

Return to I Hate This Cave

Chert, wet ears, and Princeton Tec's worst nightmare

by Jeff Bartlett

On my third trip with the LRG, and my fourth caving trip ever, Bryan Signorelli and Shaun Baker tried to kill me.

Of this I am certain. I Hate This Cave earns its ominous name by way of a quote from the initial exploratory trip inside, during the fall 2006 AACCS. About 600 feet in, that group turned back, and some vowed never to set foot inside again.

Things started innocently enough, with Shaun asking me at the grotto meeting if I was busy this weekend. The cave's nomenclature notwithstanding, I jumped at the opportunity.

We were to survey the portion of the crawl that had already been pushed, estimated at 400 feet, and continue beyond this point as far as we were able to go (or until the cave ended). We would be using a slightly different survey technique than usual: we would go as a three man team and survey as much as possible, plotting the data into Auriga on Bryan's palm pilot. This data set would then be printed onto waterproof material, in order to make a return trip with two sketchers and finish the survey.

This method would allow us to move as quickly as possible from station to station in a cave where the surveyors would often be partially submerged while taking readings.

We would also make extensive use of 6"

and 12" standoffs, allowing us to set our stations on the low ceiling and take readings at a static distance below the station mark. This technique was created for just this style of cave, with lots of low smooth ceilings.

So, on a typically hot and hazy August morning, the three of us found ourselves at the mouth of I Hate This Cave. The entry is roughly 2 feet high and 10 feet wide, with a steady dribble of water meandering around a mossy plateau and spilling gently down toward the stream bed below. We finished gearing up, set our first station, and headed in.

The first 100 feet is a belly crawl over smooth limestone, with most of the water concentrated into a shallow channel at the center. Right around the time one begins to tire of belly crawling, the ceiling starts to open up slightly. The good news here is that the water is only ankle deep. The bad news is that your knees, elbows, and chest are low enough to be underwater anyway!

As the water slowly grows deeper, the graduation to a regular hands-and-knees crawl is welcome, despite the coldness of the water. Here, the limestone has delaminated into sharp fins jutting out into the crawl, with plenty of flat, sharp pieces visible under the water.

Before one can climb completely out of the water and stretch a bit, things get interest-

ing. After meandering gently left and right, and slowly opening to a crouch-walk with just enough room between the ceiling and the water line for a helmeted head, the passage takes a 90° left turn into the "ear dip", where for 20 or 30 feet there just isn't enough room left to keep one's head out of the water. The layer of limestone above has a long rift running down the center of it, which allows a tantalizing glance of the actual roof of the passage several feet above, but the only way out is to follow the crack until it opens into a hole large enough to scramble through.

On the way in, I'd just finished taking my instrument readings, and had my helmet and headlamp floating on top of Mike's Swaygo pack next to me, so I turned my head sideways, dunked an ear (and an eyeball), and made a break for it. By this time we were shivering a bit from the slow pace of the survey and the long stretch of wet passage, and when I made it to the hole I launched myself out of the water like a dolphin and laid spread eagle on the delicate-looking ledge. 58 degree stone has never felt so warm.

At some point during the ear dip portion of our survey, we lost our first Princeton Tec Apex, the one on Shaun's helmet.

After another sharp turn, this time to the right, the crawl spills into a room. An actual room! Dubbed Big Room by the original group, we had no way of knowing whether it would prove to be the largest room in the cave or whether it would simply be thought of as the first stopping point in a long crawl that led to bigger and better things.

Big Room is cylindrical and roughly 15 feet in diameter, dominated by a large flow-

stone formation. A scramble up the flowstone reveals more flowstone and formations creeping down from the ceiling to the left, and a grim-looking slab crawl back down to the stream bed to the right.

It was at this point that we lost our second Apex, the one on my helmet I'd purchased just a week and a half earlier. It began shorting out earlier in the wet passage, and when I was able to examine it in Big Room there was visible fogging inside the lenses and some hairline cracking on the top of the head unit. It went to Chinn Springs

Cave, it went to I Hate This Cave, and now it's going to have to go directly back to Princeton Tec. I switched to Bryan's backup, another Apex, which required some coaxing to work in any usable fashion as well.

