

A person wearing a yellow helmet and a black jacket is standing in a cave, looking up at the ceiling. The cave is filled with large, orange-brown stalactites and stalagmites. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the textures of the rock formations.

The Texas Caver

October 2024
Volume 69, Fall Issue

TSA Spring Convention
The Texas Speleology Center
Sonora Mural

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Jessica Gordon sketching a cave in the Texas Hill Country. Photo by David Ochel.



Marvin Miller in his element. Photo by Marvin Miller.

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“Serenity!” Photo by Oscar Berrones.

Letter from the Editors

By Jessica Gordon and Marvin Miller

The TSA enjoys a good relationship with Texas Parks and Wildlife. This Fall 2024 Issue of The Texas Caver reports on recent discoveries and activities at Hill Country and Government Canyon State Natural Areas during TSA Karst Projects at those parks. We hope you enjoy perusing the award-winning photos and maps from the TSA Spring Convention salons. A Texas caving organization was found worthy of a national award – read all about it on page 18. Find out what's new and what's next at the Texas Speleology Center; make plans to visit Caverns of Sonora and see the new mural – and the cave; and read the tributes to our recently departed caving comrades. Thanks to all who submitted content for this issue to share these stories, discoveries, and works of art with our caving community!

TSA Karst Project Update: Hill Country and Government Canyon

by Marvin Miller

The karst project “season” runs from October through May. This article is an update of activity at Hill Country and Government Canyon State Natural Areas for the 2023/2024 season.

Hill Country State Natural Area

Due to park event conflicts, there were only three project weekends at Hill Country rather than the standard four.

In December, we started working on the survey of 1924 Cave. This cave was visited by cavers in 1984 and 1986 and partially explored, but never surveyed. The cave is a block creep fracture cave with the fracture that forms the cave trending southeast from the entrance. Chocked breakdown creates hanging floors, with lower level passage underneath. The upper level of the cave is loose and unstable but the lower levels are nicely cemented by flowstone deposition. Adam Daw accompanied me on the December survey trip and Jennifer Arbeiter and Chris Vreeland helped on the April trip. The current surveyed length is 99.4 meters and depth is 20.5 meters. We did a biological collection in the cave.

Biological collections were also done in Mosquito Heaven Cave, No No Cave, and Copperhead Cave.

Jennifer Arbeiter made several trips to Copperhead Cave to finish and refine the survey sketch. The cave has been a training ground for her sketching. Steven Gutierrez and Arron Wertheim assisted on one of these trips. The team also crossed the canyon and surveyed Raybin's Find Cave on the far side. Arron took some fine photographs of the cave.

A final bit of survey was done in Mosquito Heaven Cave by Ayana Monreal and me. Ayana ascended up into a dome previously climbed and rigged by Stephen Gutierrez. I ascended to the first bolt and then did a survey shot up to Ayana and one down to the floor. The cave has airflow that I assumed would go up the dome, but it does not, so there is potential to find more cave. Christin Miller and Leah Miller did a biological collection while Ayana and I surveyed. Mosquito Heaven Cave has a total surveyed length of 55.4 meters and a depth of 7.0 meters.

In February, wet conditions had the trails closed so we started ridgewalking the southwest corner of the State Natural Area. We covered approximately 36 acres and found two sinks, one of which looks like a promising dig.

Maps for Backup Cave, Blind Ambition Cave, and No No Cave were produced over the course of the year.

Government Canyon State Natural Area

In October, Jennifer Arbeiter, Steven Gutierrez, Christina Kastely, and Dylan Swope joined me to start ridgewalking an area we have barely touched yet. It was a productive day with 10 features found, many looking like promising digs and some exhibiting good airflow.

In November, Daniel Grisham, Heidi Forgione, Denys Osmak, and Michael Spibey joined me to survey a cave along San Geronimo Creek. Reaching the entrance required a scramble up the cliff slope. Eleven-year-old Daniel was sure he was



Peter Anderson-Sprecher looking at a lead in the Nappers Cave survey. Photo by Joe Mitchell.



Steven Gutierrez at the entrance to Raybin's Find Cave, Hill Country, SNA. Photo by Arron Wertheim.

going to die, so we named the cave Daniel's Danger Cave. We were pleasantly surprised, after 13.5 meters of survey to a constriction, to see the passage continuing ahead around a corner. The cliffside caves have tended to be small rooms with no associated passage. We still need to get back to this one to clear the constriction and keep surveying.

In November, Mio Spyker and I used a cable ladder to descend for the first time through a narrow slot at the bottom of Napper's Cave. Several ledges followed at 6.5 and 8.5 meters down. The lower ledge dropped into a 15-meter pit. At the ledge level and across the pit were horizontal leads going two directions. Mio descended the pit and briefly explored the bottom, finding several leads. Richard Silver, Katherine Jager, and Garrett Smith provided support on this trip. Richard had dug open the slot several months earlier. In May, Mio and I got back to Napper's Cave with Peter Anderson-Sprecher and Joe Mitchell to survey down through the slot and then down the pit. By the end of the day we had surveyed 57 meters, with the last station in a room with a soaring 12-meter ceiling. As Mio was finishing the sketch, we looked around to figure out where the cave was going next. A climb up the wall and up a hidden ramp led to a large upper-level borehole passage. We saw large passage heading into darkness, and many leads were noted. We will follow the survey-as-you-explore ethic in this exciting find.

