

A photograph of several cavers inside a cave. In the foreground, a woman in a pink shirt and white helmet with a headlamp is looking down. Next to her, a man in a teal shirt and brown pants is sitting on the rocky ground, resting his head on his hand. In the background, another person is visible, illuminated by a bright headlamp. The cave walls are rough and textured, and the floor is covered in rocks and some gear.

The Texas Caver

May 2025
Volume 70, Spring Issue

Neel's Cave Resurrection Project 2025
Greater Houston Grotto Sardinia Caving Trip 2024
Fruitcake Diplomacy

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Juliana Rincon and Diana Tomchick carefully brush away paint while Alan Cobb supervises. Photo by Jennifer Arbeiter.

Letter from the Editors

By Jessica Gordon and Marvin Miller

Texas cavers are active, organized, and engaged. In addition to caving in the Lone Star State, Texas cavers are exploring caves in other states and in other countries. This issue includes explorations of Texas cavers in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Sardinia (an island in Italy), and old Mexico. Texas cavers are artists winning national awards! Texas cavers are conservationists – teaming up to preserve and restore the beauty and intrigue of underground spaces. Inside this issue there are new features and familiar ones. We encourage you to read it from cover to cover to find out what Texas cavers are up to.



Jessica Gordon conducting a karst fauna survey in West Texas. Photo by Jean Krejca.



Marvin Miller in his element. Photo by Marvin Miller.

The 2024 Chuck Stuehm Award Winners

by Jennifer Arbeiter, Alberto Gaudio, Jessica Gordon,
Bill Steele, and Cruz St. Peter

The Chuck Stuehm Award for new and exceptional cavers is named after Raymond Chuck Stuehm (pronounced “Steam”), a member of several grottos in the San Antonio area who was especially good at welcoming, guiding, and encouraging new cavers. Chuck’s memory is honored every time a new, exuberant caver receives this award. Along with the award, each of our five recipients also receives a FREE one-year membership to the Texas Speleological Association.

Congratulations to the 2024 Chuck Stuehm Award winners:

Emma Kate Lowe (*Aggie Speleological Society*)

Alexander Sharp (*Bexar Grotto*)

Sierra Shepard (*Dallas-Fort Worth Grotto*)

JT Shelly (*Greater Houston Grotto*)

Bradyn Kinney (*Underground Texas Grotto*)

Emma Kate has grown rapidly as a caver in the year she has been with the Aggie Grotto, consistently showing determination to work at improving her caving abilities. She embodies the persistence and resilience of a passionate new caver.

Alexander Sharp has been a wonderful addition to the Bexar Grotto. Alex can dig! He’s strong and tough. He is a go-to guy for digging sinkholes filled with heavy rocks. He has participated in several projects, including Woot, and has taken the lead in organizing digs and clean-up projects at Cave Without a Name (CWAN). This aspiring helicopter pilot has even gone so far as to make caving his job. He has worked at Cascade Caverns and CWAN. He is an up-and-coming cave photographer and has produced some fantastic cave photos. He always has a great attitude and a smile, even during some difficult or miserable times during caving. He is the kind of guy you would want on your team during a caving trip. He is well-loved by newbies and old-timers alike. We are going to miss him when he moves to Hawaii, but we wish him safe flights and large lava tubes.

Sierra Shepard went on her first caving trip with the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) Grotto to Jester Cave, Oklahoma in February 2024. Since then, she has gone on survey trips in Honey Creek Cave and Duncan Field Cave, the longest caves in Texas and Oklahoma. She’s participated in multiple vertical practices; went to the NSS Convention in Sewanee, Tennessee where she took sketching and vertical workshops; has been vertical caving; and has visited Ennis Cave and Janus Pit in Arkansas. She is planning to join the PESH 2025 Expedition in April to Huautla de Jimenez, Oaxaca, Mexico to be part of the team in support of



2024 Chuck Stuehm Award Winners (from left to right): JT Shelly, Alexander Sharp, Sierra Shepard, Bradyn Kinney, and Emma Kate Lowe. Photo by Leia Hill.

a Ph.D. Mexican paleontologist who is studying an important paleontological cave rich with Pleistocene megafauna skulls and bones. Rarely does someone come along as gung-ho as her. It's the people in this life who "show up" who make the biggest difference.

