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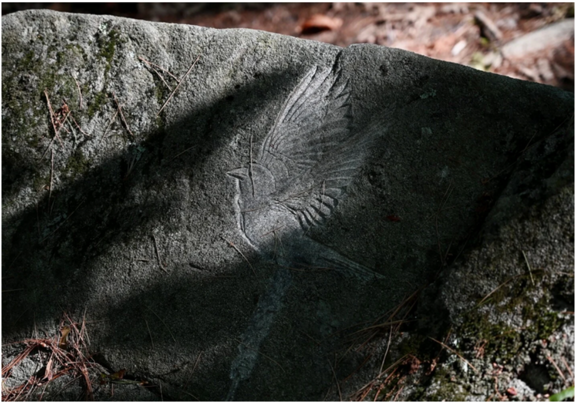
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT > Posted **August 14** | Updated **August 17**

The forest of Phippsburg is the canvas for these carvings

New York artist Kevin Sudeith has been carving petroglyphs into rock along Phippsburg trails for the past three years, including images of wildlife, a schooner and a space helicopter.

BY RAY ROUTHIER STAFF WRITER



A redwing blackbird petroglyph created by artist Kevin Sudeith in Phippsburg. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*
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PHIPPSBURG — Along the nature trails in this coastal town, there's plenty of wildlife to see.

But some creatures you'll spot are more sedentary than others – including a heron, a loon, a belted kingfisher, a tree

ROCK TOUR

New York artist Kevin Sudeith

leads tours of his petroglyphs (rock carvings) along Phippsburg Land Trust trails. He has scheduled tours on Aug. 18 and Sept. 1 from 5 to 7 p.m., leaving from the Cooley Center Pond Preserve trailhead, 125 Parker Head Road, Phippsburg. Sudeith's carvings are located in the Cooley Center Pond Preserve and the Ridgewell Preserve, both land trust properties.

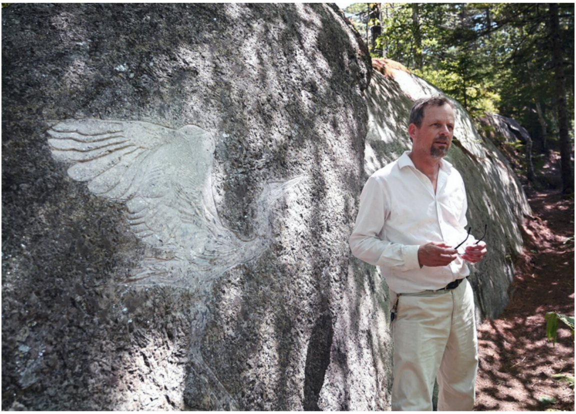
Groups can also schedule tours through Nov. 1 by emailing walks@petroglyphist.com or calling 800-781-0153. People who want to volunteer to help Sudeith with making prints of the artwork can contact him at the above email and phone number. For more information on Sudeith's carvings in Phippsburg or to donate money to help fund the work, go to nyfa.org and search "The Wild Bird Petroglyph." For information on the Phippsburg Land Trust properties and how to access them, go to phippsburglandtrust.org.

swallow and a red-winged blackbird that aren't going anywhere.

New York artist Kevin Sudeith has been creating petroglyphs, or rock carvings, on Phippsburg Land Trust properties for the past three years. He works on the carvings from late spring into fall, sleeping in a nearby barn and lugging tools miles into the woods, including ladders, diamond saws, dental instruments and a respirator/mask. He's created more than 30 individual images so far, including those mentioned above, at three sites at Ridgewell Preserve and Cooley Center Pond Preserve.

Sudeith, 56, was first struck by the emotional power of rock art as a teenager canoeing in his native Minnesota, when he saw some pictographs – rock paintings – that were between 500 and 9,000 years old. The idea of working in an ancient medium appealed to him, as does the ability to chronicle contemporary life in a way that could live on for hundreds or thousands of years.

"When I was a young artist, people would talk about (16th century portrait painter) Hans Holbein painting those collars and clothes and how he was documenting the moment. I remember thinking that was dumb, that art was about expressing yourself," said Sudeith, standing near some of his rock carvings. "But now I get that it is all about documenting the moment, it's not about me. I want these (rock carvings) to reflect the community."



Kevin Sudeith has been creating petroglyphs – rock carvings – on Phippsburg Land Trust properties for the past three years.
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Sudeith says he's trying to represent the nature of the local area by depicting various bird species, as well as butterflies and dragonflies, in his Phippsburg carvings. He's also carved an image of NASA's Mars helicopter, because we are living in the space age and because he thinks sending a helicopter to explore Mars is one of the most amazing things humans are doing right now. He's also carved a 19th century schooner, appropriate because of the area's maritime history.

