

A synopsis of what is going on in the world of the Near Normal...

Trips to Missouri and TAG

Many thanks to Laura Lexander and her article on Cave Research Foundation (CRF) work at Mammoth Cave and also a hearty thanks to Bill Roth for a dynamite new puzzle feature. So you think you know your caving vocabulary? Bill Roth has the test for you!

Several people went on some hard caving trips the past two months. One trip in Missouri's longest cave entailed some seven miles of hard wet caving with members of the Little Egypt Grotto (LEG). The other cave trips were down in

Tennessee/Alabama/Georgia (TAG), also involving LEG members. One trip was the infamous McBrides Cave. The other trip was a through trip through "The Big One" -- Ellisons - down Fantastic Pit, through Pigeon Mountain, and up Incredible Pit (or the reverse, depending on which group you were on).

Hopefully there will be some written trip reports on these outstanding caves, but in the meantime, enjoy Laura's and Bill's prose. And PLEASE send in your written efforts – they will be published!

Cave Research Foundation (CRF) July Expedition

by Laura Lexander

I spoiled myself this spring, where Mammoth Cave is concerned. In March, I took my daughter there to play "tourist", visiting the cave and a few friends in the area. We went on three tours in three caves: The New Entrance Tour at Mammoth, the Diamond Caverns tour, and the Cub Run Cave tour. In April, I flew down for the CRF expedition by myself. In May I traveled with Matt Goska and my daughter for the CRF Memorial Day expedition. And in July I drove by myself for the latter part of the Fourth of July expedition.

It was incredibly hard to walk away from Hamilton Valley to my car to head home on Sunday July 11th. I'd been down four times since the beginning of the year, whereas typically I only attend three or so expeditions a year. Knowing that I probably won't return again until October, I stopped several times to soak in the view of the bunks, main building, and surrounding area. I'd already said my good-byes to the people still lingering (and cleaning).

CRF - continued

I even placed my hand on the wall of one of the bunk houses, burning to memory the feeling of its roughness against my palm. Very soon, I knew I'd be transported four hundred miles away. While the drive takes me about 7 ½ hours I always get that, "but I was just there" feeling in the pit of my stomach when I'm sitting on the sofa at home, or walking up the stairwell at work. It's a strange, melancholy feeling that I can only alleviate by writing/reading about it, Facebooking (God forbid) my fellow caving friends, and knowing in my heart that I plan to return to Kentucky again and again for as long as I'm able. Look at people like Roger Brucker, still caving and surveying and he's eighty years old!

I realized after this expedition that when I'm at home in northern Illinois (yes, in the suburbs of Chicago) that my eyes gravitate toward the lush, greener areas around here. I've been doing that for a few years. Believe it or not, there are A LOT of places like that around me. Also, I've found it's not nearly as flat as some people's perceptions of the area are. The farther you drive away from the lake, the less pancake-like the land becomes. The city itself is far, far away from me. Kentucky, though it may be further away in distance, is much closer to where I live according to my

soul.

On the evening of the day I arrived for the July expedition, the oppressively hot and thick air was broken by a thunderstorm. We were standing under the overhang outside the main building, watching the downpour, when all of a sudden the loudest and brightest crash of thunder and lightning I'd ever experienced interrupted our talking. I jumped (and I think squeaked ... why am I admitting this?), nearly bowling into Kayla New. Paul McMullen said that strike couldn't have been more than two hundred feet away from us. Amazing! The storm continued to rumble for a while after that and the lightning was beautiful, but we never had another bolt come that close.

Much talk happened that evening over possible trips for Friday, followed by a bout of chair squeezing activities. Kayla and I were excited at the prospect of caving together for the first time. Due to weather predictions, wet suit trips weren't going to happen. We ended up going to Great Onyx with Tom Brucker and Shannon Mathey to tackle what has become known as the "Brandi on the rocks" passage because a girl about Kayla and my size had gotten stuck for six hours in that spot earlier in the week. Having been there before, I couldn't believe it wasn't possible to get through.