JT Shelly joined the Greater Houston Grotto (GHG) in June 2024 and immediately became an active member and a team player. He has demonstrated a genuine passion for caving and has actively participated in all GHG activities, including workshops, vertical practice, social events, and, of course, caving expeditions. This award is intended to encourage him to maintain this passion for the long term. We are confident that he will continue to make significant contributions to the caving community.

Bradyn Kinney is enthusiastic, smart, eager to learn, and the youngest member of a hard-working and dedicated family that the Underground Texas Grotto is proud to have in our ranks. It is impressive that they drive close to four hours round-trip to participate in Underground Texas Grotto events.

Thanks to all the grottos for participating and recognizing these outstanding new cavers!

Texas Winners from the 2024 Fine Arts Salon at the NSS Convention

by Bill Steele

What a showing for Texas caver artists! Three out of six (50%) of the winners from the 2024 Fine Arts Salon at the NSS Convention were from Texas: Erika Jaeggli, Joel Haus, and Patty Calabrese.

Please Don't Touch the Cave Formations (3D)

by Patty Calabrese

“Hopefully the first in a series of work, this sculpture was fired into bisqueware almost two decades ago, but painted with acrylic in 2024. You are the earth, and the earth is you.”

– Patty Calabrese



Grotte de Malaval (Paint)

by Joel Haus

“In 2021, I had the chance to visit the Lozère region of France and go caving with some of the locals in several really beautiful and sporting caves. It was a great opportunity to get a glimpse of the French caving culture, especially how they train newer cavers in vertical techniques. In this painting of la Grotte de Malaval, we see a handful of more experienced cavers helping a relative beginner prepare for his descent on a pitch into the depths of the cave.”

– Joel Haus



Cave Without A Name (Mixed Media)

by Erika Jaeggli

“For the past five years, my artistic focus has been on caves. This began as a conceptual framework from which to approach my work, and the idea became concretized when I received a grant from the Dallas Museum of Art in 2021 funding artistic research into seven show caves in Texas. From that experience, my understanding of and time spent within caves has grown, and the work has evolved as well. This artwork came out of visiting Cave Without a Name in Boerne, Texas, which was the first cave I ever went into as an adult. It is made with a digital photo collage that I made from photos taken onsite, and encaustic wax and oil paint applied on top.”

– Erika Jaeggli

Texas Cavers

by Marvin Miller

This is the first in a series of regular columns to report briefly on the activities of the Texas caving clubs. It's actually not the "first," but rather a resurrection of what used to be a regular feature of The Texas Caver. If you have caved since this past October and you don't see your trip mentioned below, there are ways to remedy that for the next time. When you take that trip, report on it at your local grotto meeting, and make sure your trip is recorded in the meeting's minutes. Also, tell your grotto secretary to send those minutes to me. Meeting minutes are the primary source of these snippets. Better yet, to ensure that your trip gets a line or two, send a brief report to me directly at cave0miller@gmail.com.

Bexar Grotto

Fernando Gutierrez reported during the October 14 grotto meeting about attending a biology conference on Sardinia and visiting a mine and cave. Tom Florer continued his long-standing role leading groups through Spring Creek Cave near Boerne during the annual Hydro-Geo Workshop at Cave Without A Name. Many cavers volunteered in various capacities for this event organized by Geary and Sue Schindel. Tobin Simpson and Matt Taylor attended the Cave Formation Restoration Project organized by Mike Mansur at Cottonwood Cave in the Guadalupe Mountains. In October, Geary Schindel, Matt Taylor, and Chris Lafferty led the first Central Texas Vertical Caving Workshop using the recently released NSS Vertical Training Commission curriculum. Training took place at the Medicine Wall in San Antonio and at Hidden Gem Cave in Spring Branch. Geary Schindel and Kurt Menking went to Paradise Canyon to look at a newly found cave. Kurt Menking assisted Fran Hutchins at Bracken Cave Preserve, checking on LiDAR indications for karst features and caves. The two also visited Rucker Bat Cave in Edwards County to help understand why bats were no longer using the cave.