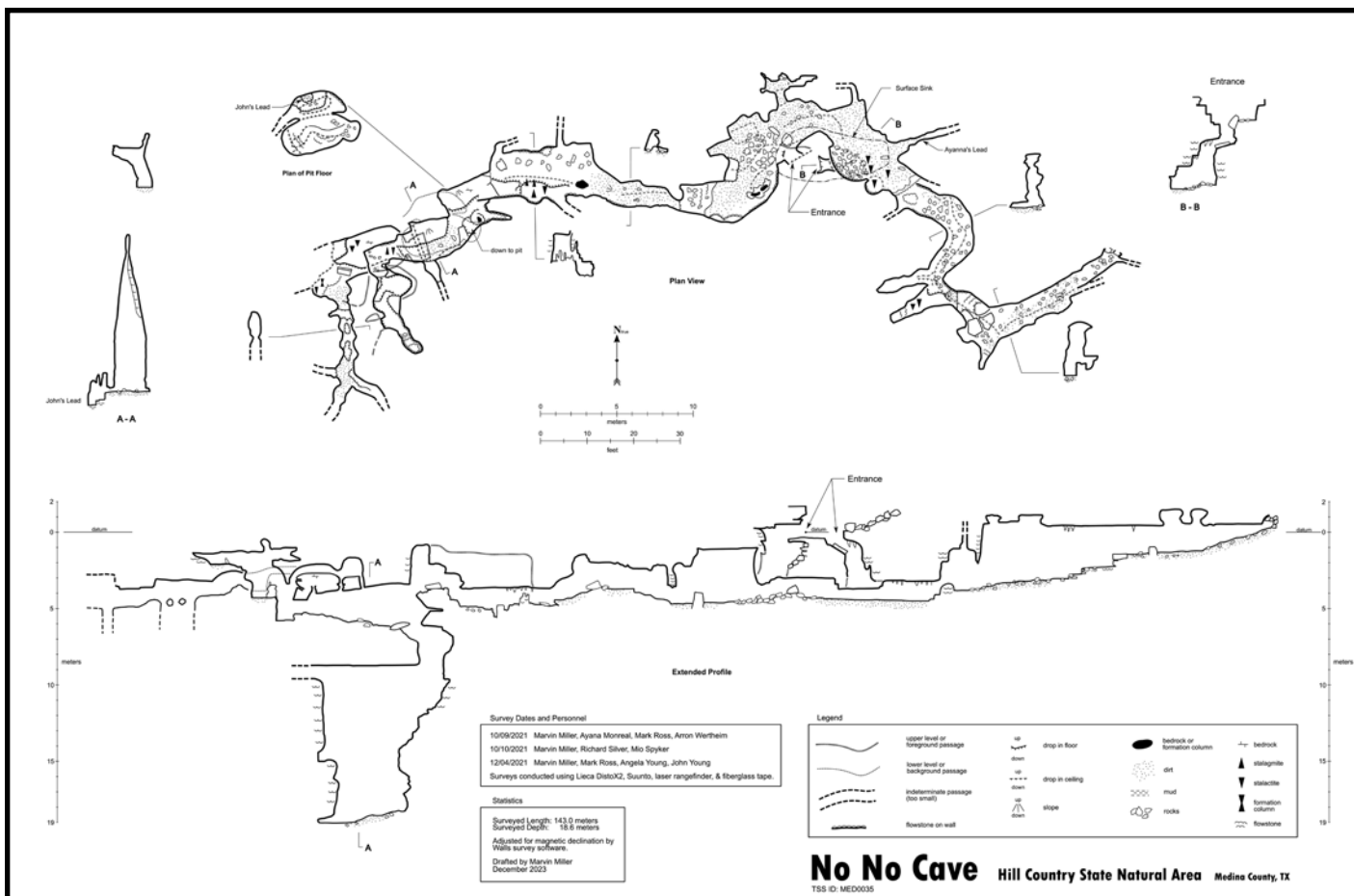
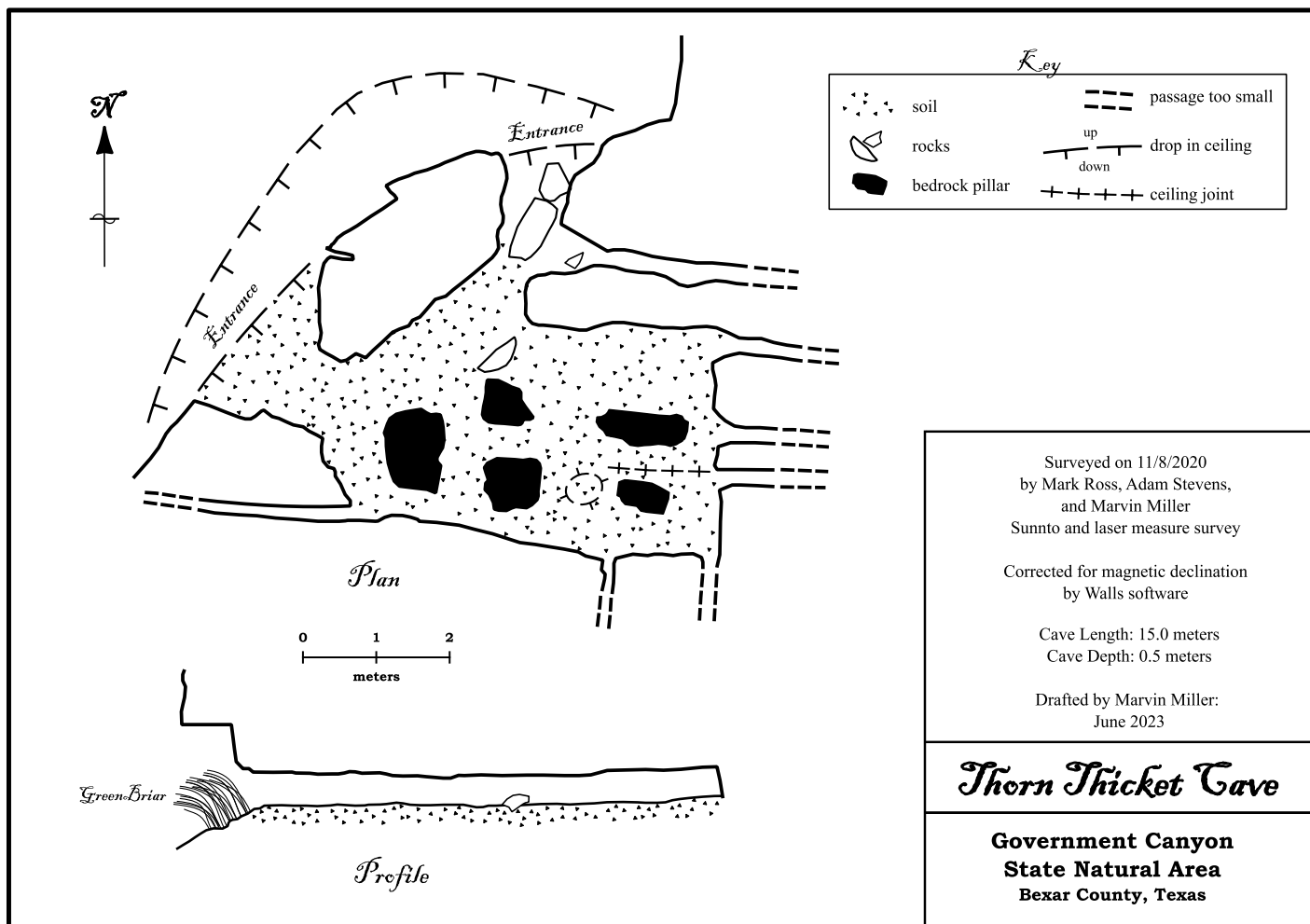
Jennifer Arbeiter, Stephen Clare, Adam Daw, Kyle Gillespie, Nick Gladstone, Steven Gutierrez, Joe Mitchell, Amy Morton, Roger Myers, Jordan Ogletree, Megan Sanchez, Sierra Shepard, Richard Silver, Caitlin Stoops, and Asher, Judah, and Ezra Villegas worked on digs. Two of those digs are promising and ongoing. The breakthrough after years of on-and-off work in Napper's Cave provides motivation.

