

# TERRA INCOGNITO



West Virginia University  
Student Grotto

Newsletter  
Fall 2008 - Spring 2009

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***Cover Photo: Kyle Mcmillan and Jataya Taylor at the 106' pit in Pocahontas County's Windy Run Cave during OTR 2008. Photo by Brian Masney.***



# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

As yet another school year draws to a close, I've been asked to write a summary of the Grotto's escapades for this newsletter, the first we've published in quite a while – I hope you get as much out of it as we've put into it.

I suppose the best way to work through the year is to treat it like a meeting. Financially, we began the year in good order and after working three football games this past fall, the Grotto had enough scrape to buy 10 new headlamps and helmets. Membership saw a strong showing at Beginner's Weekend, but, as usual, has seen a decline throughout the year. As far as actual caving goes, this year has been very busy for both me and the Grotto as a whole. Members have been active in the Germany Valley Karst Survey, the West Virginia Association for Cave Studies, the Tucker County Survey, the Monongalia Grotto, and other organizations. This past winter saw three separate member-led trips to TAG, and the WVUSG hosted Penn State in November at the GVKs field house for a fantastic weekend of caving and carousing.

While our past year has been busy and fun, our future is less clear. At the time of this writing, White Nose Syndrome (WNS) has exploded down the Appalachian Mountains, forcing many caving groups to curtail operations. The WVUSG is no exception: at the request of the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the Grotto has ratified a voluntary caving moratorium to be effective through August, when we will revisit the policy.

This moratorium on caving has the potential to affect the basic mission of the Grotto as a recreational caving organization. It is this coming challenge that will require the Grotto to pull together as a group. If we maintain the energy that has carried us through this past year, this moratorium will just be a bump in the very long road the Grotto has traveled over the years. I plan on treating it as such, and look forward to the weekend when we can all get back underground!

Kyle McMillan  
President 2008-2009



*Kyle Mcmillan and Jamie Smith at Harper's Pit. Photo by Dan Brooks*

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I didn't know what I was getting into when I started coming to Grotto meetings my freshman year. I never thought I'd get on rope, go on survey trips, or become an officer. I just thought I'd have some subterranean fun, but my entire time with the Grotto has been a series of going deeper than I ever expected. Terra Incognita is no different. I thought it would be fun to compile a bunch of trip reports. It would be something to look back on, a way for me to give back to the organization that I've gotten so much out of, and possibly a way to show newcomers what we do. I never realized what an ordeal it would be to put it all together. Looking back, I see that I might not have been the best choice for editor due to my lack of experience as an editor as well as my ineptitude with computers. However, I'm the one that got the ball rolling, so this is what you get.

That's enough about me, because this newsletter really isn't about me. It's about the Grotto and its current, former, and future members. This newsletter is made up of your articles, and photos. No one turned me down when I approached them about writing a trip report. Many alumni even contributed. The Grotto wouldn't be much without these more experienced cavers who still hang around at meetings and lead trips, so thank you John, Ben, Dave, and Brian. Then there are the current members, who took the time in the middle of the semester to write trip reports: Gayle, Tom, Kyle, and Dan. You were all very obliging when I pestered you about submissions, as well as patient while I put it all together. I also need to thank Brian Masney for letting me use so much of his great photography, as well as Greg Springer, Dan Brooks, and John Harman. I need to thank Dave Riggs in particular. Not only did he contribute an article, but he acted as the editor's editor, providing support and helpful feedback throughout the process of putting the newsletter together.

I've put a lot of time and effort into this project (probably more than the final outcome would suggest), but I've also gotten so much out of it. Now that it's time to reveal the final product, I'm both nervous and excited. I hope everyone gets as much out of this newsletter as I have and appreciates the combined effort that has gone into it.

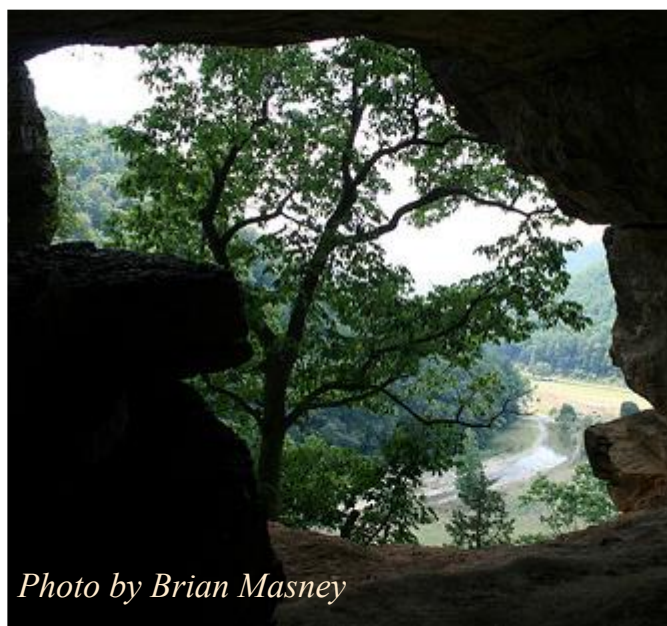
Sincerely,  
Abby Hohn  
Editor

*Abby Hohn  
coming out  
of Windy  
Slope Cave.  
Photo by  
Brian  
Masney*





# FALL SEMESTER TRIP REPORTS



*Photo by Brian Masney*

*The entrance to Trout before the gate*

## **Beginners Weekend**

*By Dan Brooks*

Beginners weekend was, well, quite the experience (for me anyways). This was not my first time caving, and in fact, not even my first time in the two caves we were going to (Hamilton and Trout Caves), but it was my first trip with the Grotto.

I rode down with Kyle, the only person I actually knew in the grotto at the time, excited to be going caving again for the first time in years and happy to be out of Morgantown. We arrived at the campground after dark, and after determining that the gate was in fact already unlocked for us, we got our tents set up and got a fire started. I didn't know anyone's names at this point, but everyone seemed to be really friendly.

Sometime after 10:00 on the following morning, we met up with a group of people from Alderson-Broadus at a small local restaurant. After breakfast, we drove to the cave preserve where we

changed clothes on the side of the road before hiking up the hill, sweating out the previous night's beverages as we did so. I had to borrow a pair of kneepads and some gloves, and since I didn't have a backpack, Kyle offered to carry my water and snacks.

Because we had so many people, we split into two groups. One went straight to Trout cave, while the other group (which I was in) went to visit Hamilton before continuing on to Trout. While we crawled around inside of Hamilton, Kyle went into tour guide mode, giving us bits of information about caving like not to break the soda straws and how to remember the difference between stalactites and stalagmites. About half an hour after entering the cave, the group was ready to go explore Trout cave (with the exception of Ben Mirabile who was ready to take a nap).

As it turned out, Trout cave was much more crowded than we expected. Not only was the other half of WVU still in the cave, but there were also several other groups visiting Trout at the same time. The



*Trout Cave after it was gated in Fall 2008 to protect Indiana bats. Photo by Brian Masney*

cave got congested, which prevented us from finding the “Square Room”, our original goal. In the end, we decided to give up our search, and head back to the entrance, which we would be seeing for the last time before it was gated.