*We Need Trip Reports!
Please, PLEASE, send
them in!!!!!!!!!!!!*

CRF- continued

Now, she did get through, but had trouble doing so and also had trouble getting back. We decided to poke around in that squeeze before continuing on to our true objective, which was to continue the resurvey of the Stairway Crawl. Shannon, a tiny person roughly the size of a thirteen year old had no problem getting through, but Kayla and I opted not to push it, even though we were nearly certain it was doable. The reason being we hadn't begun our real survey yet and didn't want to spoil the whole day by potentially getting stuck. And also, both Joyce Hoffmaster and Karen Willmes, also small in stature, had declined to push it.

Onward we went to the beginning of the Stairway Crawl. There used to be a staircase heading down a pit where the crawl begins, hence the name, but it's long gone. Tom had us head down the lower of two cracks in the pit. We crawled and scrambled through the passage. It was very tight, even requiring helmets off a few times. I was doubtful that Tom would be able to follow. He ended up taking the route above us, via the upper crack. This was dubbed the boys' way, whereas we had traversed the girls' way. At the final tight push before being dumped out in a pit, I first watched Shannon squeeze through. Looking back, I don't know why I didn't second-

guess myself fitting, because she had to fight it a bit to get through. But, without a moment's hesitation, I took off my helmet and followed. Luckily I did make it! Kayla, who had been helping Tom, came through a little while later.

Shannon and I poked around trying to find a sizable passage leading back up out of the pit. There were two possibilities. A small window that I tried several times, concluding with Tom trying to pull me through by my arms (obviously by then he had found the easier route onward). It was a no go for me, but Shannon had success. Then Kayla passed me going up a tight canyon nearby, a channel I had pushed into a couple times, but had forgone to try the window again. She made it up so I knew that was the way I'd have to follow. I am a little larger than she is, but this was compounded by the fact that I was wearing coveralls. After getting hung up at my pelvic area for the third time, I finally gave up, dropped back down into a small room and angrily declared the coveralls were coming off (the first time I've ever had to do so!). Clad in my flame-covered proto-tights, peach-colored polypro top, and cave surveying bra, I wiggled back up and made it to the top of the canyon, joining my friends! From there we did some survey work.

Have you paid your dues for
2010 yet?
It's almost 2011!

CRF - continued

On Saturday, Shannon brought with her three interns from the Park Service. Three teams were dispatched to Bedquilt: John Delong, Tom Brucker, Rick Olson, Shannon Mathey, Nathan Brucker, Tomoya Lamberson, Matt Giljahn, Sam Serman, and me. After a warm, bugs-in-the-face forty-five minute hike along a thorny, log-strewn trail we arrived at the entrance, and were greeted with a breezy reprieve of lovely, cool air. From there I followed John in. The entrance to Bedquilt basically becomes a belly crawl right away. The cave's gate is set back past the first few "meanders". Once in the main cave, we hiked at a leisurely pace, stopping a few times for Tom to tell us interesting stories about Bedquilt, which is the setting for the very first interactive adventure game on a computer, called Adventure. It's now more commonly known as The Colossal Cave Adventure Game.

Bedquilt has probably the most exposure that I've been a party to so far with the CRF. There was a lot of down climbing, climbing, and traversing above the floor. It was challenging and sometimes unnerving, but great fun! I am embarrassed to admit some of it was out of my comfort zone, but I am proud that I stuck with it! I was intimately aware of where I would place each foot and hand, making sure my holds were secure, or the wall wasn't too slick. Our first climb down was at the entrance to the 1871 Passage (aka the Hall of the Mists room). We basically had to use our feet and butts to inch down until we could reach lower holds to complete the drop. It was in this room then that Tom first talked about the Adventure game and his early experiences with Bedquilt.

