

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

February Minutes

Minutes of the meeting February 11, 2011

Present: Ralph Sawyer, John Walther, Jason Kern, Laura McCartney, Todd McCartney, Kristin Bogdonas, Matt Level, Andrea Tognetti, L J Tognetti, Kevin Rasmus, Bill Roth, Troy Simpson, Gerry Woltering, Bill Morrow, Allen Caulkins

President L J Tognetti called the meeting to order. Introductions with an answer to the question "What was your last cave meal?"

Treasurer's Report: Bill Roth reported a balance of \$846.80, with approximately \$105.00 in dues received but not yet deposited. Bill asked for another board member to be a second alternate party with access to NNG's bank account.

Minutes of previous meeting were presented by Secretary Ralph Sawyer. Examined and approved. No Old Business

Trip Reports

Bill Morrow reported on a trip of 8-9 hours duration through Rimstone River Cave in Missouri. Water over one's waist most of the time, but less actual swimming than on a previous trip. Cold, cold, exit and changing.

Ralph reported on a trip to Pautler Cave with the owner of property adjacent to Karst Conservancy of Illinois' nature preserve, on which the Pautler entrance is located.

Bill Morrow described a trip in Gourdneck Cave in Tennessee-Alabama-Georgia (TAG). Gourdneck has plenty of waterfalls to climb up and down, and some deep pools. This trip featured a cold exit.

Todd McCartney described Thunder Hole in TAG. The hike up the mountain to the entrance was made easier with a GPS unit. The first drop was rigged to avoid the waterfall. The waterfall was unavoidable in each of the four subsequent descents/ascents.

Our last TAG cave trip, for some of us, was Flowing Stone, a 200 foot plus pit. Andrea Tognetti described rappelling past a flowstone curtain more than 50' in length, as well as impressive rimstone dams and salamanders on the floor of the pit. Meanwhile Todd and Laura visited Water Works Cave with one of our TAG hosts, Andy.

On the trip home the TAG cavers visited Russell Cave National Monument.

February Minutes – continued.

John Walther visited the Catacombs of San Sebastian of Rome. Much warmer than TAG in January.

New Business

We reviewed annual donations that NNG makes to other organizations. We voted to continue to support Indiana Karst Conservancy and Karst Conservancy of Illinois at the same levels as we have in the past.

Bill Morrow moved we donate \$50.00 to the Richard Blenz Nature Conservancy, owners of Buckners Cave in Indiana. Motion passed.

Ralph Sawyer talked about Bat Conservation International's policy regarding White Nose Syndrome in bats.

Andrea Tognetti moved that NNG either donate \$50.00 to Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc, or buy a slice of an SCCI cave for same.

Troy Simpson informed us that Indiana Department of Natural Resources has reported that White Nose Syndrome has been found in Endless Cave. Endless Cave has been closed to sport caving – with a gate – for the last two years.

We intend to discuss dates and locations for vertical practices and our annual picnic at our next meeting.

The meeting adjourned. We headed out to lend our critical caver eyes to the movie Sanctum.

March Minutes

Present: Andrew Rasmus, Kevin Rasmus, Todd McCartney, Matthew Level, George Mattson, L. J. Tognetti, Gerry Woltering, Bill Roth, Ralph Sawyer

President L. J. Tognetti called the meeting to order.

Minutes of the previous meeting were examined and approved.

Treasurer's Report: Bill Roth reported a balance of \$1071.86. Bill will soon send donations to Indiana Karst Conservancy, Karst Conservancy of Illinois, Richard Blenz Nature Conservancy, and Southeast Cave Conservancy Incorporated, each donation \$50.00. Bill needs addresses for RBNC and SCCI. Bill intends to prepare a list of paid and unpaid members of Near Normal Grotto. We will clarify family dues structure and refund any overpayments. We need to replace Julie Angel with Ralph Sawyer as an alternate person with access to NNG's bank account. Locate and acquire any remaining treasurer records.