So what was it about the trip that made it such an “experience”? Well... during the time we were NOT inside a cave we kept ourselves pretty well entertained, and as it was my first trip, I was not accustomed to the grotto's standard of revelry. On both days, we went for a ride in the back of Ben Mirable's truck to the fire tower. Kyle cooked the burgers we ate for dinner one night using the same hatchet he used to cut the wood we cooked over. To entertain ourselves between acts of hooliganism, we tended to stay up late, drinking around the campfire, telling lies, and having a good time in general.

### **Bear Cave**

*By Gayle Suppa*

On October 12, 2008, three grotto members: Anastasia Heasley, John Tudek, and Gayle Suppa went to Bear Cave in Westmorland County, Pennsylvania. We arrived at the cave parking lot around 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We did not have a good description of which trail to take, but I had been to the cave as a child and was relying on my memory to get us to the cave. We trekked uphill for a quarter of a mile until the trail split in two. Luckily we came across a man, who was looking for Bigfoot. He directed us the rest of the way. Upon seeing the outcrop where the cave entrance was, I realized that I had been a lot smaller as a child. Either that or the cave entrance shrank.

Upon entering the cave, we passed a large group of children on their way out to meet their family. The front section of the cave is a large network maze. The three of

us broke up as the passages met with one another continually. John Tudek had a map from the 1970s, which we used to get to one of the only significant rooms in the cave. We then made it to the Keyhole Passage, through John's navigation and some trial and error. The stream was a few feet below us until we eventually had to squeeze down through the canyon. We duck-walked through the stream to the calcite falls. From this point, the passage narrowed. We assumed we were near the back of the cave and did not press on. Time underground was about two hours.

### **Mystic Cave**

*By Tom Lilly*

In December, I led a small contingent of cavers from Bloomsburg University and the Penn State Nittany Grotto into Mystic Cave. After a great conversation (as usual) with Mrs. Teter, we got permission from her to visit her cave. After entering the cave, we decided to go



*Formations in Mystic Cave  
Photo by John Harman*



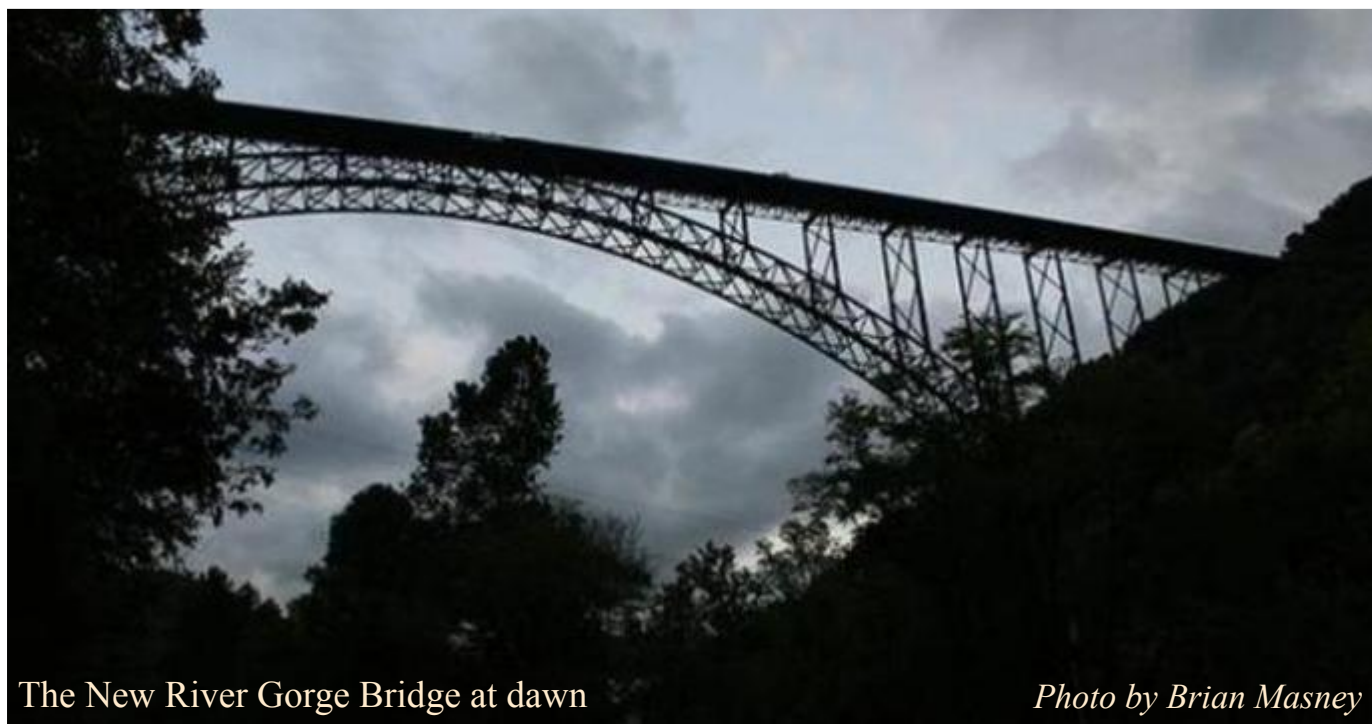
on the dryer route first, and headed downstream. The downstream portion wasn't moving as much water as it usually does, so it was fairly easy going. We made it all the way down to the waterfall room, and after making it down the hand line, we continued a bit further until the passage narrowed. Here, we decided not to go out the west entrance, and made our way back to the junction room for a short break, and to hit the upstream passage.

We made our way up the upstream passage without incident. Just like the downstream passage, there wasn't as much water movement as there has been during my past trips there. We made it to the pool,

and luckily everyone made it past without falling in. We continued through the downstream passage and made it to the formation room. The formation room consists of a very large wall with enormous white calcite formations and large amounts of flowstone. As this is an amazing sight for new and old cavers alike, we spent quite a bit of time looking at the formation wall. After this, we continued to the waterfall that leads to the South entrance, but since I had never been through it, we decided to forgo this entrance and head back to the junction room. Overall, we spent about 5 fun hours underground.

## BRIDGE DAY

*by Brian Masney*



The New River Gorge Bridge at dawn

*Photo by Brian Masney*

There were 12 people signed up for the Monongahela Grotto Bridge Day team this year: Carl Amundson (Tri State Grotto), Mary Davis, Don Ferguson, Bob Griffith, Cullen Hencke, John Harman, Terry McClanathan (Tri State Grotto), Mary Schmidt, Jason Thomas, and Brian Masney, who was team captain. Additionally, Aaron Bird drove down from Michigan and Dave Riggs flew in from Oregon for Bridge Day. There were a total

of 22 teams. We had rappel spot #9, which is probably about a 750' rappel.

Friday evening was the usual safety meeting. They discussed the do's and don'ts of the day, shuttle rides back to the top, what to do if a BASE jumper hits your rope and last, but not least, security, which includes snipers and helicopters (no kidding.)

