

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### IDENTIFICATION OF SNAKE BANDS BY ALEXANDER ROSS

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Alexander Ross took a great deal of interest in Pacific Northwest Indians, and although he knew that some of his tribal identifications were confused, he went to a great deal of effort to distinguish different peoples that he dealt with. By profession, he was a teacher and academic administrator as well as fur trader, so his Indian studies reflected a different approach from that of most beaver hunters of his time. For tribes active along Snake River, he had no trouble separating Nez Perce and Blackfoot bands from Shoshonean peoples, but some of his Shoshoni and Northern Paiute analysis got scrambled. He recognized large Northern Shoshoni composite bands (primarily a Boise and Fort Hall Shoshoni group led by Peiem) and another group of Lemhi Shoshoni with whom other Mountain Snakes (Tukudeka) often associated in Salmon, Lost River, Lemhi, Yellowstone, and other mountain sheep habitats. (Northern Shoshoni identified as Mountain Snakes or Sheepeaters were skillful mountain sheep hunters who had refrained from depending upon horses to travel widely in search of buffalo and other resources: some of them--later referred to as Lemhi Shoshoni--had used horses to expand into Montana's plains in search of buffalo. Sacajawea was a member of a Mountain Shoshoni band with Tukudeka origins for which a Lemhi reservation eventually was provided.) Ross also was aware of a noted Northern Paiute band that had penetrated into Idaho from Oregon and Nevada after obtaining Shoshoni horses and starting to travel with mounted Northern Shoshoni bands. These Northern Paiute were referred to as Bannock, and they soon compiled a firm military record of opposition to Snake country trappers. They had wiped out John Reid's post near later Fort Boise in 1814 and resisted a variety of other trappers in 1824. Ross sometimes confused them with Mountain Snakes with whom they traveled.

Much more of a problem came from encounters Donald Mackenzie and Alexander Ross had in Boise Valley with a plains Arapaho band they encountered at regular summer salmon fishing and trading festivals there. Ross naturally regarded them as Snakes and could separate them from Peiem's Northern Shoshoni. He realized that he was dealing with three different groups (Northern Shoshoni, Bannock, or Northern Paiute, and a plains band that came a long distance to meet with him in a camp at Caldwell in 1824) but he often was unclear in figuring out what band belonged to which group.

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