After passing through somewhere between 200 and 2,000,000 more feet of chert belly crawl, I watched Bryan squeeze through a tight spot up ahead and then... stand up!

True to form, we enthusiastically attacked the slab crawl, which quickly developed in to a shallow, chert-lined pool extending for 100 feet or so. After enjoying a lovely survey station smack in the middle of it, the water again receded to ankle-depth and the next couple hundred feet was a combination of belly crawl and H&K crawl over chert, terminating in Mutiny Island.

Mutiny Island marked the turn-around point of the original team, where the cave was accidentally named and the exploration was aborted. More shore than island, climbing up out of the water onto dry chert and a five foot ceiling was a pleasure. From this point forward, we were surveying virgin cave.

After passing through somewhere between 200 and 2,000,000 more feet of chert belly crawl, I watched Bryan squeeze through a tight spot up ahead and then... stand up!

Borehole. Really. Heading off in both directions, with multiple leads down each path. 10 feet wide and 10 feet high, and we were the first ones to see it. This was the point where the third Apex died, Bryan's spare, but for a moment we didn't care.

We did our best to contain ourselves, peered around a few corners, took some rough measurements, and decided that after eight hours of surveying it was best to call it a day. It was a decision made easier by the fact that all three of us were down to a single headlamp. The borehole, and whatever lies beyond, will have to wait for the next survey trip, after the 830 feet entry crawl has been sketched.

All that remained was a quick (~45 minute) scramble back out the way we came, and we emerged into the night air muddy, cold, bruised, and exhilarated.

In summation, the discovery of a larger passage and several good leads beyond

made the difficult survey well worth it. The cave is blissfully unspoiled, and the 3-man survey team worked well.

I can't wait to go back next week and help with the sketching. But I'm bringing a different headlamp.

Since the authoring of this article, LRG has made several return trips to I Hate This Cave in efforts to further and/or complete the survey. What follows is a summary of these trips.

August 11, 2007

Our bruises mostly healed, Bryan and I returned with Dewayne Agin to sketch the previously surveyed passage. As Dewayne worked from station to station, Bryan and I surveyed a small meander near the entrance and left flagging at each station to help mark them. Things moved slowly and we grew frustrated. By the time we got to





the “big room” and had finished shooting radials, everyone was very cold and time was growing short. We surveyed an additional meander after the big room, and headed back with about 300 feet of sketch and a small amount of new survey.

September 22, 2007

Unable to find anyone else dumb enough to tag along, Bryan and I returned to I Hate this Cave with hopes of not only finishing the sketch but continuing the survey a bit. By this time, I had managed to learn Adobe Illustrator and had already mapped the previously sketched portion of the cave; any remaining questions were field-checked.

This was an extremely productive trip, although wearying as we were only a group of two and somehow I managed to leave my complement of cave food in the truck. Bryan sketched the remaining 500 feet of previously surveyed cave, and I sloshed around in the ear dip wearing swim goggles, taping the air/water depths at each station as well as between each station. While these figures surely vary with the season and water level, it seemed appropriate to have the most accurate figures possible for this trying section of cave. We also spent some time taking photos during the field check and additional note taking, one of which would go on to win Swaygo’s “Pack in Action” contest. It must have been the goggles. (Ed.—See previous page for winning photo.)

After completing the sketch, we added a half-dozen additional vectors to the survey, and while Bryan sketched the right portion

of the previously discovered “borehole” passage I attempted to cram myself into a muddy hole in the wall dubbed the “grim weeper.” While it appeared to connect with a room on the other side, after removing two bowling-ball sized rocks from the constriction at the end of the crawl I found myself too tired to continue and we decided it was time to head home.

After 11 hours in-cave, having only shared three candy bars, we found ourselves back at the truck. Even after a quick meal in town, we were exhausted and had to pull over on the side of the road for a 60 minute cat-nap before finishing the return drive. I walked into the house at 4:08 AM.

