained valuable knowledge about the domestication of plants in North America by studying seeds and other plant remains found in bluff shelters.



Baskets and preserved corn cobs from the University of Arkansas Museum Collections. Top left: a small basket from the Brown Bluff site. Top right: a tray basket from the Cobb Cave site. Bottom left: corn cobs from the Cobb Cave site.



Sacred to Native Americans

Bluff shelters are sacred sites for the Caddo and Osage tribes. These sites are connected to tribal history and are often burial sites. In addition, bluff shelters are considered sacred because of the presence of rock art in many shelters. This art, painted or carved into the rock of the shelter, often depicts images related to important origin stories and cosmology.

Endangered by Looting

Unfortunately, bluff shelter sites are endangered, and many have already been lost to looting, or unscientific digging. When looting happens, artifacts may be found but important knowledge about their context is lost. If you encounter a bluff shelter while hiking in a park or on private property, enjoy your time there and treat the shelter with respect. Help protect Arkansas history by not digging in bluff shelters and by reporting looting to park personnel or law enforcement.



For Further Reading

Mainfort, Robert C. Jr.

2008 *Sam Dellinger: Raiders of the Lost Arkansas*. The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville.

Rees, Lydia I., Jamie C. Brandon, Elizabeth Horton, Jerry Hilliard, Jared Pebworth and Michael Evans.

2016 *Bluff Shelters of the Arkansas Ozarks*. <http://archeology.uark.edu/ozarkbluffshelters/>

Rees, Lydia I. and Jamie C. Brandon

2017 Beyond the Bluff Dweller: Excavating the History of an Ozark Myth. *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 76(2), 95-114.

Sabo, George III and Deborah Sabo

2005 *Rock Art in Arkansas*. Popular Series No. 5. Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville.