Roger Myers, Mio Spyker, and I finished the survey of Insurrection Cave. It ended up being 58.3 meters long and 2.6 meters deep. There are several tight leads that have the possibility of extending the survey with a little work.

Biological collections were done in Crawl, Hop, and Fly Cave, Insurrection Cave, and Napper's Cave.

Maps for Thorn Thicket Cave and Oak Tree Alcove Cave were produced over the course of the year.

Watch the TSA calendar for karst project dates.





Jennifer Arbeiter getting ready to descend in 1924 Cave. Photo by Chris Vreeland.

27 Years of Government Canyon

by Marvin Miller

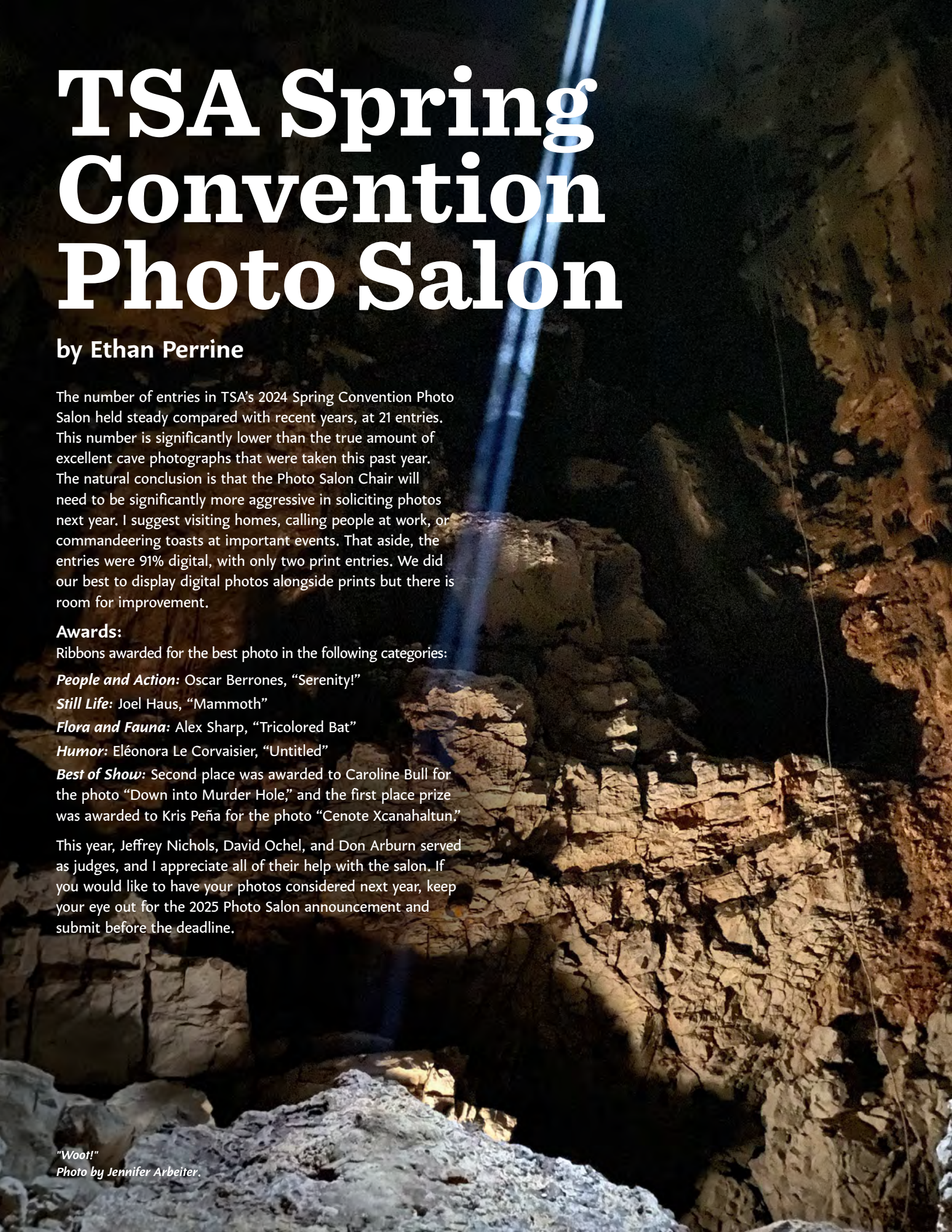
I started caving in 1993 with the Bexar Grotto. As with many new cavers, I had a hard time filling my caving ticket. I was very excited when George Veni started up the Government Canyon Karst Survey Project in 1994. I loved the idea of thousands of acres (4,717 acres) to explore and at least one whole weekend a month devoted to caving. I was a faithful volunteer in those early years. In 1997 when George's work demands got too heavy, he let it be known that he was looking for someone to take it over. I held up my hand.

Twenty-seven years later I am still coordinating and managing this project. That certainly wasn't what I expected at the outset, but it has never gotten old or boring, and I never saw a reason to quit. Due to continual additions of property to the park (now at 12,243 acres) there are still thousands of acres to be explored. I turned 60 back in December. I don't feel old, and I still enjoy hard caving, but I know age has a way of showing up suddenly. For that reason, I decided it was time to hand off leadership of the project to someone younger than myself, to take it into the future. Bexar Grotto member Steven Gutierrez has agreed to be that person. I hope and plan to have many more years of exploring those thousands of acres both above and below ground under his leadership.



Richard Silver hauling buckets from a dig in a small pit. Photo by Marvin Miller.

TSA Spring Convention Photo Salon

A dramatic photograph of a cave interior. A single, bright beam of light from above illuminates a jagged, rocky ledge in the center of the frame. The surrounding cave walls are dark and textured, with some areas reflecting the light. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and awe-inspiring.

by Ethan Perrine

The number of entries in TSA's 2024 Spring Convention Photo Salon held steady compared with recent years, at 21 entries. This number is significantly lower than the true amount of excellent cave photographs that were taken this past year. The natural conclusion is that the Photo Salon Chair will need to be significantly more aggressive in soliciting photos next year. I suggest visiting homes, calling people at work, or commandeering toasts at important events. That aside, the entries were 91% digital, with only two print entries. We did our best to display digital photos alongside prints but there is room for improvement.

Awards:

Ribbons awarded for the best photo in the following categories:

People and Action: Oscar Berrones, "Serenity!"

Still Life: Joel Haus, "Mammoth"

Flora and Fauna: Alex Sharp, "Tricolored Bat"

Humor: Eléonora Le Corvaisier, "Untitled"

Best of Show: Second place was awarded to Caroline Bull for the photo "Down into Murder Hole," and the first place prize was awarded to Kris Peña for the photo "Cenote Xcanahaltun."

This year, Jeffrey Nichols, David Ochel, and Don Arburn served as judges, and I appreciate all of their help with the salon. If you would like to have your photos considered next year, keep your eye out for the 2025 Photo Salon announcement and submit before the deadline.

"Woot!"
Photo by Jennifer Arbeiter.



Best in Show "Cenote Xcanahaltun."
Photo by Kris Peña.



*Second Place "Down Into Murder Hole."
Photo by Caroline Bull.*



Still Life winner "Mammoth."
Photo by Joel Haus.



People and Action winner "Serenity!"
Photo by Oscar Berrones.



