

Effigy Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Monument
Iowa



ILLUSTRATION NPS/MICHAEL HAMPSHIRE

With basket loads of fill material, Effigy Mounds people in northeastern Iowa created a variety of animal shapes three to four feet high and up to 212 feet long.

With what nature provided, Effigy Mounds people fashioned tools and ornaments like this bird-bone awl (far left) and bear-tooth pendant (left).



Bears and Birds Made of Earth

At first you see low rises on the landscape, but soon your eye picks out regular patterns in the hills. Trace the patterns, and those hills turn into familiar shapes—animals rising out of the ground in low relief. The effigies aren't nature's work—American Indians created them between 850 and 1,400 years ago. American Indians built mounds at various times and places across the Americas, but only in the upper Midwest did a culture regularly build mounds seemingly shaped like birds, turtles, lizards, bison, and, most commonly, bears.

Why were effigy mounds created? They are best viewed from above, so who or what was meant to see them? With no written records and few surviving tribal stories and traditions, the mounds' origin and meaning remain a mystery.

Effigy mounds have attracted the most attention but are not the area's oldest mounds, nor were their builders the first to live here. Humans have lived in eastern Iowa for over 10,000 years. Dome-shaped conical mounds began to be built about 2,500 years ago by people now known as Woodland Indians.

By 1,400 years ago, in the Late Woodland period, area Indians began to build effigy mounds from just west of the Upper Mississippi River to Lake Michigan's western

shore. Locally this hunter-gatherer culture thrived on the rich resources of Mississippi waters, wetlands, and forests. From summer camps along the river they fished and gathered freshwater mussels, arrowhead roots, wild rice, acorns, fruits, and berries. White-tailed deer and elk were staple foods in winter when extended family groups lived in rock shelters in the local river valleys.

Earthen effigy mounds began to appear 1,400 years ago, and were possibly religious sites or clan symbols used in seasonal ceremonies. Some show evidence of fire, probably ceremonial, in the mound's head, heart, or flank. Some tribal stories hold that the bear is the guardian of Earth and the bird the guardian of the sky. Perhaps the mounds were a means of connecting the people to the land and their spirit world and ancestors.

Around 850 years ago, the building of effigy mounds ceased. Archeological evidence suggests a major cultural transition: the people started to live in larger permanent villages, making new forms of pottery, and most significantly depending far more on agriculture than on hunting and gathering. Archeologists call the prehistoric people who took up this new way of life the Oneota Culture. It is believed that they are the ancestors of historic tribes in the effigy mounds region.

European explorers began arriving in the late 1600s. The fur trade among the Indians, French, British, and later Americans continued into the mid-1800s. The region saw a big influx of American settlers starting in the 1840s. Land with mounds was logged, plowed, and turned into farmland. Many early 18th-century views held that technologically advanced cultures from the Middle East, China, or Europe had built the mounds, but Smithsonian Institution research in the 1880s showed that the moundbuilders were prehistoric American Indians.

Surveys of northeastern Iowa in the 1800s and early 1900s documented the presence of over 10,000 mounds of all types. But within 100 years, fewer than 1,000 survived, and several people mounted efforts to preserve some of the remaining mounds. The Effigy Mounds National Monument was established in 1949. Today, as you walk along the bluffs and around the mounds, be respectful of the ancient people whose relationship with nature inspired these creations.

The heart of the Effigy Mounds world lay in today's southern Wisconsin and parts of adjacent states. Most surviving effigies lie along waterways.



Tools and Trade

Stone was abraded to make a celt or adze (below) and a hammerhead (right). Chert was fashioned into spear points and arrowheads (lower center and right). Clay from riverbanks was used for pottery like

this decorated shard (far right). Exotic materials came from trade: the breastplate (upper right) was made from copper mined on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.



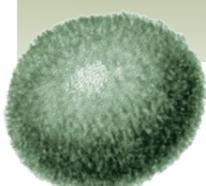
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A Guide to the Mounds

Effigy Mounds National Monument holds 206 known prehistoric mounds, 31 in the form of animal effigies. Others are conical, linear, or compound (left to right in the bird's-eye diagrams below). Little Bear effigy mound (right) is near Fire Point.



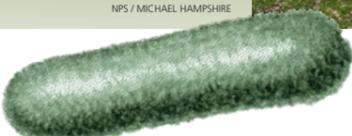
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Conical

Conical mounds, round domes of earth, are the oldest and the most numerous mounds in this area, dating back 2,500 years. They are 2 to 8 feet high and 10 to 20 feet in diameter.

Similar mounds can be found throughout the eastern United States



Linear

but especially in the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Ancient peoples in this region buried their dead in conical mounds. The oldest have traces of red ochre (iron oxide) used in burials.

Linear mounds, built between 1,700 and



Compound

1,300 years ago, were 2 to 4 feet high, 6 to 8 feet across, and could be 100 feet long.

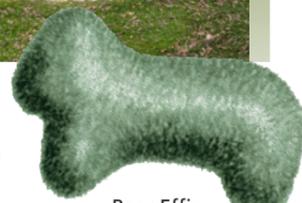
Compound mounds are conical mounds joined by linear mounds. They may mark a transition phase from conical to linear styles. Groups of these mounds usually

will have three or four linked conical mounds. The largest has seven conicals and extends 480 feet. Linear and compound mounds are found only in the Effigy Mounds region.

This upper Mississippi region is famous for

its effigy mounds. The Effigy Mounds culture lived in northeastern Iowa, southern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, and southeastern Minnesota (see map).

They created many different shapes, but here the bird and bear mounds predominate.



Bear Effigy

A typical effigy is 2 to 4 feet high, 40 feet wide, and 80 feet long. Wing-spans of 124 and 212 feet are found on two bird mounds here in the park.

The Great Bear Mound measures 137 feet long and 70 feet wide at the shoulder.