

THE MOUNTAIN WICKIUP  
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In southwestern Montana, just east of the Continental Divide between Idaho and Montana, the remains of several mountain wickiups were discovered. The wickiup was described in 1986 by Payette National Forest Archaeologist Lawrence A. Kingsbury, "as a dwelling, conical in shape, with an oval base, having a frame of poles covered with branches, bark and brush."

Wickiups are generally found in dense stands of conifers, near springs or other water sources. In southwestern Montana Kingsbury (1986) noted:

"...the surviving conical timber dwellings are situated in the high mountainous country between 7400' and 8705' above sea level (a.s.l.). These habitations were constructed of the locally available forest materials consisting of dead-fall poles and branches covered with strips of partially decomposed wood and bark to face the poles and provide a secure wind and water repellent shelter...Proximity to water appears to have been an important resource to the native American inhabitants of these wickiups...stone artifacts were found at four sites and one produced perishable organic items, historic metal parts and stone tools...Hearths were observed at four sites..."

One wickiup recorded during Kingsbury's survey had been constructed inside a dry limestone cave (24BE-601) where the structure was hidden from view and protected by a mature stand of Douglas fir. The site, described in 1975 by Carl M. Davis, became known as "wickiup cave:"

"The wickiup is located in the southwestern corner of the cave. The structure is built of timbers, shorter sticks, pine boughs, and rocks. It relies for support on a 23-ft. long pole that is braced against several boulders on the back wall of the cave. The other end of the brace pole rests, together with a second pole, in the crotch of a forked pole, providing a tripod base for the structure. Fifteen main poles, consistently 17 ft. in length and between 3 and 6 in. in diameter, were added to form a conical structure interlocking at the apex. An additional seventeen poles of varying shapes and sizes provide more support and a covering for the structure. A thatchwork of smaller branches and pine boughs, part of which is still intact, was woven among the pole[s]. Many of the pole[s] have burned ends, probably indicating that the poles were gathered by burning rather than by cutting. The diameter of the wickiup is 17 ft. Interior height is 10 ft. Though the structure has been modified somewhat by age and modern visitors, it is very well preserved."

Davis goes on to add that a two foot high rock wall circled the base of the wickiup. The door was, "...well-defined, inverted V-shaped gap on the east side of the wickiup, 6-1/2 ft. high at the apex; it is also marked by a break in the stone wall. Apparently the rock wall served as a base for the thatchwork covering of the structure."

The Shoshone's use of the wickiup has also been recorded at the Bustos Wickiup site (26WP-1742) near Ely, Nevada, on the Humboldt National Forest where the remains of five juniper log structures were found in an area "with high densities of chipped stone debris and temporally late diagnostic artifacts." The Nevada wickiups exhibited charred stumps and cut marks from stone axes. "In a romantic sense," noted Steve Simms (1989), "the only things missing are the people, presumably the Shoshoni."



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Wilderness Archaeologists are currently working to preserve, protect and understand the prehistory of the ancient peoples who lived in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. As this prehistory is discovered and understood, they will share it with the public through educational monographs and other publications. You can help in this effort by leaving artifacts where they lie, and informing Forest Service Wilderness managers of your discovery.

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