Humor winner "Untitled."
Photo by Eléonore Le Corvaisier.

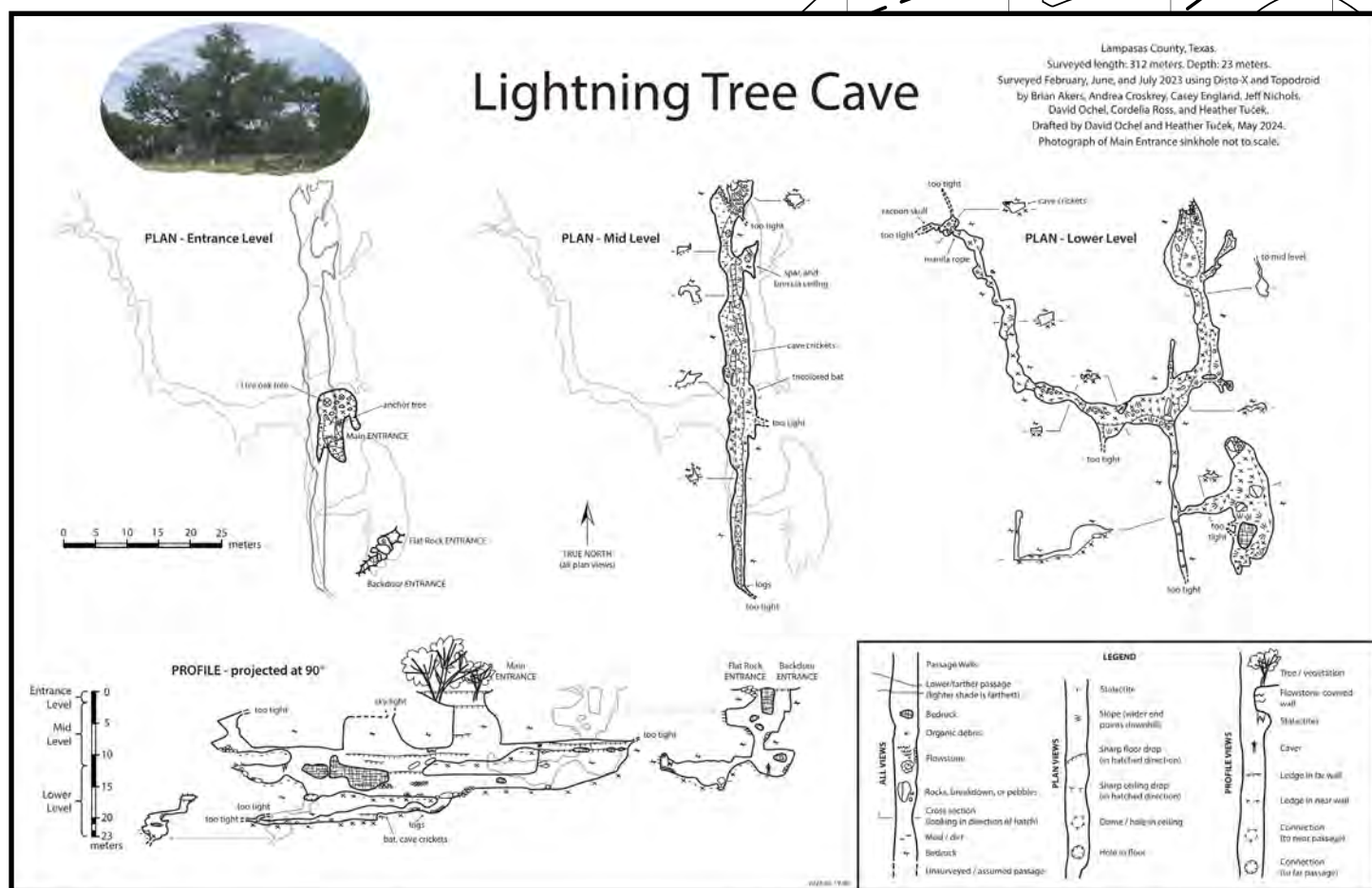


Flora and Fauna winner "Tricolored Bat."
Photo by Alex Sharp.

TSA Spring Convention Map Salon

by Marvin Miller

Seven maps were entered into the TSA Map Salon competition at the spring convention. Ryan Hoffman was awarded an Honorable Mention for T. Ryan Cave in San Saba County, Greg Mosier was awarded a Blue Ribbon for Woot Cavern in Medina County, and David Ochel and Heather Tuček were awarded Best of Show for Lightning Tree Cave in Lampasas County.



The Texas Speleology Center

by David Ochel

Have you heard of the Texas Speleology Center (TSC)? The TSC is essentially a library that hosts most (if not all) of the Texas caving nonprofits under its roof: the Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA), Texas Speleological Survey (TSS), Texas Speleological Association (TSA), and the Association of Mexican Cave Studies (AMCS). We are housed at a former residential property in Driftwood, south of Austin, made possible by the generosity of late Texas cavers Bill Mixon and Bill Russell. Most of the space inside the house is dedicated to the archives and publications of these organizations, but room for events (such as nonprofit board meetings) is also available.

Who runs the TSC?