Old Business

We approved the following events and dates:

Vertical Day June 12 with alternate June 26

Vertical Day August 14 with alternate August 21

Who contacts ISU to reserve ROTC tower for Vertical Days?

Annual Picnic September 11 with alternate September 18

No New Business

Announcements

George Mattson will head up a Father's Day weekend trip. Ideas, please.

March Minutes - continued

Matt Level can get access to nice cabins at Crane Naval Base in southern Indiana. 20.00 per cabin during warm months of the year.

Trip Reports

George Mattson described his group's February trip in Sullivan Cave. Routes included the Mountain to the Spiral Room and Sorry Room, also the Siphon Crawl, Grand Canyon, Water Room passage, and the north end of the Backbreaker. The group met up with Todd McCartney and Marc Tiritilli in the Mountain Room.

Bill Roth described the next day's trip in Donnehue Cave. Bill, Jason, and Chris examined an upper passage, then went to the river entrance and doubled back to the culvert entrance, with a side trip to examine the Berg Squeeze.

Meeting adjourned.

A Snow Covered TAG Trip in January of 2011 *by* Bill Morrow

Several members of the Near Normal Grotto made a pilgrimage to TAG over the Martin Luther King weekend. LJ and Andrea Tognetti, Todd and Laura McCartney, Ralph Sawyer, Jason Kern, and Bill Morrow all converged near Kimball, Tennessee to enjoy a long weekend of caving. Andy Z. graciously hosted us at his home, which had, coincidentally enough, a beautiful backdrop of a cave entrance not more than a couple hundred yards away. The only thing unusual about the vista was that it was covered with several inches of white snow. We had come down just after one of the biggest snowstorms in the South in recent years, and the snow was going to stay with us the entire trip.

We first went to Gourneck Cave. Gourneck Cave is leased by the Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. (SCCI). The SCCI is similar to the Indiana Karst Conservancy, however they manage many more caves. The SCCI has come to be very much appreciated by TAG folk and visitors. We descended into the snow-covered entrance and worked our way upstream. Gourneck is a very fun cave, but it is definitely a wetsuit cave. Going upstream, several difficult waterfalls and chutes were encountered, requiring some tricky maneuvering, thought, and dealing with exposure. After coming to The Pool, a deep (how deep, we never found out) hole at the base of a waterfall, we climbed a tricky chimney to avoid the waterfall, then threaded our way through a small hole situated over open air, performed a little open air straddling, a tight 30-foot squeeze, and emerged back in the stream passage on top of the waterfall. We followed the stream quite a ways through some beautiful formation passage until we came to another beautiful waterfall with a pool, which was our turnaround. After some exploring and climbing around, we reversed our route, descending the waterfalls we had gained, and climbing up the verglassed snow-covered entrance with cold wet fingers.

The next day we all met up and went to Thunder Hole. Thunder Hole is an impressive five-drop cave that is 460 feet deep, with the drops having interesting names like Flash Flood, Wet Dream, Neptune's Well, and Maelstrom Shaft. It was a beautiful sunny day, which made the hike up the mountain pleasant, though snow covered. We found the 80-foot entrance drop easily, partly because a snow-melt creek was flowing right into it. With some thought we managed to rig the only dry drop we would find that day. The next four drops were all wet, with the last two, Neptune's Well (95') and Maelstrom Shaft (66'), being the most wet and cold. At the bottom of Maelstrom we found a small room to keep out of the mist, with a short passage leading to the sumped end of the cave. After some discussion, we then began our ascent back up.

