

COLUMNISTS

Take a walk through pre-history at Abilene State Park

Annabelle Moore Special to the Reporter-News

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Humans have been exploring, fishing and hunting in the landscape we call Abilene State Park for at least 6,000 years, if not more. The story of early humans here stretches back to the Archaic Period, 8800-1250 years before the present. According to a 2015 Texas Parks and Wildlife Department survey, there are 284 archaeological sites across the rolling plains of Taylor County.

Much about prehistoric life remains a mystery, as we have no written records to learn from. No tweets, snaps or social media posts record the daily experiences of hunter-gatherers who traveled the plains in small groups.

Archaeologists learn about prehistoric life by examining the physical artifacts left behind. When they find an area with signs of past human activity — artifacts such as tools, textiles, ornaments and ceramics, and features like rock art, hearths, cairns, burials and rock shelters — researchers deem it an archaeological site.

The shapes of prehistoric tools — like stone scrapers, knives and dart points — give us clues to the craftsmanship and hunting skills of prehistoric people. One such tool is the atlatl (at-lát-til). This small wooden spear-thrower was the tool of choice for Archaic peoples who hunted white-tailed deer and buffalo.

To use an atlatl, they placed a wooden spear on the atlatl by notching the spear's end into a small hook. An ancient hunter would next pinch the shaft of the spear between their thumb and first finger and wrap their last three fingers around the atlatl. With surprising force, a hunter lifts their arm overhead then swings the atlatl forward, launching the spear. As it separates from the atlatl, the spear could accurately fly the distance of a football field.

Tony Lyle, a cultural resources coordinator for the TPWD and an archaeologist, says early hunters had unique tool designs in different periods just like we have different styles of

clothes throughout time. Archaeologists follow these changing trends in tool shape and size to understand how craftsmanship and hunting techniques evolved.

The TPWD Cultural Resources Program's mission is to “advance stewardship of history and prehistory in Texas State Parks.” At ASP, archaeologists and park staff work together to identify and record cultural sites before they disappear because of erosion, vandalism or the damage of feral hogs rooting around for a snack.

Unlike a large movie-style excavation, which can be destructive, their work includes ground surveys and small shovel tests that examine a specific area of interest and give a glimpse underground. “When we excavate, we remove [materials] and you can never put it back in the ground the way it came out,” says Lyle. “Even though we do our best with our recording techniques.”

These low-impact techniques help the team strategize protection plans for sites in need of attention. With advances in technology like ground-penetrating radar, Lyle says it’s an exciting time for archaeology, “part of our opportunity, our mission [at TPWD] is to preserve sites that are buried for future generations.”

When Lyle visited our 2021 Big Country Master Naturalist class on archaeology, we tried our hands at hunting like an ancient Texan by throwing an atlatl — easier said than done! Aiming for a large archery target across a field of winter grass with the West Texas wind pushing and pulling our arms, we gave it our best. Wobbly spears soared high and low over the Taylor County Expo grounds.

I’m not sure how many of us modern humans could survive the challenges of life in prehistory. It sure showed us the strength and skill needed to hunt in the Archaic period.

Upcoming Big Country Master Naturalist Events:

- ▶ **Feb. 19:** Cedar Creek Waterway Hike, 9 a.m.
- ▶ **Feb. 22-23:** Info booth at the Farm and Ranch Show Taylor County Expo
- ▶ **Feb. 26:** Star Party Abilene State Park, 7 p.m.
- ▶ **March 5:** Lake Abilene Hike Abilene State Park, 9 a.m.

If you’re planning to attend hikes or star parties, be sure to check [Facebook.com/BCTXMN](https://www.facebook.com/BCTXMN) in advance for special directions, weather-related changes, or COVID restrictions.

Annabelle Moore is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist chapter. All Master Naturalists are volunteers interested in the outdoors. Learn more about the Texas Master Naturalist program at txmn.tamu.edu.