The property is owned by a dedicated, volunteer-run nonprofit organization called Rumix. Per its mission, “Rumix Nonprofit Corporation operates the Texas Speleology Center in order to further speleology by archiving cave data, facilitating cave science and documentation, and promoting cave conservation.” The current board of directors for Rumix consists of Holly Klein, David Ochel, Linda Palit, Ethan Perrine, and Scott Serur. Ron Ralph has been pouring endless amounts of time into upkeep of the property in recent years, and Katie Arens has been helping with keeping the inside of the building in shape.

Visitors study publications at the TSC Open House in 2023.
Photo by David Ochel.



How can you benefit from the TSC?

For one, the TSC enables our guest organizations to provide you with access to their collections of publications, maps, and survey data. For events and meetings that are aligned with our mission, we may be able to offer you meeting space both indoors and outdoors. Indirectly, you benefit from your favorite Texas caving organizations having a physical location to call their home, all under one roof.

What's new and what's next at the TSC?

Last year, Rumix Nonprofit Corporation formally took ownership of the property. In May 2023, we made a lightly attended attempt at hosting an open house. In October 2023, we had a well-attended Volunteer Workday that resulted in lots of repairs and maintenance being tackled at the property. Thanks to everyone who helped with either of those events! Look for another workday to be announced this fall! Meanwhile, our A/C died at the beginning of summer, and funds had to be sought to replace it. Urgent improvement projects that are outstanding are the installation of rain gutters and the replacement of rotting exterior door frames.

How can you contribute to the mission of the TSC?

Like all other Texas caving nonprofits, Rumix is run by volunteers. We would love to have you volunteer, if nothing else, by showing up to the next workday! If you're in the (greater Austin/San Marcos/San Antonio) area and have a day or weekend to spare, please check in — just donating the time to prep materials for required improvements helps. If you have a small handful of hours to donate on a regular basis, we'd love to find volunteers to: take over the organization of workdays, be a property manager coordinating maintenance, or help us organize what's going on inside the building. Last, but not least, as a 501(c)3 organization, we appreciate financial donations to cover our expenses. (Please do not, however, use the TSC as a dumping ground for "caver memorabilia" or other physical possessions without explicitly coordinating that with us. ;-))

How can you get in contact with the TSC?

Find us on Facebook under "Texas Speleology Center" or email us at info@texasspeleology.org.



*Oscar and Vico prepare to replace broken siding with a more permanent solution.
Photo by David Ochel.*



Peter reviewing records for archiving in the AMCS library. Photo by David Ochel.

Sonora Mural

by Lee Ann Dean

On May 26, 2024, a mural was installed in the entrance to Caverns of Sonora. It was a surprise gift by two Lubbock cavers, one of whom is a cousin to Gerry Ingham, the matriarch of the family who owns the cave. The mural displays a ranch scene landscape from the local ranching history of the family. Every buzzard, herding dog, horse, and brand illustrated on the mural was researched from old family photos. The artist commissioned to do this piece, Tim Kohtz, has had his work displayed in the Carlsbad Caverns Visitor Center and at the Carlsbad Museum. It was Tim's first adventure doing a mural and using acrylics. The seven panels required several months of work. When ready, they were transported from Lubbock for installation. It took 5 hours in heat and humidity to hang the mural in the entrance room where the stairway descends into the cavern. The ladder had to be moved every 15 minutes to make way for tours. Later, a surprise champagne party unveiled the completed installation for approximately 30 family members and friends.

*Tim and Annie, Artist and Creative Director.
Photo by Lee Ann Dean.*



*Gerry Ingham, Mayfield Matriarch.
Photo by Lee Ann Dean.*



Texas Cave Management Association Receives the National Speleological Society's Group Conservation Award

by Bill Steele

Congratulations to the Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA) for receiving the National Speleological Society's (NSS) prestigious Group Conservation Award, not awarded every year, at the Award Banquet at the 2024 NSS convention in Tennessee. The citation, read from the podium, said, "Four years ago, Texas cavers learned of a threat of pollution to the longest and one of the best caves in the state. Cavers attended public hearings and went to the microphone, speaking passionately about not allowing the possible pollution of the water in the cave.

The Texas Cave Management Association joined the fight and assisted in litigation at the request of the cave owner against a property developer that was attempting to develop a large subdivision and water treatment facility above the cave. This facility was attempting to obtain a permit to discharge 365,000 gallons per day into the Honey Creek watershed, which would be more than double the flow of the surface creek. This excessive discharge would put native flora and fauna at risk.

As a result of this litigation, the development was limited to half as many homes with improved wastewater treatment and monitoring requirements. As a result of this ruling, the developer decided to sell the land to the Texas State Park system as part of the Honey Creek State Natural Area which is adjacent to Guadalupe River State Park.

The Texas Cave Management Association continues to assist with conservation activities on site as well as offering access to Honey Creek Cave for continued speleological research."

TCMA officers Jim "Crash" Kennedy and Ben Dau went to the stage and received the certificate and applause.



TCMA Officers Ben Dau (left) and Jim "Crash" Kennedy (center) receiving the Group Conservation Award from Val Hildreth-Werker (right) at the 2024 NSS Convention. Photo by Bill Steele.



NSS Group Conservation Award received by TCMA.