Saturday morning, Dave Riggs and Brian Masney rode the shuttle bus to the

bottom to wait for the rope to come down. Aaron Bird, Don Ferguson and John Harman rigged the rope at the top. In years past, people used to rig to the thick railing on the catwalk. Recently, they began using two wide pieces of webbing that go around large I beams on the bridge. Getting to the anchors requires someone to stand on top of the railing of the catwalk, while clipped in to an anchor.

Once the rope was down, Dave and Brian had to do a pull test with the safety personal present. Once we were approved, people were allowed to start rappelling.

Due to the large number of rappellers, only 3 people from the team are permitted on the catwalk at a time. You are permitted to enter the. Since our rope was in the middle of all the other ropes, we had about 10 teams to pass through to get to our rope. The catwalk is only about 1.5 feet wide and you are very close to people when passing by them. It probably takes about 5-10 minutes to get to the rope, depending on congestion encountered.

In years past, most people used a 12" frame. Some people had to start out on 4 bars to move, but it is a little scary being so high up using only 4 bars. This year, most people on the team used an 18" rappel rack,



*Brian ascending. Photo by Dave Riggs*



*Mary Schmidt Rappelling the Bridge. Photo by Brian Masney*

which allowed everyone to use at least 5 bars even at the beginning of the rappel. This made for a much smoother rappel and people were able to safely get in more rappels.

At the end of the day, the team was able to get in a total of 35 rappels. John Harman used his 24" "El Cap" rack and his fastest rappel time was 1:27. He spent roughly 7 minutes on rope during his 4 rappels. This year was also the first year that they had a dedicated ascending rope, which was courtesy of Extreme Rappels. Dave and Brian did two tandem ascents through the day.

If you are interested in doing Bridge Day in the future, you are required to have at least one 250' rappel and you must be comfortable doing a changeover. It is also implied that you have several years of rope experience under your belt and you are generally comfortable on rope. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication, but it is worth it in the end.



# ANOTHER PIECE OF THE DRUID PUZZLE: WINDY SLOPE CAVE

## *A History of Discovery, Exploration, and Survey by members of the WVUSG*

*By Dave Riggs*

To tell the history of discovery and exploration in the Cheat Canyon is to tell the history of the WVU Student Grotto. Located just a stone's throw from Morgantown, this area has been the local stomping ground for WVU cavers for decades. While the Beaverhole caves on the North bank of the Cheat have been known since caving "antiquity", it wasn't until a group of forestry majors, including the WVUSG's first President Allen Peterson, discovered Druid Cave in 1978, that true exploration in the Canyon began. In the mid-90's, the next generation of Student Grotto explorers pushed the far reaches of Druid, extending the cave to 2.3 miles in length; this saga was chillingly told by Greg Springer in the NSS News. Then, a decade later, the third chapter of exploration began as Aaron Bird and Brian Masney rekindled interest in the area, seeking out a new upstream entrance to Druid. Their efforts paid off, and on January 1, 2005, Jason Thomas discovered that upstream entrance. The ensuing survey yielded over half a mile of brutal virgin cave over several years, but New Years Day Cave still hadn't proven to be the back door into Druid.

To make some sense of this cave system, which was beginning to look more and more complex, we contacted USDA hydrologist Doug Boyer, and with his help conducted several dye tracing experiments in the Cheat Canyon. In February 2007, we placed charcoal traps in Druid Cave and in several of the many springs that emerge from the Greenbrier limestone along the steep canyon wall.

As Aaron Bird and Dave Riggs were placing the dye traps at a large "twin" spring located where the Cheat River intersects the dipping limestone, they noticed a small spot on the hillside where falling snow refused to collect. They investigated further, and discovered a small crack which sucked air furiously, pulling snowflakes inside before they could fall to the ground. When a team returned two weeks later to pull the dye traps, they brought light digging equipment, and were able to pry away several hundred pounds of limestone, exposing a tiny sucking conduit. After several anxious days of waiting, the dye tracing results came back: the "twin" spring was very strongly traced to the dye dumped into New Years Day Cave, a 1.5 mile straight-line distance.

With the discovery that this entire side of the Cheat Canyon could be a single, large cave system, the very next weekend saw an unprecedented turnout; nine excited cavers hiked into the Canyon to dig at the



*Brian Masney at the connection in Windy Slope*

*Photo by Greg Springer*

now-blowing hole above the twin springs. The effort was a success; at 5PM on March 31, 2007, we broke into virgin cave. Several WVUSG members crawled in to scoop and they reported a tight maze of low passages, several woodrat nests, but no stream and no continuation of the passage. This entrance was later named the "Fitchner Entrance", and the cave named "Windy Slope Cave"; both names after a landowner without whom our modern work in the Cheat Canyon would not be possible - Mark Fitchner, who lives on Windy Slope Farm, a fitting name for a cave that blows the Druid Winds from the drastic cliffs of the steep Cheat Canyon.

The very next weekend saw an even larger turnout - 12 cavers working in the Canyon. With so much manpower, tasks were divided up between them. One team worked on blazing and securing a trail down the steep hillside to the cave entrance; one team surveyed the newly-discovered passage, dubbed the "Maze of Democracy" after the teamwork of so many excited cavers; and a third team started digging on a low passage near the entrance where the Druid winds continued to blow. Several more dig trips followed and the blowing passage was pushed for tens of feet, but the way beyond wouldn't come without an effort.

In early June of 2007, Aaron Bird organized a 5-day work-week in the Canyon, which he called Cheat Camp. This would be a concentrated effort to better understand the relationship of the caves in the Canyon, investigate more promising surface features, and continue the dig in the new cave. On the first day of Cheat Camp, while a team was digging on the blowing passage in Windy Slope Cave, Greg Springer was investigating a stream gully only 150 feet away from its entrance and felt a blast of cold air. He started moving aside rocks, and within minutes was peering into cave passage! He and Aaron Bird quickly suited up and headed in,



*Aaron Bird in the Boretube in Windy Slope Cave.*

*Photo by Greg Springer*

finding narrow canyon passage with icy-cold waist-deep water and as little as 18 inches of airspace. More importantly, the cold wind indicated that this new way in, dubbed the "Water Entrance," was another back door into the system.

The group returned the very next day, armed with wetsuits. Greg and Doug McCarty pushed their way through the tight, wet passage inside the Water Entrance and within minutes popped up into big, wide, walking virgin passage! Soaked, sore, and excited, they scooped 250 feet of the nicest walking passage found in the Cheat Canyon since the discovery of Druid itself. This round, epiphreatic passage was light-heartedly named "The Boretube" (because it wasn't big enough to be called "Borehole"). Additionally, a dry side lead headed straight for the blowing dig inside the Fitchner Entrance. By the end of the month, after digging from both sides, the dry passage was enlarged enough that Dave Riggs could make the first through-trip; Windy Slope Cave now had a direct, easy entrance, and the cave survey was underway.