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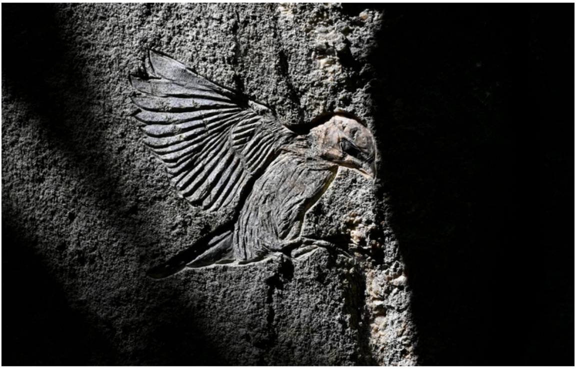
PAINTING, RUGS AND AN ANCIENT MEDIUM

Sudeith grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, and has been drawn to drawing since elementary school. Images from the "Star Wars" movies, including the villainous Darth Vader, were among the first things he drew with passion. He studied art in college – ceramics and pottery at first before switching to painting. He got a bachelor's degree from San Francisco Art Institute and a master's of fine art from the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

In the early '90s, he began exhibiting his works, mostly paintings and drawings, including "abstracted, idealized landscapes." While he painted, he had a series of jobs to help pay the bills. One was buying the contents of abandoned storage containers then selling them, like what people do on the A&E TV show "Storage Wars." He also began selling Persian rugs and soon began to specialize in rugs made in Afghanistan in the 1980s with images of planes and helicopters on them. The motif started becoming popular around the time of the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, Sudeith said.

While he was still studying art in the late '80s, he had traveled to Australia and saw a huge variety of rock art, including contemporary images and some estimated to be thousands of years old. The idea that the art was still in place for people to see intrigued him.



A cedar waxwing bird carved by Kevin Sudeith, one of many he's created along Phippsburg trails. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*
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Years later, after selling the Afghan rugs, he began thinking more about ways to meld contemporary art with older methods. Around 2007, he began planning to do his own petroglyphs.

"I thought it was awesome that you could paint something that would last so long," said Sudeith. "I really liked the idea of making something contemporary in such an ancient medium."

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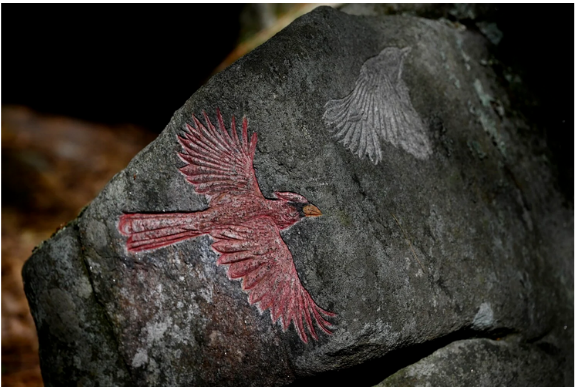
The first rock carving he did was in a little-used park in Manhattan, littered with mattresses and hypodermic needles. The piece included images of police helicopters. In all, Sudeith has created 11 major petroglyph sites in the U.S. and other countries, some with many images, and about a dozen smaller petroglyph creations.

Outside a subway station near a beach in Queens, New York, he created images of horseshoe crabs, airplanes taking off, birds and a basketball. In Iceland, he carved a local horseback rider and birds. In Kenmare, North Dakota, he created images of farming and oil production. Some of his other works can be seen on his website, petroglyphist.com.

TRAILS TO TREASURE

All of Sudeith's Phippsburg works are accessible to hikers, either on or just off paths in the two preserves. He also leads tours of his work and will customize the time and length of tours, depending on what people want. The Ridgewell works – waterfowl, schooner, helicopter and others – are about three-quarters of a mile into the woods. One of the Cooley preserve sites is about half-mile in using a steep shortcut, further if you follow the trail around a giant cliff. It features nine cedar waxwings.



