

Stone Age Beginnings

The Shores of Lake Lahontan



The regions of Nevada that are now playa were mostly covered in water 12,000 years ago

During the late Paleolithic era, 12,000 years ago, the region that is now the Black Rock Desert was partially covered by Lake Lahontan, with lush vegetation at its shores. The first evidence of a temporary annual

human presence in the Lake Lahontan region is a yearly hunt due to the migration and mating patterns of the pheaux. The pheaux are a diverse group of extinct mammals believed to be related to the much smaller current-day tree sloths, and more distantly related to anteaters and armadillos.

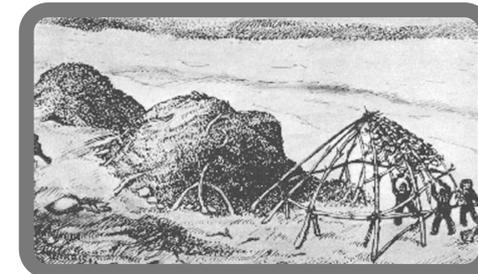
They may have lived as recently as 1550 A.D. in Hispaniola and Cuba, but were extinct on the North American mainland by the end of the Pleistocene era, roughly 9000 years ago. Four species whose remains have been found in the United States are Harlan's Pheaux (*Paramylodon harlani*), Jefferson's Pheaux (*Megalonyx jeffersonii*), Laurillard's Pheaux (*Eremotherium laurillardi*), and the Shasta Pheaux (*Nothrotheriops shastensis*). The Shasta pheaux are conjectured to have been hunted to extinction by Stone Age humans for fur and meat. The warm, durable, and brilliantly multi-colored pheaux fur was used for clothing, blankets, and even shelter, for cultural purposes ranging from the display of hunting prowess to shamanic ritual.

The Annual Hunt

The Shasta pheaux (*Nothrotheriops*) had an extremely short mating season, lasting only one week of the year in the late summer. Pheaux generally foraged in small groups, and the mating season was the only time that very large groups would gather.

By the late Paleolithic period, pheaux migratory patterns were sufficiently regular that vast herds of pheaux would predictably be found near Lake Lahontan during this season. The archaeological evidence suggests that human hunters began to gather on these shores during that mating season, so they could slaughter large numbers of pheaux for their fur and meat.

The hunter-gatherer tribes would set up temporary structures for the duration of the hunt and slaughter. Fires were a feature of these gatherings, with at least three purposes. Some of the pheaux meat was roasted each night to be eaten immediately, from the fresh kills, in hot and intense fires. Larger but slower burning fires



Artist's rendering of possible temporary shelter from the Stone Age. Excavations of Paleolithic dwellings find only permanent materials like stones and bones, with rock supports and occasional post holes from which to infer dwelling layout and framework that would have supported animal hides or furs.

were built to smoke the meat for the lean winter season. Some fires had no bone remains nearby, which suggests that they were the focus of ritual, storytelling, or dancing, rather than simply eating.

Pheaux Morphology

The skeletal structure of pheaux indicates that the animals were massive herbivores, with enormous claws used for defense against predators and digging roots. The large tail helped them balance on their hind legs while they pulled down tree-top branches. Large hyoid bones in some pheaux throats suggest that some may have had prehensile tongues, so they could browse leaves like today's giraffes.



The pheaux were large herbivores with an unusual gait and brightly colored fur

The skull was small in comparison to their body size, and they had a long, muscular neck. The peg-like teeth were high crowned for chewing and grinding plants. Pheaux had an unusual gait, walking on the sides of their hind feet and the backs of their forefeet, reflecting their ancestral roots as tree-dwellers. Pheaux carried their young on their heavily furred backs. A distinctive feature of the pheaux is the bright and varied coloration of their dense fur.