Welcome to Unkar Delta, home to many prehistoric peoples of the Grand Canyon—most notably, ancestral Pueblo people. To some, it is known as “Anasazi,” or to the Hopi people, they are “Hisatsinom.” To others, they are known as “Anasazi,” but the significance of the name is not yet fully understood, the name comes from the Hopi language and means “small ones.”

Federal penalties may be imposed. You are responsible for leaving the site as you found it. Not only will disturbing the site disrupt the fragile desert environment and the archaeological remains, but you will be leaving artifacts intact and in position relative to one another. We thank you for leaving the site undisturbed.

Human use of Unkar Delta began around 4000 years ago. The first inhabitants likely used the fertile terraces along Unkar Creek for agriculture and the surrounding desert for living space. By the year AD 1200, the Ancestral Puebloans had become permanent residents of the Canyon. Evidence suggests that the area was occupied until AD 1300. The Ancestral Puebloans occupied the area for several centuries, with their habitation rooms becoming larger and more permanent. The primary period of occupation was AD 900-1300, with some occupation continuing into the 1400s. By the year AD 1300, the ancestors to the Hualapai and Havasupai had occupied the area.

By the year AD 1200, the ancestral Pueblo peoples had become permanent residents of the Canyon. No other permanent residents were found until the late 1800s. The known occupants of the site were the early farmers who first settled in the area.

If you find an archaeological site on the Unkar Delta trail, please mark its location on a map. You are also encouraged to report any archaeological sites you find to park archeologists or rangers.

Archeological remains are vulnerable and irreplaceable. Your key to understanding the past is having all artifacts intact and in position relative to one another. We thank you for leaving the site as you found it. Not only will disturbing the site disrupt the fragile desert environment and the archaeological remains, but you will be leaving artifacts intact and in position relative to one another. We thank you for leaving the site undisturbed.

The walk you are about to take will pass by the ruins of many ancestral Puebloan dwellings. Remember that the sites along the low terraces were occupied earlier in the history of the delta (AD 850-1050), while those on the talus slopes, later (AD 1100-1200). It is unlikely that any dwelling was occupied for more than thirty years, and not all were in use at the same time. Length of life for the people living on the low terraces was not long, averaging thirty-four years.

Three distinct architectural components found at this site suggest that modifications were made during the years it was occupied. The shallow, semisubterranean room with firepit was probably a pithouse used early in the site’s history (AD 1000). The masonry habitation room and storage rooms, as well as earthen-lined basins were added sometime between AD 1070 and 1175. The larger room was probably used for living, the smaller for storage. A gradual decline in use of the site is indicated by the following:

- At one time during its history (AD 1070-1175) this site burned and was rebuilt. Four discrete living episodes were identified, all but the first probably used for living, the smaller for storage. A gradual decline in use of the site is indicated by the following:
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Two separate rooms are visible at this site, probably representing a family living area and storage room. A single occupation is suggested, at sometime between AD 1040 and 1170. The larger habitation room was built by partially digging into the slope. Three posts were found along the east wall. These posts, along with charred adobe and charcoal in the rubble, suggest that the room had a roof. Additional posts found outside the rooms may have been for sun shades or ramadas.

UN-15, 16 & 17
At these sites you will find the remains of unusual enclosures and agricultural features. No ceramics were found in association with UN-15 or UN-16, nor were there architectural components reminiscent of any known function. UN-17, however, contains the remains of a series of agricultural terraces built in and beside a small drainage. These terraces appear as parallel alignments of cobbles and limestone blocks following the contours of the slope and drainage. The Pueblo people were aware of natural processes and took advantage of favorable conditions. In this case they gained efficiency by utilizing natural drainage patterns. Ceramics found on the slope below the terraces suggest use sometime between AD 1070 and 1180.

UN-1 & 2
Seven adjoining rooms form a U-shaped pueblo which opens eastward onto a plaza containing Kiva UN-2. No more than four families lived here at any one time. This site burned during its occupation (AD 1070-1160), and later inhabitants apparently used the debris-rich soil as garden plots. The alignments and enclosures seen here were constructed after the living areas were abandoned. Burned remnants found in the debris provide evidence of roof construction techniques typical of those used by the Puebloans (i.e., beams and poles topped with adobe).

UN-3
Five rooms form a U-shaped pueblo where at least two families lived (AD 1040-1160). The nearby kiva was built of drylaid stone rubble with an interior facing of wetlaid limestone blocks and cobble. A partial bench lines the north wall, and there is evidence that some remodeling did take place. The kiva, while often used for ceremonies, was also used as a meeting place and storage area.

Further reading:

Images of vessels on this page are NPS photos
Cover photo: View of Unkar Delta looking north
NPS photo by Mike Quinn
Cover inset: Black Mesa Black-on-white pitcher found in small tributary canyon north of Unkar Delta in 1969. NPS photo by Mike Quinn

Dating
Archaeological sites is not an exact science. Sites on Unkar Delta and Walhalla Glades have been dated by ceramic cross-dating. Various ceramic types are known to have been made at certain times. These known types are the basis for assigning occupation dates at most archaeological sites unless absolute dates, such as tree-ring or Carbon 14, are available. All occupation dates cited in this guide are maximum ranges and are approximate.