Over the Fall and Winter of 2007/2008, over a quarter mile of cave had been surveyed; the majority of which was a single, walking-height stream passage heading up-dip and towards the tail end of Druid Cave. In April, while a survey team inched closer and closer to grim-looking breakdown, Brian Masney spent hours hammering and prying at shattered rock until he and Dave Riggs squeezed through to find that the cave suddenly changes character. At its upstream end, Windy Slope Cave is faulted and shattered, one wall tilted and the other crumbling. Dripping water infiltrates down through the cracked ceiling, giving the cave something unique throughout the Cheat Canyon: a passage decorated with delicate soda straws, stalagmites, and stalactites, which they named “The Chandelier Ballroom”. An “Upper Ballroom”, accessible via a tight climb through the ceiling, is even more decorated, and breaks the cave up into the crumbling, shale caprock that serves as its upper boundary. Upstream, however, is blocked by “terminal” breakdown, where

the fractured ceiling has fallen with such density that nothing aside from wind or water may pass.

Despite its rugged location, Windy Slope Cave has already seen its share of tourists; Dave Riggs led an exhausted group through the cave at 2008’s Spring MAR meeting, and Abby Hohn led a group of 12 WVUSG cavers in the fall. With just over 2042 feet of surveyed passage, it is now the fifth longest cave in Monongalia and Preston Counties, and brings the total surveyed passage in the vicinity of Druid Cave to over 3.3 miles. It isn’t feasible to name all of the dozens and dozens of cavers who worked on the surface, dug, and surveyed the cave, but this decades-old project lives on thanks to their dedication and effort. Several teams have since attempted to push their way beyond Windy Slope’s terminal breakdown, but so far, despite the beckoning of the Druid Winds, a path through is yet to be found; another piece of the Druid Cave puzzle is in place, but the puzzle is far from finished.



*Megan Smith in the Chandelier Ballroom. Photo by Brian Masney.*

# WINTER BREAK IN TAG

## Moses Tomb

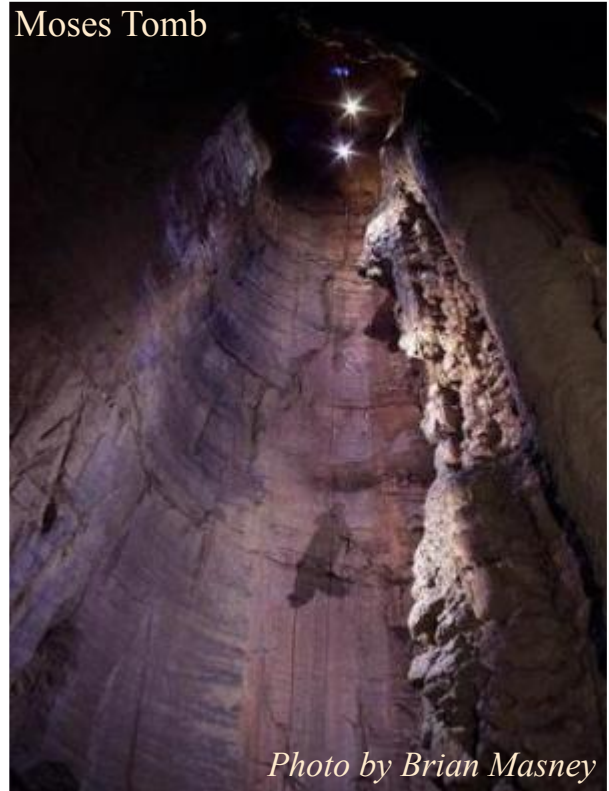
*By Gayle Suppa*

On December 18, Dave Riggs, Abby Hohn, John Harman and I drove down to TAG for six days of caving. It was Abby's and my first TAG trip. Dave and John, who had both been down to TAG multiple times, made sure that Abby and I had a phenomenal but safe time. Our intentions were to bounce well-known, impressive pits.

After a long drive and a few wrong turns, we finally managed to find the dirt road leading to Moses Tomb campground in Alabama. Before even getting to the campground, we had our first snafu. Previous rains had turned the road muddy and Dave's car got stuck in a rut. We tested the strength of some rope that John brought along, and used John's jeep to rescue the car. Needless to say, the rope was retired. The road got worse from there, so all four of us piled into the jeep for the drive to the campground.

Before setting up camp, we hiked out to bounce Moses Tomb, a 230 foot pit. This pit was not open air and resembled pits that both of us had done in Germany Valley, Pendleton Co., WV. Neither Abby nor I had done anything much over 100 feet, so the similarity certainly helped to ease me into the idea of such a deep rappel. Being a little nervous, I fumbled with threading my rack. The others, including Abby, rappelled and ascended without a hitch. Not feeling comfortable with my first rappel, I convinced the others to come back with me in the morning so I could do it again. Somewhat begrudgingly, they agreed.

Back at the campground, we became acquainted with the creatures with which we would be sharing our camp. As we were taking off harnesses and changing shoes, the



*Photo by Brian Masney*

ants made their way up our legs. Despite a few ant bites, we learned where not to put our tents.

My rappel of Moses Tomb went better the next morning, and the group moved on to our next stop. Abby and my first TAG pit was certainly one we will remember fondly. The experience made the sights that much more vibrant. As the four of us traveled on, I tried to envision pictures of the beautiful, exciting pits Dave and John would be taking us to. I soon discovered that pictures just do not do these open air pits justice.



*Gayle  
grinning in  
Cemetery  
Pit.*

*Photo by  
Dave Riggs*

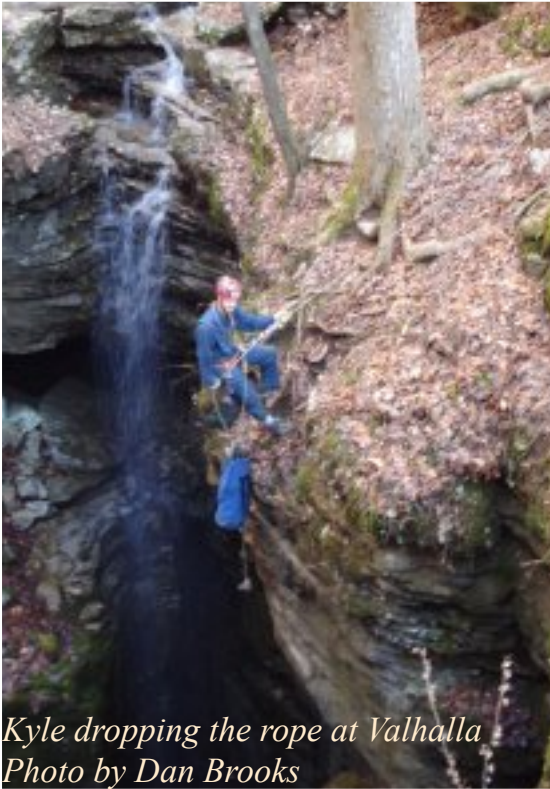


## Valhalla

By Kyle Mcmillan

In early January, Dan Brooks, Jamie Smith, Brianne Oehmke and I headed to TAG for a week of laid-back caving. On our last full day of bouncing pits, we somehow managed to wake up and clear camp by 7:30 AM for a doubleheader. We began with a trip to Neversink, then skidded and bumped our way down the road to Valhalla Cave.

