

3 Hieroglyphic Canyon

Kids and adults alike enjoy this short, easy hike on the edge of the Superstition Wilderness. The trail takes you through a picture-perfect stretch of the Sonoran Desert, with rugged mountains looming high before you. You'll end at a petroglyph site where the Hohokam left images of animals and people, and an array of mysterious designs.

Start: East end of Cloudview Road in Gold Canyon

Distance: 2.8 miles out and back

Approximate hiking time: 1.5 hours

Difficulty: Easy

Trail surface: Dirt, rocks

Seasons: Best Oct through Apr

Other trail users: Equestrians

Canine compatibility: Dogs permitted

Land status: National forest

Nearest town: Gold Canyon

Fees and permits: No fees or permits required

Schedule: Trail always open; parking lot at trailhead open daily 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Maps: USGS Goldfield, AZ

Trail contacts: Tonto National Forest, 5140 East Ingram St., Mesa, AZ 85205; (480) 610-3300; www.fs.fed.us/r3/tonto/home.shtml

Finding the trailhead: From US 60 (Superstition Freeway) in the community of Gold Canyon, drive northeast on Kings Ranch Road. Wind your way through Gold Canyon for 2.8 miles to Baseline Avenue. Start watching for trailhead signs with arrows, which appear at all the following turns. Turn right (east) onto Baseline Avenue and continue for 0.2 mile to Mohican Road. Turn left (north) and continue 0.4 mile to Valley View Drive. Turn left (east). Over the next 0.5 mile, Valley View Drive will curve right (north) and become Whitetail Road, eventually reaching Cloudview Avenue. Turn right (east) onto Cloudview Avenue and drive 0.4 mile to a parking lot at the trailhead. GPS: N33 23.384 / W111 25.469.

The Rock Art

One look at Hieroglyphic Canyon and you can tell the place was once prime mountain sheep habitat. The cliffs surrounding this rugged gorge in the Superstition Mountains look tailor made for surefooted desert bighorns, and the lush vegetation at the bottom of the canyon would have provided plenty of food. There is even a bubbling spring in the lower part of the canyon that produces more water than an entire herd could drink. The only question is "What happened to all the sheep?"

The answer is that the local sheep population was wiped out in the early 1900s by habitat encroachment by miners, diseases contracted from domestic sheep, stress from recreationists, and other factors associated with settling the area. It is sad that the animals no longer inhabit the canyon, but their story makes for some thought-provoking petroglyphs. If you hike to the spring, you'll find large stone panels covered with pictures of sheep that now serve as prehistoric fossils of the locally extinct species. One scene shows eight sheep walking in a line; another appears to depict a ewe

giving birth. Most of the sheep, however, look like they're simply hanging out on the rocks, as bighorns often do.

Donald E. Weaver Jr., an archaeologist who investigated the site, speculates that the Hohokam hunted sheep for food and also placed some sort of religious or spiritual importance on them. Sometime between A.D. 900 and 1100, Native Americans using Hieroglyphic Canyon as a base camp for hunting and gathering became concerned that the sheep population was dwindling, possibly due to excessive hunting by several different tribes in the area. To ensure the continued availability of the sheep, the Hohokam sought spiritual assistance and conducted some sort of ritual or activity that included drawing sheep on the rocks. The spring was a natural location for this artwork because the sheep regularly gathered around the waterhole to drink.