In November, Wurzbach Bat Cave Preserve manager Jennifer Arbeiter hosted Val Hildreth-Werker and cavers from around the state at the preserve for a graffiti removal workshop at the Texas Cave Management Association's (TCMA's) new preserve. Marvin Miller led the survey of Hidden Gem Cave in Spring Branch. Mio Spyker, Chris Lafferty, and Greg Mosier applied

Chris's micro-blasting kit to a tight fissure on Mio's Edwards County property to access what turned out to be a cave with 50+ feet of down-climbable fissure passage. A tight squeeze led to more and larger cave with passage continuing down and unexplored. A survey day is being planned.

Joe Mitchell led a project trip to the Deep & Punkin Cave Preserve for a Deep Cave survey weekend. Loops were surveyed and a new pit was discovered. A lead to an "unsurveyed room" led instead to significant passage that has marks of foot traffic but is not on the map. Best of all, Tobin Simpson and Matthew Taylor got engaged. Aubri Jenson participated in the recent Karst Underwater Research <<https://karstunderwater.org/>> expedition to Phantom Springs Cave. She was part of the science team collecting biological specimens with Ben Hutchins.

The first weekend of January saw Tobin Simpson and Matt Taylor repairing formations for the Cave Formation Repair Project at Caverns of Sonora. A survey trip to Dinosaur Cave in Comal County on January 18 yielded 339.9 meters. Marvin Miller, Joe Mitchell, John Moretti, Greg Mosier, Joe Schaertl, and Mio Spyker formed two teams to work on both the downstream and upstream surveys of Dinosaur River. The cave is now 1,400 meters long with going passage. John and Angela Young joined Houston Grotto members and Peter Sprouse in surveying Neel's Cave in Menard County.

Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) Grotto

At the November grotto meeting, Diana Tomchick reported that she, Bill Steele, and Sierra Shepard worked on the survey of a gypsum cave in Oklahoma. Juliana Rincon and Sierra Shepard attended the graffiti removal workshop at Wurzbach Bat Cave in San Antonio. The DFW Christmas party was held at Cave Without A Name and featured a trip into nearby Spring Creek Cave.

The featured program at January's meeting was a Zoom presentation by Mike Rodgers on Blue Spring Cave in Tennessee, the state's second longest at 35 miles.

Greater Houston Grotto

In May, the Houston Grotto continued a tradition started in 2022: taking a summer field trip abroad to experience caves in other parts of the world. This year's trip was led by Alberto Gaudio to the island of Sardinia. Read all about it in the article on **page 26**.

The grotto had a well-attended trip to the Deep & Punkin Cave Preserve in November. Those who made the trip were Bethany Carter, Tim Charlton, Ben Dau, Chelsea Dau, Alberto Gaudio, Lydia Hernandez, Megan Necessary, Andrew Reutten, Michael Scott, Cruz St. Peter, Will Stevenson, Brooke Tolson, and DeAndre Walker. Besides visiting the caves, the team cleaned and organized the tool shed, weeded around the preserve sign, and recorded some O₂ measurements in Punkin Cave with a multi-gas monitor.

Alexander Rush and Sadott Corona attended the graffiti removal workshop at Wurzbach Bat Cave in San Antonio. Alexander Rush, Will Tolsen, Brooke Tolsen, Alberto Gaudio, and Bethany Carter spent the weekend of December 7 & 8 at NCRC – Orientation to Cave Rescue.

Casey Campbell, Ben Dau, Chelsea Dau, Megan Necessary, Jack Ryan, Cruz St. Peter, and Brooke Tolson were in Menard County on the weekends of January 11 and 18 helping Peter Sprouse map Neels Cave. More than 1.3 km of resurvey and new survey were accomplished.

Lubbock Area Grotto

Ryan Marshall reported on a visit to Crystal Cave in Arizona at the November grotto meeting.

A number of grotto members participated in the High Guads Restoration Project at Cottonwood Cave on October 12–13. The project is led by Mike Mansur. They also had permits for recreational trips to Pink Dragon, Hidden, and Cottonwood Caves. Meeting minutes show that Brian Alger, Michelle Brooks, Lee Ann Dean, Ryan Marshall, Dakota Masoner, Pierson Miller, Joshua Mokry, and William Tucker were on the trip.