After setting up our camp on the SCCi property, we rigged Valhalla with an hour of daylight left. Even in the fading light, we were blown away by the sheer size and scale of the pit – what begins as an



*Kyle dropping the rope at Valhalla  
Photo by Dan Brooks*

entrance as large as a house becomes a football-field sized cavern with ceilings 100' above you. With all of the recent rainfall, the three waterfalls down the side of the cave were thundering down, creating a surreal, majestic setting.

Our trip had two goals: find “Thundering Falls” and the 200' tall “Megadome.” After what turned out to be a very easy cave trip, we found both. “Thundering Falls” is nothing to really

write home about – just a 15' tall waterfall. The “Megadome” is an entirely different matter. After crawling and squeezing through tight, twisty passages which felt like Hamilton Cave, we suddenly emerged in a tremendous cavern with ceilings that all four of our headlamps together had trouble illuminating – a “Missile Silo” is the only comparison which conveys the scale of the room. The transition from tight, confined crawling to this outrageous cavern was shocking, and made the trip back there well worth it.

After sitting in awestruck wonder of the room, we forced ourselves to stop staring and headed back to the entrance drop. The sun had set, but the entrance was now illuminated by a wide shaft of moonlight which lit the entrance and waterfalls with a dull, silvery glow. The water droplets sparkled in the air. I was the last one out of the pit, but the wait was an experience I'll never forget.

After we made it back to the surface at 12:30, we made a late dinner and enjoyed a brilliantly clear, cold starlit night in the mountains of Alabama.

## Neversink

By Abby Hohn

I went on my first TAG trip last December and, due to some overzealous scheduling, I was lucky enough to return within a month's time. I had gotten to see Neversink during my first trip with Gayle Suppa, Dave Riggs, and John Harman, but I didn't bounce it, so I was excited to return with Nikki Green and Aaron Moses in January and actually rappel the 160' pit.

When I got on rope and looked over my shoulder at the whale of a hole below me, the breath caught in my throat and my heart began to pound. TAG has that affect on me. I always feel like I've never been on rope before when I'm standing over a giant



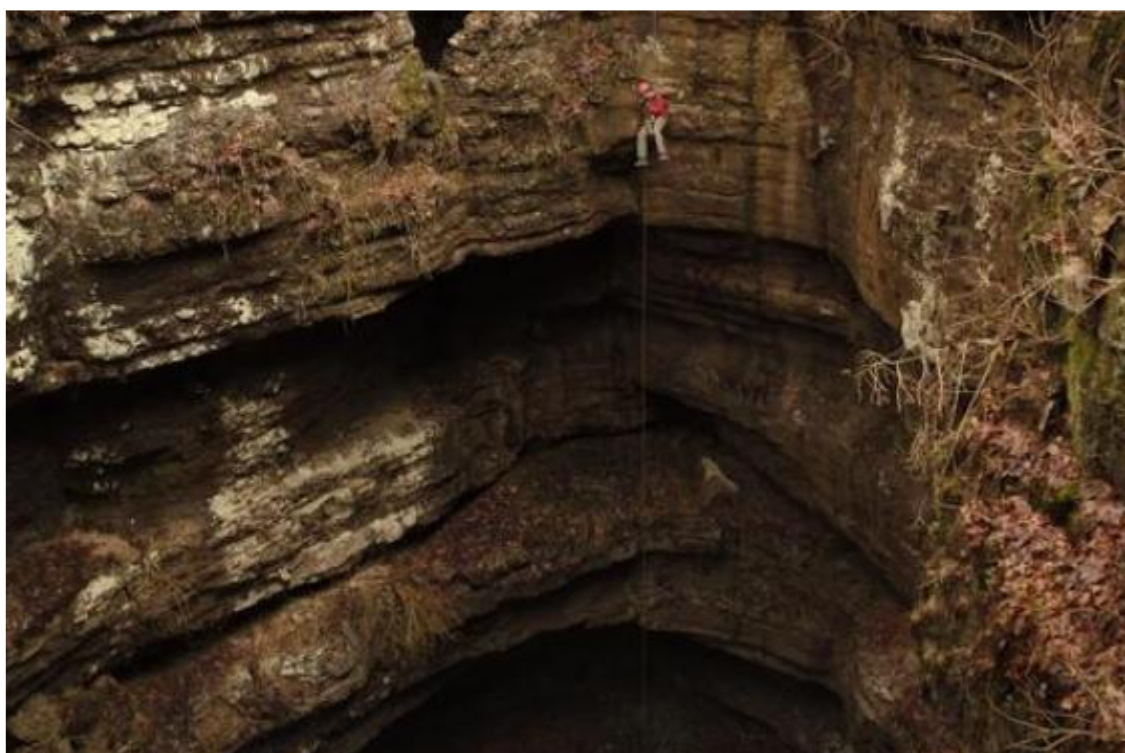
*Abby Hohn coming over the lip at Neversink  
Photo by Aaron Moses*

TAG pit, but, as far as I'm concerned, that's part of its charm.

I edged over the lip with a bubble of fear caught in my throat. Once I was past the lip and began the free rappel, that bubble deflated. Fear was replaced by waves of joy and awe. I descended slowly, rubbernecking it the whole time. I admired

the waterfalls and the rock all around. It had been an extremely wet week in TAG (the day before we'd gotten held up in a Wal-Mart because of "tornadic conditions") so the waterfall, which had been a gentle stream the month before, was roaring down the side of the pit opposite our rope. The bottom was almost completely flooded except for a small island of soggy logs, rocks, and other debris about fifteen feet away from where the rope landed. Unable to touch down, I had to stop and do a changeover. I had been assured that I wouldn't be able to count the pit if I didn't at least get my boots wet, so I rappelled until I could dip my boots in the water and locked off. I took the time to splash my feet gleefully around in the water, like a little kid sitting on a dock. Then I changed over and ascended out.

After I got off rope, Aaron and I walked around the ledge to the other side of the pit in order to watch Nikki rappel. This perspective was more open, revealing the size and splendor of the pit. It seemed that the more I saw of Neversink, the more magnificent it turned out to be. I really hope this extends to TAG in general. Either way, I can hardly wait until I get a chance to go back and bounce more monster pits.



*Nikki Green  
Rappelling  
Neversink.  
Photo by  
Aaron Moses.*



# GERMANY VALLEY – LAND OF PLENTY

*By John Harman*

Everyone has heard about Germany Valley. In the 50's, the NSS cut its vertical teeth into Schoolhouse Cave and by the 70's Germany Valley was THE caving destination on the East coast. Sadly being THE caving destination came at a steep price. Landowner relations were strained to the breaking point and throughout the 80's and 90's relatively little caving was done in Germany Valley. This was when Germany Valley Karst Survey (or GVKS) entered the scene. The GVKS began to restore landowner relations by approaching caving scientifically and not as a group of thrill seeking adrenaline junkies. Through a lot of hard work and a few lucky breaks the GVKS was contracted by Greer Industries to survey Hellhole Cave. In just

five years, the GVKS with Gordon Brace as project manager extended the surveyed length of Hellhole from a respectable 8 miles to over 28 miles.

