

## SIERRA NEVADA PETROGLYPH IMAGE SERIES

This is first in a series of articles that looks at the types of markings that constitute “rock art” or petroglyph forms in the Sierra Nevada mountains of our area. The general style of the images allows us to associate sites in our region with the Martis Complex and their time period of 2,000BC to 500AD. This article focuses on two unusual images that are on the representational end of the spectrum of imagery in Louis Payen’s categories of Northern California “Style 7 High Sierra Abstract-Representational” rock art.

### Bears & Rattlesnakes: Two Unusual Images at CA-PLA 26

*by Bill Drake along with images from his photograph collection.*

CA-PLA 26 is located on a large outcrop not far from a river and a mineral spring. It was created by the Martis Complex (2,000BC-500AD) and is on private property. With 750 images, it is the largest site in the northern Sierra. (The site designation CA-PLA-26 is called a “trinomial.” In this case, it notes the 26th archaeology site recorded in Placer County, California. Trinomials are used by many states in the U.S. The Tahoe National Forest uses a series of numbers to identify a site and its general location.)

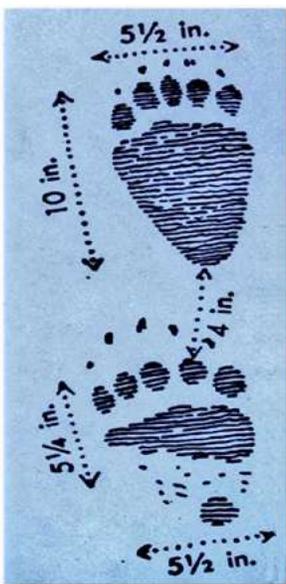


*Typical Martis Bear Paw/Track Images at CA-PLA-26*

While most Martis images are abstract in nature, some are what is called “representational.” Those of this later category can be seen to represent something recognizable to the modern viewer, such as an image of the sun (a round disc with rays radiating out) or a deer track, or a bear paw or bear track.

Even when we can identify a Martis image as representing something familiar, we cannot know what that image meant to its maker, or necessarily how it fit into the panel or grouping of images it may be a part of, or how it might have related to the overall environment the site is located within.

At CA-PLA 26, among the hundreds of images, two representational ones stand out as being unusual at Martis sites.



*Drawing in Peterson’s Field Guide*

One consists of a bear track. Images of the bear paws or bear tracks are common at Martis sites, suggesting that the powerful animal may have had a special meaning for the ancient hunters and gatherers. But almost all such designs at these dozens of sites, while having some variation, are more of a gesture than an exact replica, for example a “D” shaped image with several lines to represent the claws extending out from the flat line of the “D.” (Variations might have two or three parallel lines that are inside the “D” and are either parallel or perpendicular to the flat part of the “D.” In a small percentage of cases the main shape is more square or rectangular than “D” shaped.)

What is unique about this particular image at CA-PLA 26 is how accurately it represents a bear track. It is as if the animal just put its paw to the ground and left the mark. You see the front and rear pads of the foot as well as an arc of dots (as opposed to a series of straight lines) where the tips of the claws would touch the ground. You could open a copy of Peterson’s Field Guide to Animal Tracks and find the same image in the “bear section” of the book (left).