November 2, 2007

On Friday, an AACS team headed back to continue the survey. I was not present for this trip, which consisted of Bryan Signorelli, Shaun Baker, Brandon Waggoner, and Jerry Cindric. The team was able to map the left side of the borehole passage, which disappointingly returned quickly to more stream crawl and choked off after a short distance. Shaun Baker pushed the Grim Weeper beyond my previous advance and determined that it did not go.

November 3, 2007

By Saturday, myself and others had arrived at AACS and we were able to put two teams into the cave with the hopes of finishing the survey. Since the previous trips had distilled the available leads to a single “going” lead, we planned to use the two teams in a leapfrog fashion and extend the

cave as much as possible. The first team consisted of Bryan Signorelli, Aly Bowen, and Mike Young. The second team consisted of Shaun Baker, myself, and Tim Hargett.

This was very difficult survey in a wet bedrock passage with a ceiling height varying between 1.25 feet and 1.5 feet throughout. The crawl continued this way ...and continued ...and continued. After nine hours in-cave, seven of which were spent actively surveying, the two bedraggled teams found themselves needing to turn back after netting only 600 feet of additional survey, and looking down a passage that continued with the same maddening cross section.

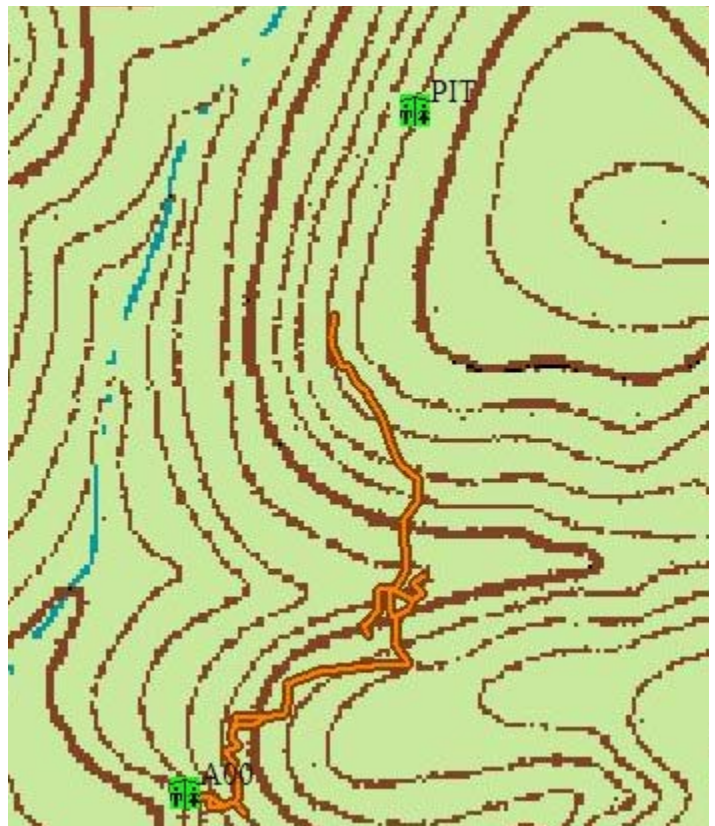
Taking one final break to gather our torn, broken gear and rest before the 45-minute crawl out of the cave, the new passage was dubbed *The crawl of hopeless misery (and unending despair)*. We think it fits nicely with the name of the cave. Aly came to the conclusion that eating a fruit cup while laying on her back in a 15" high passage was rather difficult, although we all agreed that it couldn't have been as difficult as Mike removing his cave suit and dry suit in the same passage in order to pee.

Upon returning to camp and admitting that the cave did in fact continue, we were greeted with a rousing chant of "Hell no, we won't go!" from the other cavers at the fire. Sounds like we'll need to finish this one ourselves.

Epilogue

We left AACCS determined to put this cave to bed for good, and turn in the map as-is. "Here Be Dragons", the map could say, or "Dave Taylor says the cave ends here." We were ready to write it off. But within a few days we were all feeling a mixture of guilt and curiosity, and then Bryan put the new line plot on a topo map showing that we were 400 feet away from a sinkhole on the surface, and it was all downhill from there.

We're optimistic that the next team can complete the survey. But aren't we always?



by Bryan Signorelli