Things got really interesting after we climbed up a ladder out of the pit room into the T survey, where a large canyon passage followed, called the Gypsum Mine. Before the Park was

established, gypsum mining occurred here. Then we came to a climb that was pretty tricky to get up into. John, Shannon, and Tomoya left us here to go on to their survey area. We didn't see them again until after we arrived back at Hamilton Valley because we were about 1 ½ hours late. I watched a couple people head up and then took my turn. It's difficult to describe, but I remember the hard part was that the holds were above where they would've been easy to get. And then at the top of the climb, one has to turn sideways to inch into a crack in the wall. On the way out, both Sam and I jumped to get back down, which is a big no-no in caving, but with Tom's blessing, was really the best way to do it in this situation. Those who were taller were able to down climb.

The subsequent narrow passage was a mix of walking on and traversing above the floor. The passage doesn't have, but desperately needs, a good name! At the beginning of the F survey, Tom left Rick, Matt, and me to take his crew off to their survey area. A notable feature of this area is a tic-tac-toe board ... wonder how long that took to form! Our objective was to resurvey the F survey. We had been mistakenly under the impression that we needed to go to the bottom of a pit to start it. There were two ways down, though both required the cable ladder and for safety, a belay line. Rick rigged the ladder and the rope (Matt and I helped, but neither of us know knots very well). I volunteered to climb down first and see if the lead led back to the main pit.

Rick tied the belay line around me, and I crawled over to the top of the cable ladder. This cable ladder was about 5 inches wide, with each rung about 8 inches apart. In order to keep the ladder from swinging, one is supposed to alternate how each foot is placed on the rungs. On one rung, your toes go in first. On the next rung, you

Inside Story Headline

wrangle with the ladder to get your leg around it so you can put your heel in. It can be exhaustingly frustrating, especially never having done it before. At the bottom of the pit, there were three passages leading away. The one that seemed to head back toward the main pit I followed. I climbed up a short wall, squeezed through a crack and popped out on a ledge about eight feet from the floor of the other pit. There wasn't a good way to climb down so I went back and up the cable ladder.

After we rigged the main pit, which was about twenty-five feet deep, Matt and I went down first. Then we belayed Rick down from the bottom. There are technically four passages out of this pit. The ledge I had been in previously, a small passage near the floor at one end of the room, and two nearly impassable cracks - one near the small passage and the other around a corner at the other end of the pit. The small passage was the most promising, seeing as we soon discovered another pit after a very short crawl. Rick took the belay line in and it was long enough to give us support down to the bottom of the next pit. Only Rick did it at this juncture though. My chronology may be off here, but at some point, we looked up at the ceiling of that main pit to see the old F survey high above us in the ceiling channel. Ugh. Back up the cable ladder we went. We couldn't survey the bottom of the pit without tying the stations together!

At the top, Rick climbed around the pit along on a slightly sloping ledge. I followed, very carefully. The passage continues as the P survey from there, but the F survey starts in a three foot ceiling channel with no floor except for some ledge protrusions that make it traversable. My first instrument reading was from a comfortable spot, but the next ... not so much. Rick said it would be okay if I didn't want to do it, but it wasn't that I didn't want to. It scared me, but I considered it a

doable challenge. And because that's part of the allure caving has for me - its challenges, meant I had to try. I moved into position, securely wedging myself in the small ceiling passage. Once my butt was in place, I knew I wasn't going to slip, but it was impossible not to be aware of the chasm in front of and below me. I didn't feel true relief until I had clambered all the way back across the sloping ledge to where the cable ladder was rigged.

We opted to continue the survey at the bottom of the main pit because it was virgin and because that ceiling channel probably wasn't the best for learning survey, which is what Matt was doing for the very first time! So, back down the cable ladder we went for the third and final time. Matt was setting stations so he went through the short crawl first, where at the end there is a ledge about four feet below, and the floor of the pit only another eight or so feet below that (if my memory is accurate, and I'm not very good at estimating distances). The ledge curves around the pit to another narrow passage we believe connects to one of the pits I saw on my first climb down. On the wall opposite where we entered this pit/room there were good holds that Rick used to get down to the floor. Once Matt had maneuvered over to where the narrow passage goes off, I climbed onto the ledge.