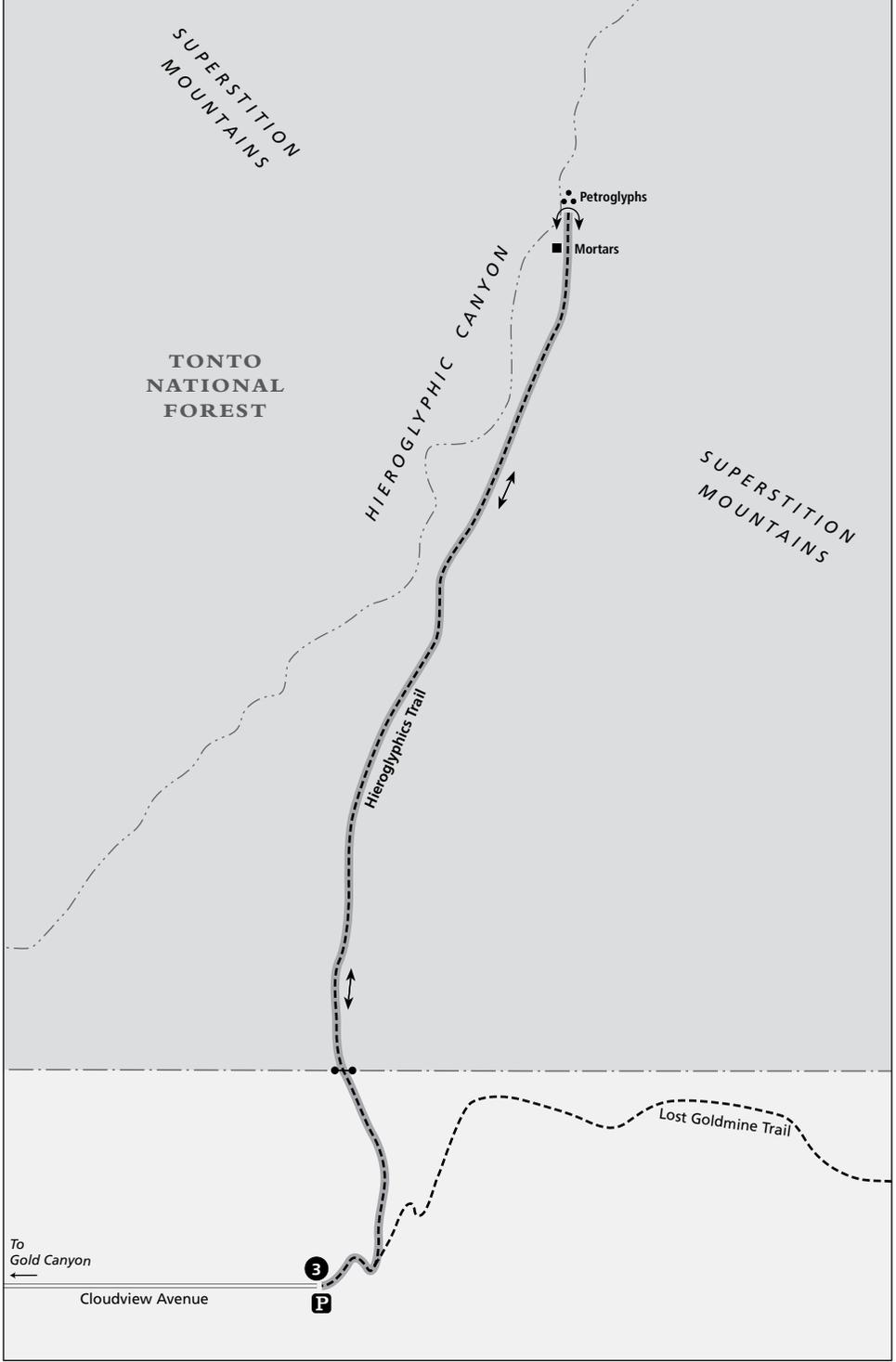
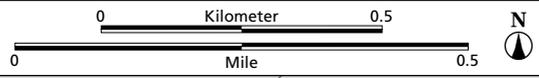
The Native Americans' efforts apparently worked, for sheep continued to live in the canyon long after the Hohokam stopped hunting in the area. In fact, the animals hung on for another 800 years or so until European-Americans began to change things. However, don't get the idea that all twentieth-century Arizonans had it in for the sheep. Just like the Hohokam, modern wildlife biologists have been concerned with the vanishing sheep population. They even made several attempts in the 1960s and 1970s to reintroduce bighorns into the western part of the Superstitions. However, after being turned loose, the animals wandered away into other parts of the range.