Two other important caves have been discovered in Germany Valley since 2000. Memorial Day Cave, situated at the southern end of the valley, is 14 miles long and grows every month thanks to a dedicated crew of surveyors that camp all weekend in the cave. Shoveleater Cave is currently just over 4 miles long and is arguably the most technical vertical cave east of the Mississippi if not in the whole United States.

Recently, members of the WVUSG have become very active in GVKS and have enjoyed some amazing caving. Brian Masney, Dave Riggs and I were all lucky enough to be involved in the survey of Hellhole. We didn't discover any monster borehole but we certainly saw our share, which made the 20+ hour trips more than worth it. In 2007, the Hellhole survey contract with Greer Industries ran out and GVKS's focus shifted to the exploration of Shoveleater. In late 2007, Mark Minton, Yvonne Droms, and Bill Stone executed a bolt climb in Harper Canyon that led to over 3 miles of cave and 3 new 100 foot pits.

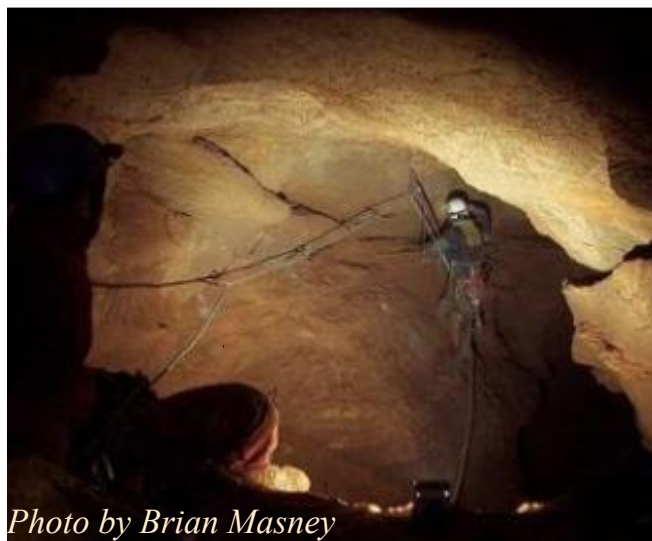
In the last year, the WVUSG has been very active in the exploration of Shoveleater. In the past year I have been on 11 trips to the cave and have led 4 bolt climbs that have netted over 1200 feet of virgin passage. Brian Masney has taken some amazing salon quality photographs which not only wow online viewers but have further solidified our relationship with the landowners. Dave Riggs and Nikki Green have used their squeeze freak talents



*Harper Canyon in Shoveleater Cave.  
Photo by Brian Masney*

to explore the tightest confines of Shoveleater. Abby Hohn, Kyle McMillan and Gayle Suppa have all been on survey trips and enjoyed the thrill of virgin passage.

If the Cave Gods are willing and the explorers are persistent Hellhole, Memorial Day and Shoveleater will connect to form a 50+ mile cave system. Many old hats say the golden era of exploration passed our generation by. I, along with the monster borehole hiding just beneath the dove grey Germany Valley limestone, respectfully disagree.



*Photo by Brian Masney*

*John Harman doing a bolt traverse in Shoveleater with Josh Flaucher on belay*

## VERTICAL PRACTICE

*By Abby Hohn*

The WVUSG has always been open to new members of all levels of experience. However, it is obvious just through the newsletter alone that many grotto members visit some extremely difficult vertical caves in TAG, Germany Valley, and even the Cheat Canyon (Druid). Vertical practices are a way for the more experienced vertical cavers of the Grotto to introduce this type of caving to new members. The WVUSG does not take beginners straight to Harper's Pit or Cass Cave. Instead, beginners start off at the wall, the Iron Furnace, or simply on a treadmill in someone's back yard.

The support provided by vertically experienced members of the WVUSG is invaluable. Dave Riggs, John Harman, and Kyle Mcmillan among others have taken a lot of time to show beginners the ropes, so to speak. Almost every Wednesday the grotto has a vertical practice before the meeting. Usually, practice takes place at the climbing wall in the student Rec Center. During the warmer seasons Grotto members sometimes go out to the Iron Furnace, Cheat View, or Army Rock.

Vertical practices give new members

the opportunity to gain experience in a more controlled environment than underground. On the other hand, vertical practices are not just for beginners. They are also an excuse to hang out with cavers above ground, while improving upon technique.



*Dave Riggs at Army Rock  
Photo by Kyle Mcmillan*



# SPRING SEMESTER TRIP REPORTS

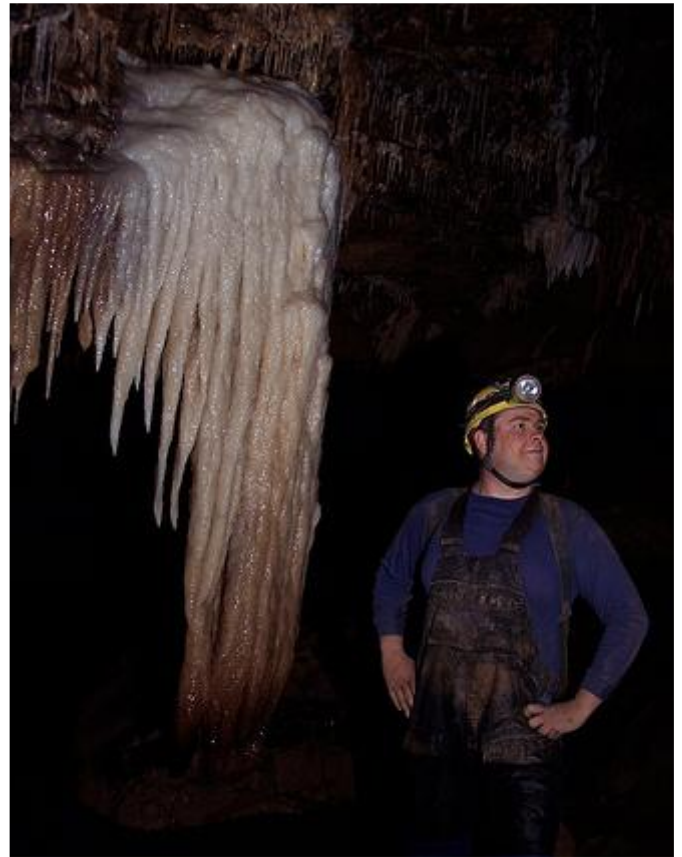
## Finding the Flow in Scott Hollow

*By Ben Mirable*

The rolling hills in Monroe and Greenbrier counties hold some of the largest and longest caves in West Virginia. The land down here has always been my ultimate definition of karst. The karst in this area is a sight to behold and it's all in plain view. The karst plain here extends for miles across the landscape. In Monroe county, you don't spend an afternoon searching for one dim sinkhole shaded by trees, tucked up in a hollow, far from the nearest paved road. We don't even talk about a sinkhole; we talk about chains of them.