A Snow Covered TAG Trip in January of 2011 - continued

Conditions had changed a bit. We had entered the cave around 11am. The sunshine and pleasant weather must have caused a bit more runoff ascending than descending. My main concern before starting the ascent was the water temperature, as I was very cold the last two drops. But the temperature wasn't even a consideration. Breathing was. Going up the rope put us square in the water's path, and it felt like someone dumping 5 gallon buckets of water right at your face. I didn't think it would be that hard to breath, but it was! At times, I ended up holding my head down creating a bubble of air around the falling water and was able to get enough air. Occasionally, by stemming on a rock projection to one side I was able to push my head away from the main flow to get decent air also. Going up I remember what LJ had said before we went in – "once you are on rope, do not hesitate...". Hesitating wasn't in the plan at all. Then about 5 or 10' from clearing the lip, right where water was unavoidable, my headlamp stopped working. First thought – "Crud" (edited for the newsletter). Second thought – "do not hesitate". I kept climbing until I had my head above the lip where the water was spilling over. Luckily, Laura had ascended before me. "Laura! Laura! I could use some light over here!!!". After getting off rope safely and about 20 headlamp switch attempts, my Fenix headlamp came back on. So much for the waterproof guarantee!

The next ascent, up Neptune's Well, I had my backup lights at arm's length ready to go, but they were not needed, even though the 95' ascent felt like it had its own weather system complete with a nice undercut lip at the top to overcome with water spilling right into your face. Maelstrom and Neptune were two very steep learning curves for learning to ascend in waterfalls, but I felt much more prepared and confident for the last few rope lines. We even learned a trick or two. At the top of the second to last ascent, we could create a short-lived dam by sitting in a narrow section of the stream. When the ascending caver got to where it was going to get wet and nasty, the caver on top would sit down, yell "YA GOT 30 SECONDS!", and then the ascender would clamber over the top in relative drought conditions. After they got their body over the lip, the sitting caver would stand up and an impressive torrent would rush over the falls.

After negotiating a very tight cobble strewn crawl with sections named "The Constrictor" and "Exhalation Squeeze", and some more ascending, we came out into a night sky lit up with a beautiful full moon. A hurried change out of our wetsuits and cave clothes in the snow followed by a slippery bushwhack down the mountain, and Thunder Hole became a rewarding memory.

The next day was Flowing Stone, the second deepest drop in Georgia at 227'. It was a beautiful cave, with rhythmic flowing water at the base of the cave, but the highlight for that day was the beautiful sunny day and the great company we had that day when TAG cavers Chuck, Patty, Peter, and Jane, joined us.

Which is how I'll end this report, hoping not to sound maudlin. The larger part of why I enjoy going to TAG so much is the cavers we've met there. At Flowing Stone, cavers who hiked up with us didn't even go down the pit, even though they set up the rigging. Their packs carried fruit, cookies, and candy for all. It felt like a picnic feast up on the mountain. Ralph and I were the last ones out of Flowing Stone, and we came up to a little spread of cookies laid out for us, as everything else was packed up and heading down the mountain. We stayed at Andy Z.'s home, who graciously hosted us even though he wasn't there the first night, and only Todd and Laura were able to cave with him one day. This is the very definition of Southern Hospitality, and it is why I'm looking forward to my next TAG trip so much...

Successes Built on Failures *by* Ralph Sawyer

Most trips in Sullivan Cave near Bedford Indiana are through areas that are shown on the bottom third of the map. I can remember dreaming over my map of Sullivan Cave, wondering if I would ever make it into the northern sections of the cave. North of the Quarry Room is the section of the cave known as the Beyond the Beyond. Just unrolling the map to reveal the miles of sinuous, north-trending passage leading to the Rise of the Sullivan River is almost a journey in itself.

I've been to the Rise of the Sullivan River four times now. It is a long trip and can be physically punishing. There are no formations to see, no big rewards for the effort unless you count the series of large rooms, the exploration of which can tax the caver even more physically. It is not a through trip. You make your way to the Rise, have a quick look, turn around and go back the way you came.

Often cavers I accompany say they don't see much point in repeating the trip.

Why do I keep going back to the Rise?