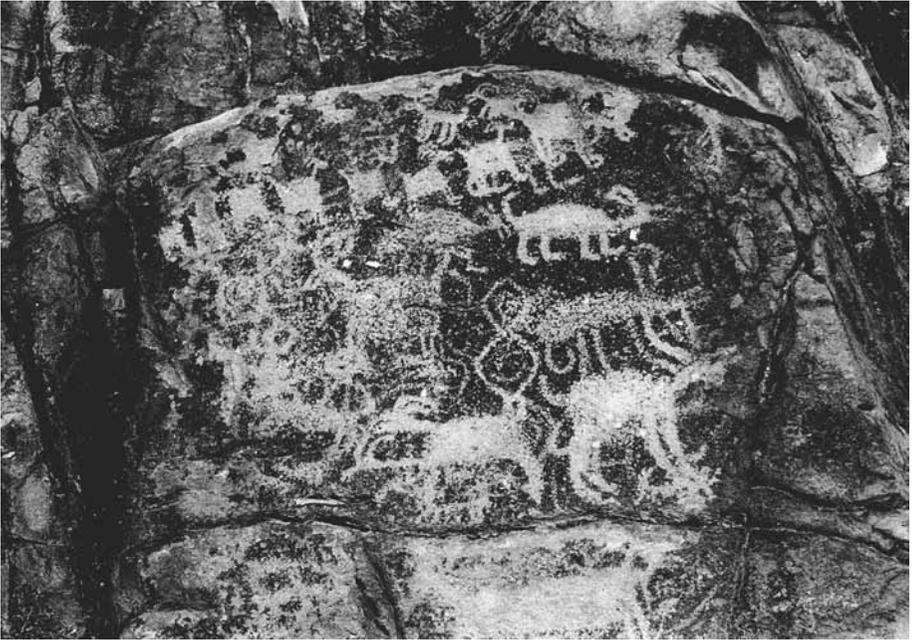
When you get tired of counting sheep, you can observe a variety of other petroglyphs around the spring in Hieroglyphic Canyon. There are almost as many deer as there are desert bighorns, and their interpretation is more or less the same as for the sheep. You'll also see a striking image of a stick figure wearing a headdress, plus a wide array of geometric patterns and designs.

One of the more prominent designs is that of a spiral, an image that shows up at many Hohokam rock art sites and has received a wide range of interpretations. One of the more interesting theories about spirals maintains that they function as solstice markers. For example, at Petrified Forest National Park in northeastern Arizona, a crooked shadow line moves across a particular spiral petroglyph as the sun rises on the first day of summer. When the crooked line bisects the center of the spiral, it becomes a straight line. Some spirals also mark the arrival of the winter solstice, vernal equinox, or autumnal equinox. If you show up in Hieroglyphic Canyon during a solstice or equinox, you may find out if the spiral there also interacts with a shadow.

Another prominent petroglyph consists of three squares stacked atop one another, each containing a pair of small circles. This image is called a "pipette" and is very common at Hohokam sites, although the appearance tends to vary a bit from one site to another. Pipettes bear a strong resemblance to rock art in southern New Mexico depicting Tlaloc, the goggle-eyed rain god of Mesoamerica, and the similarities have led some experts to believe that Hohokam pipettes may also represent some sort of deity.

Hieroglyphic Canyon





Bighorn sheep, including eight of them walking in a line, are all over this petroglyph panel in Hieroglyphic Canyon.

If you're taking photographs, bring a telephoto lens—many of the petroglyphs are too high up on the rocks to frame tightly with a regular lens.

The Hike

This hike begins at the east end of Cloudview Avenue in the community of Gold Canyon. The suburban landscape quickly gives way to a pristine desert environment as you head northeast on the Lost Goldmine Trail. Almost immediately after that, turn north onto Hieroglyphics Trail, which takes you into the Tonto National Forest and the Superstition Wilderness.

Hieroglyphics Trail is a bit rocky, with a slow, gradual incline of 620 feet over 1.4 miles. Overall that's fairly easy. In fact, you're likely to see nearly as many children along the trail as adults. Whatever your age, you'll marvel at the Superstition Mountains, which loom high over the thousands of saguaros along your low-lying trail. Look way, way up on the right canyonside and you'll spot a gigantic boulder precariously perched on a tall, pointy rock. It seems as though a mere breeze would push it over!

Just before reaching the petroglyph site, you'll pass a large granite boulder on the left (west) with seven (or possibly eight) perfectly round holes in it. These are mor-

tars. Ancient Native Americans used them in conjunction with handheld stones, or pestles, to grind food.

A creek appears just beyond the mortars, and all around the creek are images of sheep, deer, people, and all sorts of intriguing designs.

Miles and Directions

- 0.0** From the Lost Goldmine trailhead, follow the trail northeast.
- 0.1** Reach the junction of the Lost Goldmine and Hieroglyphics Trails, which is well marked with signs. Turn left (north) onto Hieroglyphics Trail, which will take you into Hieroglyphics Canyon.
- 0.3** Reach a gate and a sign stating you are entering the Tonto National Forest and the Superstition Wilderness.
- 1.3** Reach the large granite bolder full of mortars on the left (west) side of the trail.
- 1.4** Reach the creek in Hieroglyphics Canyon (GPS: N33 24.483 / W111 25.172). Petroglyphs are everywhere, especially on the opposite side of the creek. This is the main rock art site, but another significant concentration of petroglyphs exists about 100 yards downstream (not visible from the trail). After visiting the petroglyphs, turn around and head back the way you came.
- 2.8** Arrive back at the trailhead.