It has always been a great pleasure for me to show off the caves down here, specifically Scott Hollow Cave. When I heard the Carter Caves Crawlathon was cancelled due to WNS scares, I jumped on the chance to invite WVUSG down to my place to take in some of the stream passage in Scott Hollow. Coincidentally, there was an upstream trip planned for that particular weekend, and I had an open invite from Mike Dore, the cave owner, to tag along.

This trip was going to be a fast-moving trip to the far upstream reaches of Mystic River, the main cave stream, with the goal of setting up dye traps for a very ambitious dye tracing project. At least five separate dye traces are planned in this cave to locate in feeders to the main flow of the Mystic River. Since the discovery of the cave in 1984, there has been a lot of conjecture, hypotheses, and busted theories on the source of water in the Mystic River. While major in feeders to the stream are known, the entire structural and hydrological picture is just beginning to be pieced together. With some excitement, I convinced Dave Riggs and Abby Hohn to



*Ben Mirable by a formation in Scott Hollow  
Photo by Brian Masney*

join in on this trip. Meanwhile, John Harman, Gayle Suppa, and Dan Brooks would take some Morgantown climbers on a shorter trip to the first sump of the Mystic River.

For such a major cave system, Scott Hollow was discovered fairly recently in the grand scheme of Monroe County. Several large Monroe County caves were visited regularly during the Civil War to mine saltpeter. The 1970s saw a flurry of exploration led by Chuck Hempel and early members of the WVU Student Grotto. Their exploration resulted in the publication of *Caves of Monroe County* by WVASS. Legend has it that Scott Hollow Cave was found by dowsing. The cave was dug open in 1984, and exploration began into Mastodon Avenue. The Mystic River was not found for quite awhile after initial exploration of the cave.

Scott Hollow Cave has one of the most unique cave entrances anywhere in the US. For tour purposes, a two story building was constructed above the cave entrance. To enter the cave, one lifts a hatch in the floor, and descends 20 feet through a steel culvert. Mastodon Avenue is revealed after ducking under a rock ledge.

On this particular day, Abby, Dave and I were accompanying Mike Dore, Mike McFall, and John Powell on an upstream trip to the far reaches of Mystic River. Upon gathering in Mastodon Avenue, we immediately set off. Mastodon Avenue loses over 400 feet of elevation on its path to Mystic River. The passage follows the dip of the Maccrady Shale/Hillsdale Limestone contact all the way to Mystic. Typically, I set a fairly leisurely pace through this passage, meandering through the constant breakdown. However, we had ground to cover, and we were caving with two of the fastest Scott Hollow cavers. Mike and Mike make Scott Hollow caving look easy. These guys could cave to Mystic River with their eyes closed. They know every step, and never leave their feet when traversing this passage.

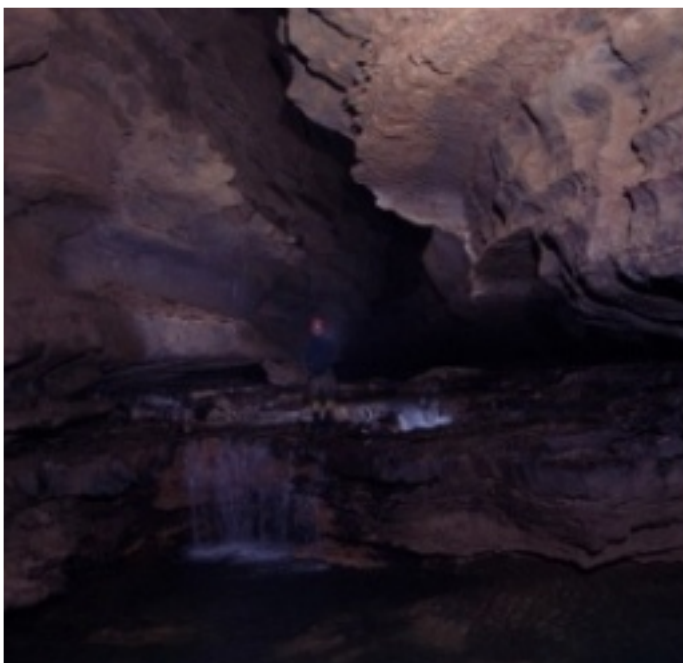
Quickly, we made our way to the end of Mastodon Avenue to its intersection with Mystic River. Since it was Abby's first time in Scott Hollow, Mike let Abby lead the last few feet to Mystic. The first encounter with Mystic River is truly breathtaking. Mystic River is the cave passage every caver dreams of finding. The roof of the passage soars 60 feet or more above one of the largest cave streams in the state.

Our journey led us upstream. We followed the water upstream, sometimes caving directly in the cave stream, sometimes climbing out of the stream onto mountains of breakdown. We soon passed John's Flowstone, the Double Waterfall, and were on to Amber's Garden--a formation near the beginning of Iron City.

It is impossible to do any trip in Scott

Hollow without traversing significant quantities of breakdown. The route continuing upstream through Iron City and Kansas is a seemingly endless passage of breakdown. One climbs up breakdown, down breakdown, traverses breakdown, and if one is not careful, can even surf on breakdown. At times, this series of cave can be one of the most disheartening passages there is. If you have a little trust in your own balance, a little fitness, and a relaxed mind you, settle into a groove. Without thinking, you are moving from one rock to another in a smooth series of efficient moves – the flow. With a little practice and sticky boot soles, this kind of caving can be really enjoyable. Unfortunately, I have possessed neither sufficient practice nor sticky boot soles for several years.

Somewhere beyond Amber's Garden, the headband of my helmet let forth a torrent of sweat. When my mind wasn't focused on the salty sting in my eyes, it turned its attention to the constant burning in my legs. It seemed I could grasp the elusive flow for maybe three moves, then, my body put forth another complaint, and poof, it was gone. Eventually though, after enough



*The Double Waterfall in Scott Hollow Cave  
Photo by Brian Masney*



punishment, my mind went fairly numb. And just in the nick of time, for we had reached the first of two intimidating climbs - all the better not to think too much here.

Unfortunately, while a numb mind is good for a cave trip gone a little too intense, it's not so good for the accompanying trip report. The rest of the upstream trip blurs into a continuing series of ups, downs, and acrosses on breakdown punctuated by the two handline climbs. As we progressed through Kansas, I was duly impressed by the immensity of the passage

Eventually we reached the famed Love Tunnel – so named because cavers love to arrive there and get respite from the breakdown. Thankfully, the Love Tunnel became the turnaround point for Abby, Dave, and I. Mike, Mike, and John continued upstream, while we turned and headed outside. Without Mike, Mike, and John, our pace out of the cave was much slower--a very good thing, too. Riggs and I had time to talk cave geology, tell stories, and just generally enjoy ourselves. At a slower pace, I was also able to get a bit of a grasp of the flow--moving from rock to rock with a little more grace and style. We made our way back through Kansas, Iron City, the Double Waterfall, and up Mastodon Avenue.