The survey above had left me feeling slightly unnerved so I had a difficult time traversing the ledge. Eventually, what helped me succeed was Matt holding the rope taut so I was between it and the wall. After setting the station, Matt climbed down to the floor. Rick entered the pit/room after us and once he made it (easily) over to my perch, we exchanged places so he could sketch and I could climb down after Matt to take the back shot. I briefly wondered if I'd be able to climb back up at all! Matt explored the far end of

CAVE PUZZLE ONE

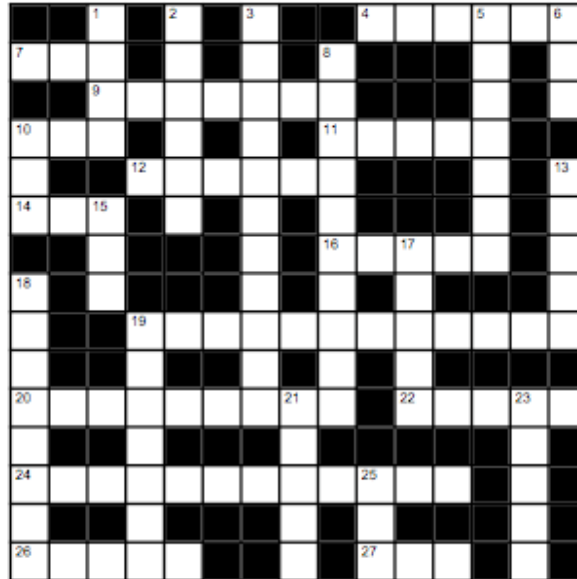
by Bill Roth

Across

- 4 Controlled descent on a rope
- 7 Take ___ backup light sources
- 9 Transports sweat away from skin
- 10 Self warming "Mystery" meal
- 11 Watch out, some are loose
- 12 White or colorless mineral
- 14 Deep vertical hole
- 16 Some say no fewer than 4 should cave and others say no fewer than ___
- 19 Scientist who studies caves
- 20 Mechanical devices for moving up a rope
- 22 Vertical part of a cave
- 24 Cave dweller without a backbone
- 26 Deposit of bat droppings
- 27 Rimstone ___

Down

- 1 Climb on this
- 2 Provides help to prevent a long fall
- 3 Tiny bat
- 5 Go through one
- 6 Short for light emitting diode
- 8 Speleothems
- 10 Take this so you don't get lost
- 13 Black, brown, or grey nodule
- 15 ___ Fall Cave-In
- 17 Large spaces, wider than passages
- 18 You're doing this with your gear after you cave
- 19 Related to caves
- 21 Sidekick who hangs out in a cave
- 23 Might fill up your cave with water
- 25 Take a first ___ kit



Near Normal Grotto

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Meeting at
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We're on the Web!

See us at:

<http://www.caves.org/grotto/nng/>

CRF- continued

the pit/room where a narrow canyon takes off. He managed to wiggle through, helmet-less and believes it continues, albeit uncomfortable for anyone not Shannon-size.

We heard voices as we were finishing up our survey. I needed a butt boost to reach the holds to climb out of that pit, but from there it wasn't so bad getting out to the main pit, where Rick climbed up first. Then Matt and I were thrown the belay line where we struggled to retie the figure eight knot ... I think we made it more difficult than it needed to be and after struggling and laughing, we gave up and had someone up top tie it for us.

I practiced that dang knot when I got home so now I shouldn't forget it again! Before that day, the only knot I knew was the granny so even though the figure eight is a simple one, I was happy to add it to my meager repertoire.

The six of us enjoyed an uneventful trek back out of the cave and through the woods. Near the gate I paused for a few minutes, waiting for Tom and Rick, procrastinating exiting the cave. Except for being late, why hurry? I realize now that before I said goodbye to the cave itself that night, and to my friends the next day, I started looking forward to my next trip to Mammoth Cave.



Laura Alexander in Great Onyx



Laura Alexander in Bedquilt