

# JACKSON & COPPERHEAD CAVES

by Jeff Bartlett

I spent the weekend following Fall AACS assisting a survey at Jackson Cave, camping at Sam's Throne, and touring Copperhead Cave. I set out toward Janus on Saturday morning with Bryan Signorelli, arriving on time to find the usual cast of characters scattered around the fire. Before long, we were following a convoy of Jeeps toward our destination.

Jackson cave turns out to be a spacious sandstone cave on private property, stretching in two directions from a collapsed sink-hole. One flank had already been surveyed two weekends prior to our trip, and we were to attack the second half. Dave Taylor had offered to provide a survey and map of the cave for the landowner, who happily obliged. We certainly had the manpower, as a dozen people had made the trip to help out!

Bryan and I had been recruited by Walt Meurer to read instruments on his team, and he enthusiastically handed over his instruments, target light, and tape reel when learning that I did not own any of these items at the time.

Due to the number of warm bodies on hand, the survey would be split into several teams: one to do a "plan view" survey beginning from the entrance, one start at the cave's end (600 feet away) and similarly work back

toward the midpoint of the cave with a "plan view" survey, one team to sketch cross sections and one to draw a separate profile view of the entire cave. Ours was the team elected to head directly toward the end of the passage and begin there, working our way back toward daylight.

We scabbled our way across the unstable sandstone breakdown, much of which was enormous slabs slick with guano. The cave fluctuated between 100 and 150 feet in width, and poor Walter found himself stuck spending quite a bit of time sketching each station despite the aid of a Disto.

Bryan took this opportunity to get himself soaking wet pushing a wet crawl, while I mostly tried to avoid disturbing some bats who'd begun screeching at me. Periodically, Walt would finish his painstaking rendering of a 75' x 125' hunk of real estate, and we'd





by Bryan Signorelli

devoid of speleothems or any features except its wealth of bats, we found ourselves a lonely Pipistrelle and proceeded to take several close-up shots. A couple of 5x7 prints will be a nice supplement to the final map.

Our day complete, we thanked the landowner and headed toward Sam's Throne, where we would be making camp for the night. Aly Bowen and Mandy Harris met us shortly after we arrived, and soon we'd collected enough soggy wood to start a fire.

I roasted a soy sausage on my ridiculous four foot long weenie stick, then bundled up in my tent and popped my head out through the partially unzipped doorway so I could continue conversing until we decided it was time for bed.

Come morning, I decided to quickly hike the loop around the bluff to see Sam's Throne. I lingered at the top of the Chickenhead Wall before turning back; the knobby, rumped sandstone was fascinating, and I realized that what I'd mistaken for spray paint was no less than five distinct varieties of brightly-colored lichen.

Fall's foliage was in its splendor, and I was glad to have set time aside to hoof my way

happily spit more data at him to begin the process anew.

We soon found ourselves pulling tape up a fairly sharp incline spanning 60 or 70 feet. As Bryan pulled the tape taut, it snapped, and only luck kept him from falling backward with the sudden release of energy. As I read the compass from my station high above the rest of my party, a large group of bats whirled behind me. Several hours later, we found ourselves connecting with the other plan view team's survey, and heading out of the cave.

Since it was still quite early, we grabbed the photo gear and headed back underground in order to take some photos for the landowner. Since the cave itself was



Aly Bowen on rope in the entrance to Copperhead Cave.

by Jeff Bartlett

around the trail. When I returned to camp, Aly was starting breakfast. I've been permanently banned from attempting to cook food at LRG functions based on the recent Pancake Incident at AACCS. Works for me.

Copperhead would be a nice, casual trip to round out the weekend, and it was almost 2:00 in the afternoon when we finally found ourselves at the cave. Water levels on the surface were extremely low, to the extent that the nearby falls fed only a half-hearted dribble to the lagoon below and the bleached, dismantled skeleton of a deer was visible on the exposed bedrock.

We'd planned to take some pictures, and Bryan had suggested at least one interesting photo opportunity: there is a smaller, subordinate entrance to Copperhead that requires a short crawl and ends at a ledge overlooking

the entrance pit. From this vantage, one could photograph cavers climbing down through the main entrance from the side, as opposed to the more typical shots taken from the floor or lip of a pit. I volunteered, and the ledge afforded just enough room for me to sit up (albeit hunched over a bit), with one leg outstretched and planted on the opposite edge of the chimney for balance.

Bryan attached the camera gear to the rope, climbed down far enough to swing the gear across the hole to me, and then surfaced again in order to begin lowering Mandy down. As such, I was able to snap several photos of Aly & Mandy as they passed me by. I swung the camera gear back to Bryan, and then was belayed down as well.

The water in the cave was, expectedly, quite low, and the ground directly beneath the pit was dry chert. Instead of the short, cascading waterfalls typical of certain points in Copperhead, we instead found mere trickles into calm, shallow pools. We picked our way through the cave, stopping at the throne room to spend several minutes trying out some photo ideas, and after three hours or so we were back at the floor of the entrance pit.

Here we encountered several poorly equipped spelunkers who apparently intended to ascend out of the pit using a webbing ladder and a handled Petzl Ascension that had been bent severely in an encounter with a tree! We suggested they chimney out, and they asked Bryan to rig their rope so they could use it as a belay.

Night had already arrived when we emerged from the cave, and we headed home. Two days of caving and camping on a beautiful fall weekend are hard to top, and Copperhead is a very interesting cave. I suspect I will visit here again.



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Mandy Harris on her way down in Copperhead Cave.