

# Whippoorwill Cave

by Leah Bartlett

Jeff started caving late in the summer, and while I couldn't imagine caves to be all that entertaining, I accepted the invitation to see Whippoorwill to show my support for his interests. I was a bit worried because I had already heard stories about peeing in bottles and rocks that tear all your clothes off.

We camped at a very swank campsite near the cave, complete with hot showers and electricity. Jeff and I arrived after dark and I finally met the cavers that I had heard about; namely Bryan, Aly and the remarkable Mandy.

I was pleased that they all appeared to be normal. After a couple of beers around the campfire, I felt much better about this idea of caving.

On the morning of the trip, my choice of clothing was an issue. I couldn't imagine

that two layers of clothing would be insufficient for any outing; and what's more, I had carefully coordinated the layers.

To my disbelief, I was encouraged to wear an orange coverall suit that strongly favored a prisoner's uniform (I'm not convinced that it wasn't), girls' softball knee pads and a purple hardhat. To add insult to injury, I was also handed a bottle to pee in.

While I pranced around in my convict suit, Jeff wore his brand new, yellow cave suit. It was brilliant; he looked like a giant, animated banana.

The drive to Whippoorwill was in the flatbed of a pickup truck through the woods and on a dirt road. I had met Mike and his son that morning and he was following in his mom's Honda at about 3.5mph; while our ride blasted down the spiraling and completely broken dirt road at speeds perceived to be in excess of 60mph.

Once we got to the parking area for the cave entrance, I climbed out of the truck, brushed myself off, and noticed I had dirt between my teeth. I made Jeff stand guard while I enjoyed my last bathroom break in the middle of the woods while everyone officially suited up and hiked up the hill.

Within a few minutes we stood looking at a hole in the ground. The kids in the



by Bryan Signorelli



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surfaces. As was anticipated, a rude formation tore an enormous hole in the butt of my convict suit... thank goodness for those layers I had worn underneath...

I didn't find anything overly challenging until Kathy's Canyon. While crossing a large trench, I decided that I no longer enjoyed *chimneying* and would like to stop.

It wasn't until I angrily exclaimed "this sucks!" that Bryan told Jeff to stop giving me advice so that I could take advice from one person at a time. When I finally came to terms with the fact that I didn't want to be left in Whippoorwill, I chimneyed the rest of the way down and snarled at it on my way out.

It was all fun and games until the "wet exit." Jeff had warned me about it earlier, but I really didn't understand what it would be like.

group jumped right in, while I had second thoughts.

I had never been in a cave, except when I have gone on guided tours of caverns. Within the first few feet into the cave I approached a small crevice in a rock wall.

As I got closer to the crevice I saw that something with creepy long legs was perched inside (this was not in the briefing). Aly was kind enough to give me some facts on cave crickets before I lost all sense of reason.

Bryan, our tour guide, had told Jeff that Whippoorwill was a good cave for beginners because it had a little of everything. I can agree with this because it seemed that we never did or saw the same thing twice.

We crawled through small spaces, shimied over crevices and lunged across rock



by Bryan Signorelli



The wet exit, in my memory, is on par with going into shock from hypothermia. Basically you have to get on your belly and wiggle down into a hole, then swim/crawl about twenty feet through frigid water.

Bryan had Jeff go first and we giggled as Jeff began to have a meltdown when he couldn't see the exit as was promised.

After Jeff was through, I reluctantly followed. It was everything I hoped it wouldn't be - cold and miserable - but I triumphed without shedding a single tear.

After everyone in the group came through, we all piled back into the cars and drove home, feeling pretty pleased with ourselves. I have not been caving since, and I don't know when I will go again, but my first experience was extremely fun and I'm very happy I was able to go.



## At Risk in Arkansas

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service lists 30 animals or plants in the state as endangered (present in such small numbers they are in danger of extinction) or threatened (likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future). Cave critters are in yellow text.

### ENDANGERED ANIMALS

- **Gray bat**
- **Indiana bat**
- **Ozark big-eared bat**
- American burying beetle
- **Cave crayfish** (both *Cambarus aculabrum* and *Cambarus zophonastes*)
- Eskimo curlew
- Pink mucket
- Scaleshell mussel
- Florida panther
- Curtis Pearlymussel
- Fat pocketbook
- Ouachita rock pocketbook
- Speckled pocketbook
- Pallid sturgeon
- Interior least tern
- Gray wolf
- Ivory-billed woodpecker
- Red-cockaded woodpecker

### THREATENED ANIMALS

- **Ozark cavefish**
- Leopard darter
- Arkansas fatmucket
- Magazine Mountain shagreen
- Arkansas River shiner

### ENDANGERED PLANTS

- Running buffalo clover
- Harperella
- Pondberry

### THREATENED PLANTS

- Missouri bladderpod
- Geocarpon minimum (no common name)
- Eastern fringed orchid