Remembering Departed Caving Comrades: The Hall of Texas and Mexico Cavers

by Jay Jorden

Tales of two cavers: One was an Underground Texas Grotto member who caved extensively in the Hill Country and Mexico, installing cave gates across the Southwestern United States. Another was the protégé of a cave biologist and Texas Tech University professor who pioneered many studies in Texas and Mexico.

Both Charley W. Savvas, NSS 28607, and William Lenton “Dub” Rhodes Jr. passed away earlier this year. They’re remembered on The Hall of Texas and Mexico Cavers at www.hall.cavetexas.org/ on the Texas Speleological Association website. You can find more complete tributes and accounts of Charley’s and Dub’s accomplishments there – along with many others who lived to discover, explore, map, and document caves.



Charley. Photo by Chris Thibodaux.

Charley, whose caving career spanned more than 35 years, died on Tuesday, May 21, 2024, having just been transferred to a hospice care facility following a battle with Stage 4 lung cancer. He was 65.

Active among a group of cavers who restore and operate Dodge Power Wagons – the 4-wheel-drive, medium-duty trucks or short buses you see at Texas Caver Reunions – Charley frequently loaded his “Speleobus” with cavers and either headed west of Austin for caving adventures – or south to the Texas–Mexico border.

In 2017, a new scorpion species was discovered in Cueva de Casa Blanca on a trip with Peter Sprouse. The species was named *Pseudouroctonus savvasi* in honor of Charley’s contributions to biospeleology.

Remembering Departed Caving Comrads

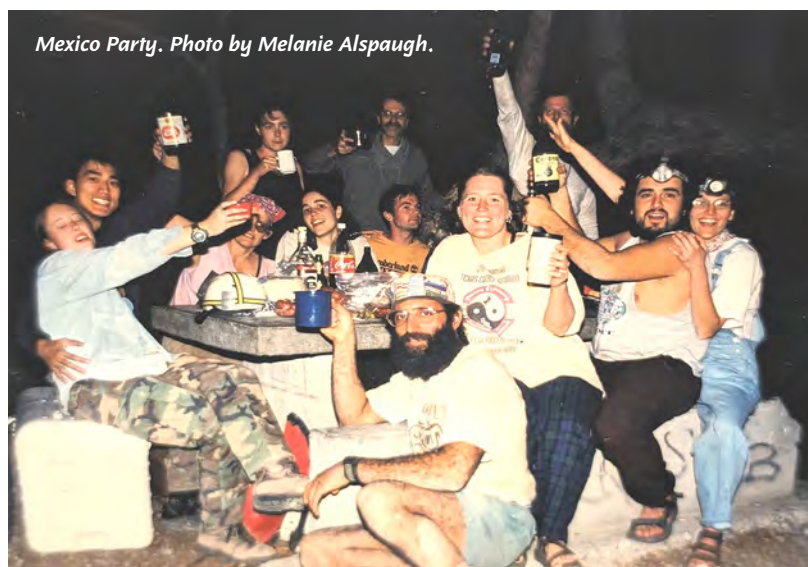
Other adventures included a trip down the Rio Santo Domingo in Oaxaca in 2004 with Ernie Garza and others. Charley organized a trip for Proyecto Espeleológico Purificación in 2009. Called “Team Savvas,” the group included Jonathan Wilson, Tom Haile, Christine Krejka, Shannon Summers, and Bev Shade.

In 2005, Charley went with Peter Sprouse to investigate a speleological dead zone southeast of the Sierra del Burro near Villa Unión. It consists of some low Austin Chalk–style ridges with a cluster of sulfur springs.

Charley’s caving exploits were legendary, including trips to Madagascar, the Philippines, the Cook Islands, and elsewhere. But one adventure closer to home, in December 1989, could have cost him his life. The cave was Barton Creek Sinkhole near Austin, where Charley became trapped when a large slab of breakdown slid into a shaft with him. His legs were pinned at the knees by a triangle-shaped limestone slab 6 feet long, 4.5 feet wide, and 2.5 feet thick. Companion Jim Wolff summoned the Oak Hill Fire Department and EMS along with many cavers via Texas Cave Rescue. Subfreezing temperatures and tight quarters hampered the rescue efforts, with caver Mike Warton and Wolff using a pair of hydraulic jacks to free Charley from the rock, which threatened to sever his legs. He had been given IV fluids and painkillers. The successful, 4.5-hour rescue was recounted in *The Texas Caver* and in *50 Years of Texas Caving* by Carl Kunath.

Charley’s lung cancer symptoms surfaced in late 2023 after Charley and his wife Amy LoBiondo traveled to Connecticut, where his mother was battling lymphoma. After her death in January, Charley was admitted to a Hartford, Conn., hospital with fluid in his lungs. With that began a series of treatments, including chemotherapy upon returning to Texas. A GoFundMe page was established on behalf of Charley and Amy.

In May of 2024 it became clear that Charley was not going to rebound from cancer complications despite his hospital treatment. The decision was made to transfer Charley to Christopher House, a hospice facility in east Austin, on May 21. Many friends stopped by to share memories of crazy adventures and laughter.



Mexico Party. Photo by Melanie Alspaugh.

"I'm so, so grateful for all the patient, kind and thoughtful people in our wide, extended community who are there for me, his family and friends," Amy posted on Facebook. "Thank you, all of you. It would be so much harder without you all."