After nine hours in the cave, we exited and made our way back to Princeton just in time to catch dinner at Campestre--the ultimate Mexican restaurant.

Dye traces continue in Scott Hollow; week by week the geologic picture becomes a little clearer. Exciting things are happening, and there is more cave to be found here. I'm working out a little to get back in cave shape and looking for sticky boot soles.

***Scott Hollow is only open to members of the NSS who have had membership for at least one year.***

## **Close Mountain Cave**

*By Abby Hohn*

Saturday Feb 21, Nikki Green and I drove down to Tucker Co. for the monthly Tucker County survey. After getting lost while attempting a shortcut, we arrived at Parsons around 9:20. John Harman, Gayle Suppa, Brian Masney, and Kevin Keplinger accompanied by his daughter, Kaitlin, were already at Trish's Restaurant. Over breakfast, we examined the Tucker County bulletin as well as the to-do list. We decided to go survey Close Mountain Cave.

After a delay in town, all of us set out for Close Mountain. It was a beautiful, clear winter day and, as we neared Close Mountain, the windmills appeared over the ridge. The monstrous white blades made a stark contrast to the dazzling blue sky.

Over breakfast Brian had related the history of the cave. It was first discovered in the 70s, but never surveyed. Only recently was it rediscovered when a group of cavers were called in to comb the area in search of the body of a local man, who had disappeared after being diagnosed with cancer. The note he had left behind led his family to believe he'd gone to die in a cave on Close Mountain. The man's body was never found, but the cave entrance was.

Access had been made much easier by a new road. We were able to park just a few hundred feet below the cave entrance. Once we'd changed, we hiked up to the cave, which is located right on top of Long Run.

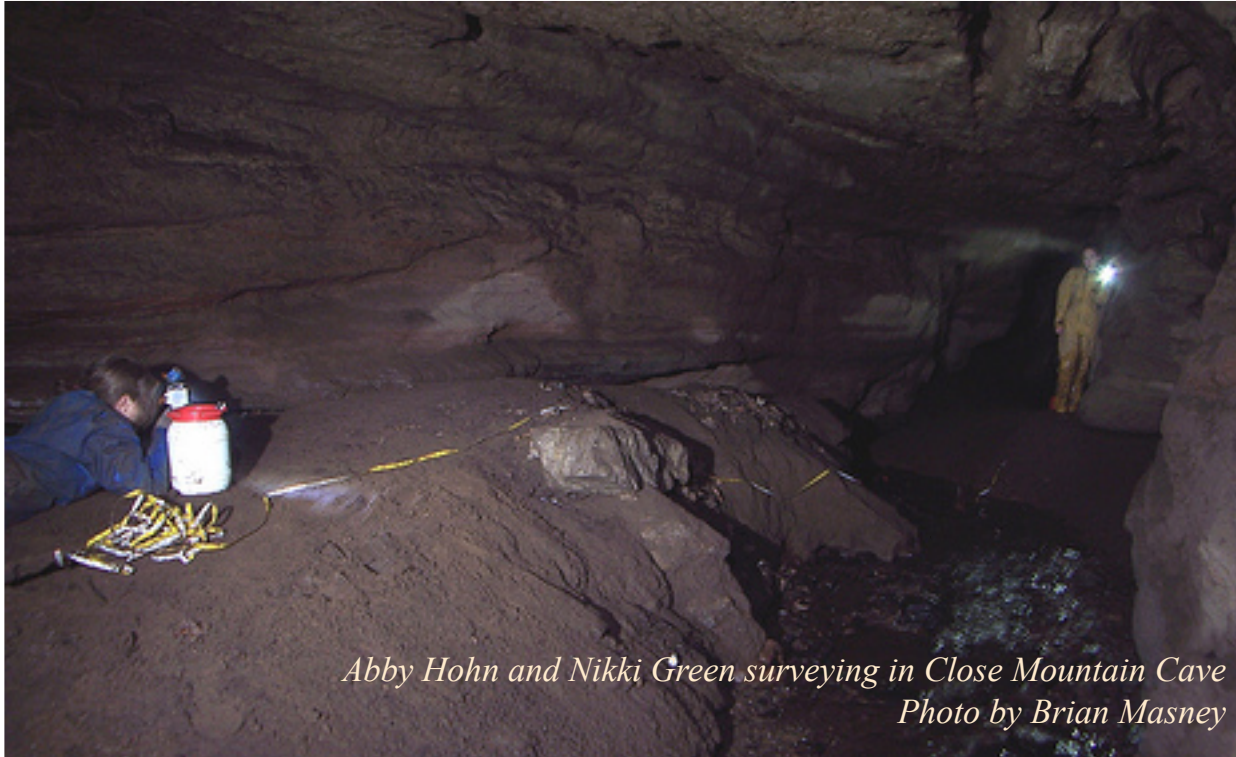
Kevin, Kaitlin, and Nikki went to the back of the cave, while John, Gayle, and I prepared to start the survey. John was sketching, I did backsights, and Gayle did foresights. While I was setting up the second station, the first group returned. The Keplingers exited the cave and Nikki began setting up stations.

After a while, Brian took over

foresights. Most of the passage was narrow walking or stooping passage. After a tight spot around a bend in the stream, the passage opened up remarkably. At this point, Nikki took over my original job and I switched to foresights in order to allow Brian to take some photos. Gayle posed for him, sang a few hymns, and eventually exited the cave to warm up in John's Jeep.

At places the passage was about 30' wide and the ceiling up to 12' high with

mud and debris plastered all along the walls indicating that the cave floods to the very ceiling. The large passage ended in a sump. There was also a loop, which ended in two stream crawls. Upon reaching the wet crawls, we decided to call it a day and "leave something for the next generation", although I believe a survey team returned to Close Mountain Cave the following month and determined that the leads terminate pretty quickly.



*Abby Hohn and Nikki Green surveying in Close Mountain Cave  
Photo by Brian Masney*

## 2008 - 2009 WVUSG Roster:

President: Mcmillan, Kyle -NSS# 56160  
 Vice President: Lilly, Tom -NSS# 59652  
 Secretary: Hohn, Abby -NSS# 60100  
 Treasurer: Suppa, Gayle -NSS# 60297  
 Board Member: Tudek, John -NSS# 36021  
 Faculty Advisor: Rauch, Henry -NSS# 8193

Baxter, Hannah  
 Bodkin, Nicole  
 Brooks, Dan -NSS#61010  
 Finley, Kristine  
 Gillis, Peter  
 Green, Nikki -NSS#59183  
 Harman, John -NSS#58082  
 Knauenshue, Jeremiah

Masney, Brian -NSS#51142  
 Martin, Thad  
 McCormick, Rachel  
 Nellis, Jason  
 Riggs, Dave -NSS#56189  
 Schreider, Thomas  
 Summy, Amanda  
 Taylor, Jataya -NSS#59469  
 Tindall, Krista  
 Vasquez, Dylan  
 White, Jessica