Ryan Marshall, Pierson Miller, and Joshua Mokry have been caving on a project near Yeso, New Mexico, ridgewalking, digging, and surveying. New caves and sinkholes have been discovered. A survey in Wedgie Cave found going stream passage. At Harrison Cave, on the Clyde Harrison Ranch, a successful dig resulted in new passage.

At the January meeting Matthew Plett reported on an unsuccessful trip to Helen's Cave – the trail to the cave was overgrown and could not be found. The trip will be rescheduled for another attempt. On January 18 – 20, the grotto organized a SPAR training weekend at Caverns of Sonora.

Aggie Speleological Society

(reported by Jenna Crabtree)

As the fall season unfolded, we made significant progress on our Critchfield Dig project and took members to Austin's Greenbelt to practice vertical caving techniques. In October, over 15 Aggies attended the Texas Cavers Reunion, where we helped run the dunk tank for the TCMA and claimed the titles in both the men's and women's mud wrestling competitions. A team of six Aggies also traveled to Oklahoma to continue work on the Nescatunga Cave Survey Project, while another group explored Powell's Cave for a recreational trip. We also ventured out to West Texas, where we continued surveying and digging on private land owned by a Texas A&M alum, with ongoing map drafting. We wrapped up the month with our legendary ASS-oween party.

November kicked off with two Aggies representing the grotto at the Graffiti Removal Workshop in Wurzbach Bat Cave in San Antonio, led by Val Hildreth-Werker. That same weekend, many of our members contributed to Drew Thompson's 6F Ranch dig project. Additionally, a group traveled to New Mexico to continue our volunteer work with the Cave Formation Repair Project at Lake Cave in Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Later in the month, we continued our tradition with the Deep & Punkin Nature Preserve trip, where we dropped pumpkins and got "deep in Deep." The month ended with Ass-giving, an inspiring dig at Oaks, and the Texas A&M vs. UT football game.

Underground Texas Grotto

Peter Sprouse has been working on drafting the Powell's Cave System maps and has been organizing trips to fill in missing survey. Two weekends in January were spent in the mud and water of Neel's Cave. 1.3 km was surveyed. Read all about it in the article on **page 18**.

The preceding was garnered from Facebook. I know a lot of interesting caving is being done by Austin-area cavers. I could just make things up, but I'd rather not. Unless you want to keep it a secret, send trip reports or minutes of your meetings to me at cave0miller@gmail.com.

TSA Karst Project at Colorado Bend

by Liz Frank



The Kinney family takes in the stunning views of the Colorado River. Shortly after this photo was taken, we narrowly escaped a heavy downpour by ducking into a nearby cave. Photo by Liz Frank.

Just a few hours north of Austin, the Ellenberger karst of Colorado Bend State Park has been beckoning Texas cavers since long before the park was officially a park. For decades, the TSA has had an agreement with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) to systematically search the park for caves and karst features, document what we find, and create surveys and maps. Documenting these resources helps the park develop a comprehensive cave management plan, which includes cave education and conservation.

So far, over 200 caves and 200 karst features have been found. The only other way to visit caves in the park is by booking a tour with caver-owned Nichols Outdoor Adventures (cbcaves.com). If caves aren't enough of a reason to lure you to the Hill Country, the park has 35 miles of trails for hiking and biking, is a mecca for birdwatching, and holds one of Texas' crown jewels – Gorman Falls. You can also kayak and fish on the Colorado River while looking for majestic bald eagles, recently spotted in the park... Who am I kidding? We want to find caves!!!

In the past year, we have been utilizing updated LiDAR data to search for caves. We have found several new caves, twice

as many karst features, and a few animal burrows. How big are the new caves, you ask? You will have to come out to the park to find out! Sometimes it kind of feels like cheating to use LiDAR data and walk right up to a new cave, but the thrill of exploration is just the same once you enter a place no one has ever been before.