A trip to the Rise is special for me because it took me three attempts to get there:

1. My first wetsuit trip: I still remember the shock of the cold water as I eased into the Deep Water below the Quarry Room, followed by the feeling of delight as my panic diminished and I realized that, although I could not claim to be warm, I could function quite well. A little later, First Bathtub was the first wet passage in which I had to deal with a low airspace. I was so scared that I was sobbing as I went through. Marc Tiritilli, the most experienced caver I knew, commented that he had never been on a caving trip like this before. To hear my caving mentor say that about a trip that I had set up was great. We didn't get very far after that. Marc and Jeffery Gosnell shredded coveralls trying to locate the Coliseum, one of the largest rooms in Sullivan Cave. Stymied, we turned around and headed out. We had failed to attain the Rise. In fact we had barely made our way into the Beyond the Beyond. Yet when I exited Sullivan Cave I was elated. I had done things that I did not know I could do.

2. A year later came our second attempt at the Rise. First Bathtub was once again difficult for me to deal with, but I did it. I did not yet know if I had what it took to clear the 400 Foot Bathtub that was shown farther north on the map. For some reason locating the Coliseum posed no problems for us on this trip. We continued north past Room 3 and the Colossus, the tallest room in Sullivan Cave. Watching the time, we decided to reverse direction just short of the 400 Foot Bathtub. There was no point in doing the dreaded passage only to turn around. One of the party shot through it anyway – it turned out to be a flooded stoopway. One could cruise through 400 Foot Bathtub in a semibouyant duck walk. Once again we were frustrated in our attempt at the Rise, but I felt jubilant. I knew that if something prevented me from attaining the Rise, it would not be 400 Foot Bathtub, former source of much trepidation.

Near Normal Grotto

P.O. Box 813
Normal, IL 61761-0813

Meeting at Bromenn
Medical Center,
Normal, Illinois.
Second Friday of the
month.

E-MAIL:
nngwebmaster@yahoo.com



We're on the Web!

See us at:
<http://www.caves.org/grotto/nng/>

Successes Built on Failures - continued

3. My third attempt at the Rise did not come for another two years. This time each of the familiar difficulties was dealt with in turn. Just short of the Rise we were stymied for a short while until one of our crew discovered a tiny half-flooded triangular hole at the bottom of a breakdown pile. Each caver nervously slithered through, fearful of getting stuck in the hole and bringing the flowing water up around themselves. Shortly we attained the Rise, which is a disappointing little waist deep pool below a mud bank. No one lingers long at the Rise. And one must keep moving. Despite the wetsuits, a break of longer than ten minutes' duration leads to the shivers and fears of hypothermia. In this section of Sullivan Cave I always feel that I am at the end of my tether, out farther than I should be. I always have a concern that, goal achieved, we will let down our guard on the return trip. If a bad accident should occur here, help would be a long time coming. Cavers tend to fall silent on the return trip. Conversation picks up at each landmark along the way, but the silences between landmarks lengthen. There seem to be more stoopways on the way out than on the way in. Most Rise trips take sixteen to eighteen hours to complete. Arising in the motel room the day following a Rise trip is a slow, painful experience.

So why would I go back to the Rise? A trip to the Rise means more to me than it does to the caver who attains the Rise on his or her first trip. Although I failed twice before achieving my goal, each failure felt like a success. During both failed attempts I experienced a feeling of elation that comes with overcoming an obstacle despite one's fear. The two failures made the eventual success all that much sweeter.

Someday I will make my last trip to the Rise, but for now I figure I have at least one more trip in me.

About Our Organization...

The Near Normal Grotto is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study, exploration and conservation of caves and cave life. Our members come from all walks of life – landscapers, camp counselors, carpenters, geologists, mechanics, teachers, and students, to name a few. In other words, people like you. Our interests may vary from exploration to conservation to photography, but we all share a passion for caving. If this interests you and you would like to know more, feel free to attend one of our monthly meetings!