A cardinal carved – and colored – draws hikers to this rock off a trail in the Cooley Center Pond Preserve in Phippsburg. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

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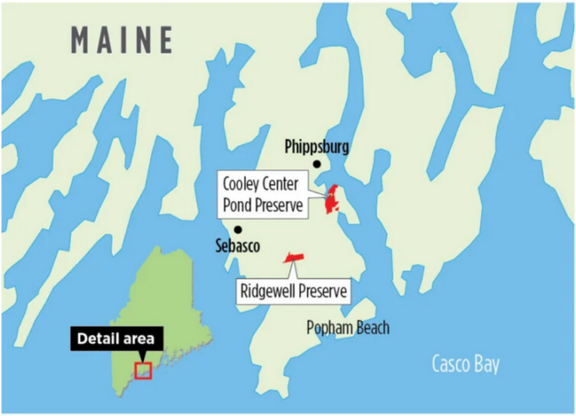
The most kid-friendly piece is just a short walk from a parking lot into the Cooley Center Pond Preserve, on a large rock just steps from the path and only a few feet off the ground. While most of Sudeith's carvings are not colored, this rock features a bright red cardinal on one end that catches people's eyes from the trail. Then walking around one side of the rock visitors see a grey catbird, a male red-wing blackbird doing a mating dance, an American crow, two dragonflies, a common yellowthroat and a hermit thrush. On the other side are a barn swallow, a swallowtail butterfly and another male redwing blackbird doing its mating dance.

Locate the carvings

Find Kevin Sudeith's petroglyphs at these Phippsburg Land Trust properties, about three -quarters of a mile into the woods at Ridgewell Preserve and at two sites at Cooley Center Pond Preserve, a short walk from the parking lot and the other farther down the trail around the cliff or a steep half-mile short cut.



STAFF GRAPHIC | JAKE LAWS

"I think the process of discovery is important to people's satisfaction with the work, " said Sudeith.

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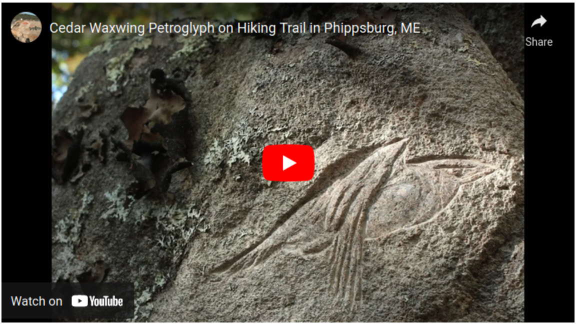
As part of his art, Sudeith does time-lapse videos of his projects, by setting up a camera in the woods and leaving it there over the days, weeks or months he works on something. The life-sized heron he did in Phippsburg, with very detailed and layered wings, took about two and a half months. The loon took about 10 days. He also does carvings of concentric circles, his signature emblem, which are much less demanding to carve.

Some of the rock he's carved in the Phippsburg woods contains mica, giving his work a glittery quality. But mica is also very pliable, almost the consistency of sheets of paper stacked together, and is very tough to carve. For some of his more detailed carvings, including the very small intricate markings on butterflies and dragonflies, he brought dental instruments.



Sudeith, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, was invited to create the petroglyphs by the Phippsburg Land Trust and plans to keep working on his carvings into next year. He funds his work, at least partially, through donations, but says he's not making money from it at this point. While carving, he lives rent free at a barn owned by land trust member Sydney McDowell, and sleeps in a sleeping bag on a camping mattress.

He was first approached about creating petroglyphs in Phippsburg by Dan Dowd, an artist who lives in town and is chair of the land trust's conservation commission. The two met at an art show in Miami, Florida, in 2018.

When Dowd heard about Sudeith's work with petroglyphs, he immediately thought Phippsburg's land trust properties would be a perfect location. Sudeith's wife's family has been coming to a summer home in Georgetown, one peninsula over from Phippsburg, for years. So Sudeith said working in Phippsburg was appealing because he could be near family while working.

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Kevin Sudeith climbs a ladder to work on a petroglyph of the Mars helicopter. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

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Sudeith arranged to have a fiscal sponsor – New York Foundation for the Arts – so he could accept donations for the project. Then he presented a proposal for what he hoped to do to the land trust. Work began in 2019.

After seeing the work that's Sudeith has done in town so far, Dowd feels that he was right.

"The idea of creating this record of us being here was really interesting to me," said Dowd. "This is another way for people to see artwork and brings more people into our preserves."

Dowd said he's seen some people express concerns about the carvings on social media, usually about how manmade art doesn't belong in such a natural setting. But Dowd says when he gets to explain Sudeith's work to someone, and the idea that it documents the places and time for generations to come, they often change their minds.

Sudeith hopes to do more carvings in Phippsburg that represent the community. He'd like to do carvings of ships and boats, after asking local people for suggestions. He hopes to work in Phippsburg again next year but, as of now, still has some details to work out.

McDowell, the land trust member who lets Sudeith lodge in her barn, likes that his work in Phippsburg could help future generations gets some idea of life there, at this point in time.

"By looking at rock carvings we get some sense of what people were up to at that time, maybe what they were trying to convey to the next generation," said McDowell.