The karst project runs from October through April, usually the second weekend of the month. Cavers of all skill levels are invited to join the project. Group tasks include ridgewalking, placing metal tags at cave entrances, surveying, sketching, and mapping. To join a project weekend, first visit www.cavetexas.org/cbsp and read all the Project Volunteer Information. There you will learn what you need to bring, what to expect, and how to sign up. Group size is limited to 20 participants a month. We have our own Caver Camp, a private area for project volunteers, and, if weather permits, there will be a campfire and star gazing. The best part of TSA weekend (besides the caves) is building friendships and plotting future caving adventures with other Texas cavers! Hope to see you at the park soon!



Ryan Hoffman admires Mossy Rocky Cave. Photo by Liz Frank.



Liz Frank squeezes into Calcite Cuffie Cave. Photo by Will Quast.



New caver Seth Kitchens finds abandoned cave booty! Photo by Liz Frank.



New caver Leo Cahill was determined to reach the bottom of this newly found cave whether he lost his pants or not! Photo by Liz Frank.

TCMA: 2024 Progress and 2025 Goals

by Jay Jorden, TCMA Secretary

TCMA Members Meet at the Texas Cavers Reunion.

The Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA) Board of Directors and officers met in January to elect new leadership, approve a budget, and set goals and objectives for 2025. This follows a year of progress in which TCMA received a prestigious national conservation award and expanded its preserves.

Congratulations to our new TCMA officers elected at the board meeting:

Rachael Lindsey, *President*

Jim "Crash" Kennedy, *Vice President*

Ben Dau, *Treasurer*

Jay Jorden, *Secretary*

Regrettably, outgoing President Joe Ranzau has stepped down because of personal commitments, but he will remain as a director. The board issued a statement thanking him for his exemplary service leading the organization.

Among new goals and objectives for 2025 are strengthening outreach to members and stakeholders; building a strong TCMA brand; pursuing new cave acquisitions; and improving our existing system of preserves along with how visitors interact with them. That includes enhancing an online permitting program for preserve visitation. Members can look forward to an enhanced website and new logo as part of the TCMA brand focus, among other upgrades to raise our visibility as an influential conservation organization. A new press kit being finalized will also expand TCMA's visibility to conservationists and the public. Board member Scott Nicholson, who has been working with fellow director Cruz St. Peter on branding, said, "We need to look like a conservation organization that owns millions of dollars worth of critical preserves and infrastructure – because we are. This is very important."



The new Godwin Ranch Preserve Guzzler with Roger Myers, Garrett Smith, and Katherine Jaeger. Photo by Eléonore Le Corvaisier.

Both directors have worked with a graphic designer on a new logo and brand identity that will be replicated across all TCMA preserves and communications. As part of that, the organization's 14 preserves will all have new kiosks with signage and site-specific information for a consistent look and feel. The initiative's rollout, which includes continued work to mark property boundaries, will be staggered across this year and in 2026.

Thanks to the efforts of volunteers from TCMA and an Eagle Scout, a new kiosk has already been built at Godwin Ranch Preserve in Williamson County. Also, Preserve Manager Eléonora Le Corvaisier reported that a yearlong project to build a wildlife watering station was completed in December. In other preserve news from 2024, public education and outreach continued at Whirlpool Cave Preserve in Austin, including partnering with Hill Country Conservancy during a fun run and outing in which 75 people visited the cave. Also, multiple survey teams entered Brooksjack Cave on the Carta Valley Preserve.



Godwin Ranch Preserve Caving. Photo by Eléonore Le Corvaisier.



*The Hill Country Conservancy
visits Whirlpool Cave.
Photo by Liz Frank.*

A successful two-day graffiti mitigation workshop was organized at one of TCMA's newest preserves, Wurzbach Bat Cave, a San Antonio property acquired in 2024 from TxDOT. The workshop was led by Val Hildreth-Werker, head of the National Speleological Society (NSS) Conservation Division and co-editor of *Cave Conservation and Restoration*. The TCMA workshop was also supported by the American Cave Conservation Association. Read more about the workshop on **page 22**.

In July 2024, the NSS presented its prestigious Group Conservation Award to TCMA at the national caving organization's convention in Sewanee, TN. The Awards Committee, chaired by Dallas-Fort Worth caver Bill Steele, cited TCMA's efforts to save Honey Creek Cave from harm. Among plans for 2025, comprehensive management plans will be finalized for each TCMA preserve, using templates for the Carta Valley Caves and Lost Oasis preserves. On a related note, updated agreements are under review for O-9 Water Well and Amazing Maze Cave with The University of Texas System Lands, as well as a Robber Baron Cave Habitat Conservation Plan.