"I knew Charley was a cherished man, but I am completely astounded by the outpouring of love and support that has wrapped around us," said Kara Dittmer Savvas, his former wife.

A native Texan well-known as a cave photographer who explored Mexican caves with Dr. Robert Mitchell, Dub died in Belmont, California, on Feb. 10. He was 89.

Stories of caving with Dub and Dr. Mitchell, who died in 2010, are chronicled in "Caving with Mitch" by Francis E. Abernethy. Mitchell's studies included *Astyanax* cavefishes in the Sierra de El Abra.

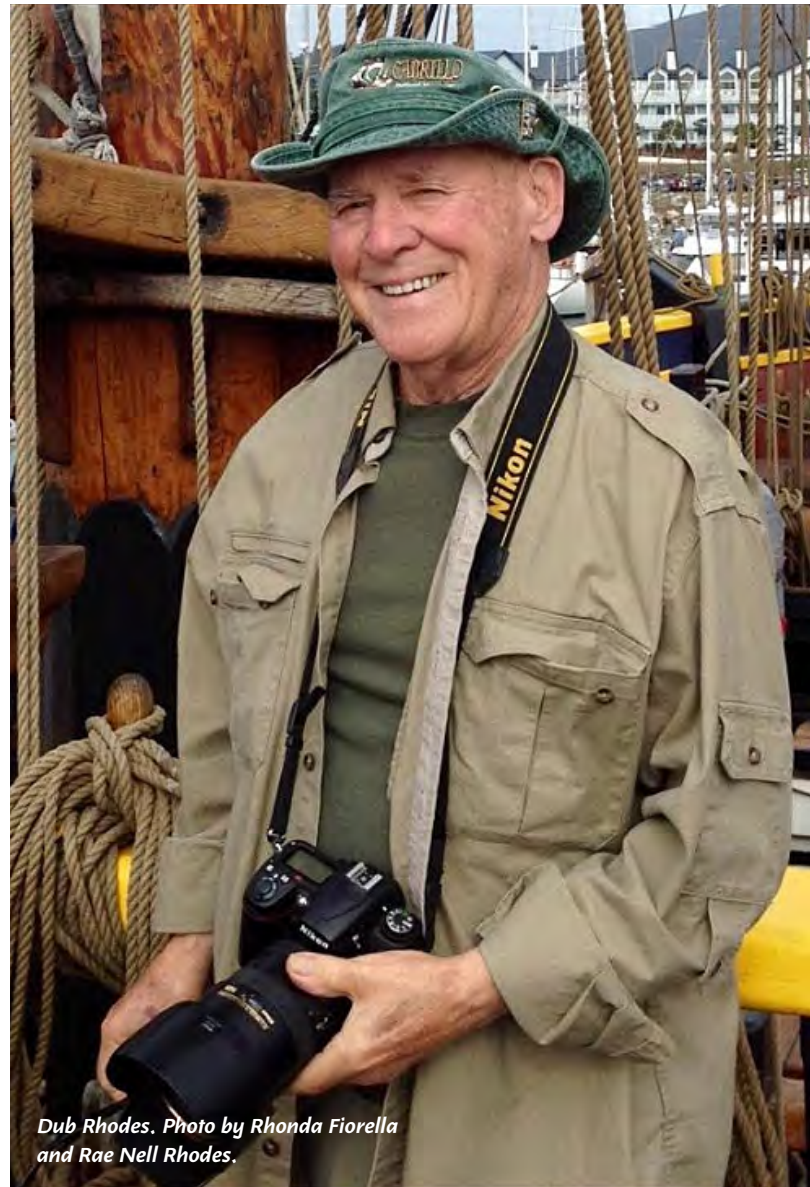
Dub's love of photography began as a very young man, when he started documenting family gatherings, locations, and events. This expertise grew into a career path as a nature photographer as he pursued his love of nature to build an impressive portfolio. Dub contributed to Abernethy's book with many photos he took of travels with Dr. Mitchell.

The two met at Lamar Tech when Dub registered for his second semester after a stint in the Navy, and he began taking field biology courses from him. Mitchell then invited him to join the department research trips. This grew into a 20-year series of adventures, including one where the two became disoriented in Sand Cave near Rancho del Cielo, a research station in Mexico of Texas Southmost College.

Dub's headlamp malfunctioned as they were returning to the entrance from an unsuccessful trip gathering biological specimens. After fixing the lamp, the group missed the exit from the cave and had to backtrack, literally crawling backwards until finding the exit.

After graduation, Dub relocated to Denver in 1964 but continued to join Mitchell, and also Abernethy, on the annual research trips and caving for another 13 years. On a 33-day road trip to Guatemala City via the Pan American Highway, a motor mount broke loose and the engine started falling, held up only by the distributor. Jacking the engine back into place and wedging a log between the engine and firewall, they located a welder along the road to make quick repairs. On another cave trip to study a large colony of ricinuleids, Dub contracted infectious hepatitis and took a year to recover.

Later in life, Dub relocated to the Bay Area of California and retired in Half Moon Bay. A celebration of life is planned for Sept. 21, when his ashes will be committed to the Pacific Ocean at Half Moon Bay Beach.



Dub Rhodes. Photo by Rhonda Fiorella and Rae Nell Rhodes.

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Photo by Jansen Cardy, NSS #50665



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