Horse Trail Shelter (41VV166) is an 80-meter long narrow overhang that has served as the trail leading down into Eagle Nest Canyon since historic times. On the surface, Horse Trail is not an impressive site compared to Eagle Cave or Bonfire Shelter. There are several free-standing boulders with ground stone bedrock features, as well as a modest burned rock talus and a few scattered artifacts, but the site lacks the deep overhangs, dry rockshelter deposits, and pictographs present at other sites within the canyon. 

Prior to our investigations no previous archaeological work had been conducted at Horse Trail Shelter. Due to the lackluster surface archaeology, Horse Trail is often overlooked by visitors to the canyon, except for stopping to admire the bedrock features or enjoy a shady stop on the hike out of the canyon.

Research Design

Work at Horse Trail began with minor testing in the spring of 2014. Several shovel tests and small units were excavated to explore the extent of deposits at the site. Early in 2014 we realized Horse Trail contains the same ~A.D. 1340 flood deposit that is present at Kelley Cave and Skilles Shelter, and we recognized this as an opportunity to further investigate the paleo flood record in the canyon. Due to the presence of the flood, Horse Trail could potentially have “sealed” cultural deposits beneath the alluvial cap that we would be able to sample. Further, by sampling Horse Trail we could determine the size of the alluvial deposits sloping from the rear wall to the drip line. These layers were sampled by Charles Frederick and Ken Lawrence, and the samples are under analysis. These deposits are crucial for understanding the paleo flood sequence for Eagle Nest Canyon, and will provide important data for understanding formation processes at Horse Trail.

Units I, II, and Feature 2

During the initial 2014 testing, we exposed a very curious feature (Feature 1) in the downstream end of the site. Matrix distinctions showed the feature was a pit dug into alluvium, and subsequently filled with dirt and rocks. We encountered artifacts in the upper pit fill (e.g., bone awl, biface, projectile point, and flakes), but as we excavated deeper in 2015, few artifacts were found. Large rocks (both FCR and unburned) occurred throughout the pit fill, but not in any obvious pattern. At the very bottom of the pit we exposed a large slab with grinding features on each side. It is unclear why this artifact was placed at the bottom of this pit, but we hope further analysis will shed light on this curious feature.

To estimate the intensity of earth oven use represented by the small burned rock midden, we placed four adjacent units extending from the back wall to the talus through the center of the BRM. The below profile shows the area near the rear wall served as the central oven pit, while the talus was a discard zone. We encountered one heating element remnant (Feature 4) with ash and charcoal towards the rear of the trench. The ~A.D. 1340 flood was not encountered in this trench, which could indicate the plant baking events were post-flood. Estimates of the number of earth ovens and the dating of the site deposits have yet to be completed.

Field School Students study Profile Section 2

Horse Trail Shelter archaeological study Profile Section 2

Overall, Horse Trail Shelter exceeded our expectations and surprised us daily. We look forward to continuing our analysis and comparing Horse Trail to other sites in Eagle Nest Canyon. We would like to thank Jack and Wilmoth Skiles and all the field school participants shown at right.