There are some mysteries that, once discovered, never let you go. In 1976, Harry Casey of Brawley began to explore a desert mystery that fascinates him to this day.

While taking an archeology class with Jay von Werlhof at IVCC, an avid bird-watcher since high school, he enlisted his 1946 Piper J-3 “Cub” plane for archeological aerial reconnaissance. The project began with a 35-minute camera and a plane with a hole cut in the floor of the pilot’s cabin.

Casey figured he could fly and shoot film at the same time. It became an amazing legacy and a lifelong love. Harry and his wife, Margaret, (they met during a field trip) have spent the last 38 years traveling the Colorado and Mohave deserts exploring earth art known as geoglyphs. The Casneys have flown almost 40,000 hours, documenting geoglyphs across the southwestern United States, Mexico and North America, trying to learn the stories behind their creation.

Photographing geoglyphs is a year-round project. Casey has written an unparalleled record of the physical changes of the geoglyphs in the southern California and Arizona deserts over the last 38 years.

Geoglyphs: Ancient earth art?

There are hundreds of geoglyphs throughout the deserts of the extreme southwestern United States, but they remain a relatively unknown phenomenon. The largest concentrations of geoglyphs (also called Incas, or earth art) are found in western Australia, northern Chile, southern Peru (the famous Nazca Lines) and the extreme southwestern United States and adjacent Mexico.

The images are best seen from the air and can range from only a few feet to hundreds of feet in length. Ancient geoglyphs are nearly all found along terraces or cliffs edges near a reliable source of water, like the Colorado and Gila rivers.

They are made by removing Earth by foot. Smaller figures are often tamped down into the earth by foot. Smaller figures are often tamped down into the earth with a stone, or with a rake to level out stones. Smaller figures are often tamped down into the source of water for centuries. Their meanings are still shrouded in mystery.

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Dating

While these desert marvels are still an uncertain science, desert varnish may hold the key.

Geologist professor Ron Dorn, with Arizona State University, has been working with desert varnish for years and used it to date many of our local geoglyphs.

Desert varnish is not a part of the rock itself, but paper-thin layers of clay minerals blown onto rocks over thousands of years. Minute amounts of organic matter are trapped in the rock by the varnish, and carbon-14 dating can be done using Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS C14) dating.

The geoglyphs of the Colorado Desert

The largest concentration of local geoglyphs are in a 165-mile band along the Colorado River between Needles and Yuma — not surprising since the Colorado River has been the area’s most reliable source of water for centuries. Their meanings are still shrouded in mystery.

Ethnographies suggest that geoglyphs are ceremonial or religious art, often given to capture mythological events, mythological events, or cliff edges near a reliable source of water. Their meanings are still shrouded in mystery.

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