Along with the new officers, current TMCA board members are: Joe Ranzau, Rob Bisset, Greg Mosier, Bree Jameson, Eléonore Le Corvaisier, Jenna Crabtree, Scott Nicholson, Tobin Hays, Drew Thompson, Ethan Perrine, and Cruz St. Peter.

Keep in touch with TCMA at our website (www.tcmacaves.org) and on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/groups/46868704142).

Looking forward to a new year filled with caving and progress!

HIDDEN WATERS ~ HIDDEN LIFE

NATIONAL CAVE & KARST MANAGEMENT SYMPOSIUM

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Great Basin
National Park Foundation



Hosted by the Western Cave Conservancy

Photo by Gretchen Baker, NPS/GRBA

The TSS Treasury of Forgotten Caves

by Joe Mitchell

Just a few Texas caves get the vast majority of regular caver visitation. Many more caves are recorded but still need complete exploration.

The Texas Speleological Survey (TSS) maintains a database of more than 7,000 caves across the state, with records dating back to the TSS founding in 1960. Some of these caves have only been visited a single time, or perhaps not for 40 or 50 years. There are potentially significant caves for which little information exists. These caves are ripe for further exploration and discovery but require a little footwork to identify the present owner and gain permission for access. Existence of these caves does little good hidden away in the TSS archives, so in this recurring column, we will present some promising candidates. In this article, we look at a few poorly explored caves in the San Antonio area.

In northeastern Bexar County is the old Classen Ranch (also known as the Oakdale Ranch). One of the caves on this ranch is Corkscrew Cave, which is horizontally and vertically extensive and needs a new survey. It has a known length of more than 300 m and depth of more than 45 m. Much of the cave is muddy and wet, offering a fine variety of walking, crawling, and climbing experiences. No one has attempted to push the water crawl. It has a sump that has not been evaluated for diving potential. The cave has probably not been visited since the early 1970s. It is now surrounded by a housing development and cut off, in that regard, from the other former Classen caves: Baling Wire, Buzzard's Roost, Loose Rock, Tobacco Can, and Whistledrop. They may all be on different properties from each other, but all need surveying, GPS, etc.

In Comal County is Bear Creek Bat Cave. Bill Russell surveyed it about 40 years ago and created a pencil draft of the map, but the notes are lost. The map is damaged and the end of the cave, probably the last 20–30 m is missing. A resurvey is needed. The cave is more than 500 m in length and is a single, long meandering passage that averages about 6 m wide by 1 to 1.5 m high – and it has a bonus. The cave ends in breakdown where it is truncated by a ravine. There is a sink on the other side of the ravine that marks the continuation of the cave. A dig there could lead into a major cave, but someone needs to evaluate the sink to see how big an effort it might be.

In Kendall County, Guenther's Cave No. 1 has the potential to lead to a major water cave. The low-level passage goes at least 15 m to the southwest as a rugged crawlway and continues unexplored. To the northeast, the passage has been surveyed 29 m to water and becomes a water crawl about 7 m further. At an undetermined distance beyond the crawl, the passage enlarges to continue with deep water and is unexplored. It was last visited by Randy Waters and Kurt Menking in 1983 when they dug open the water crawl.

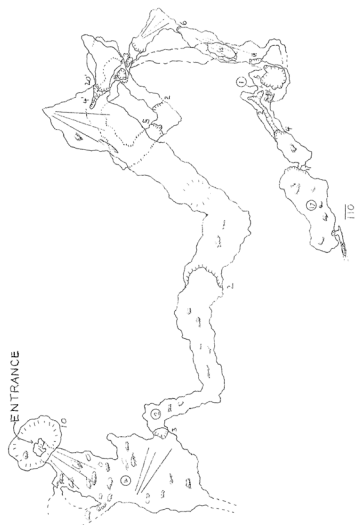
If you are interested in learning more about these caves or trying to establish access for further exploration, please contact Joe Mitchell, Marvin Miller, or any TSS director. Happy cave hunting!

Joe Mitchell, TSS President

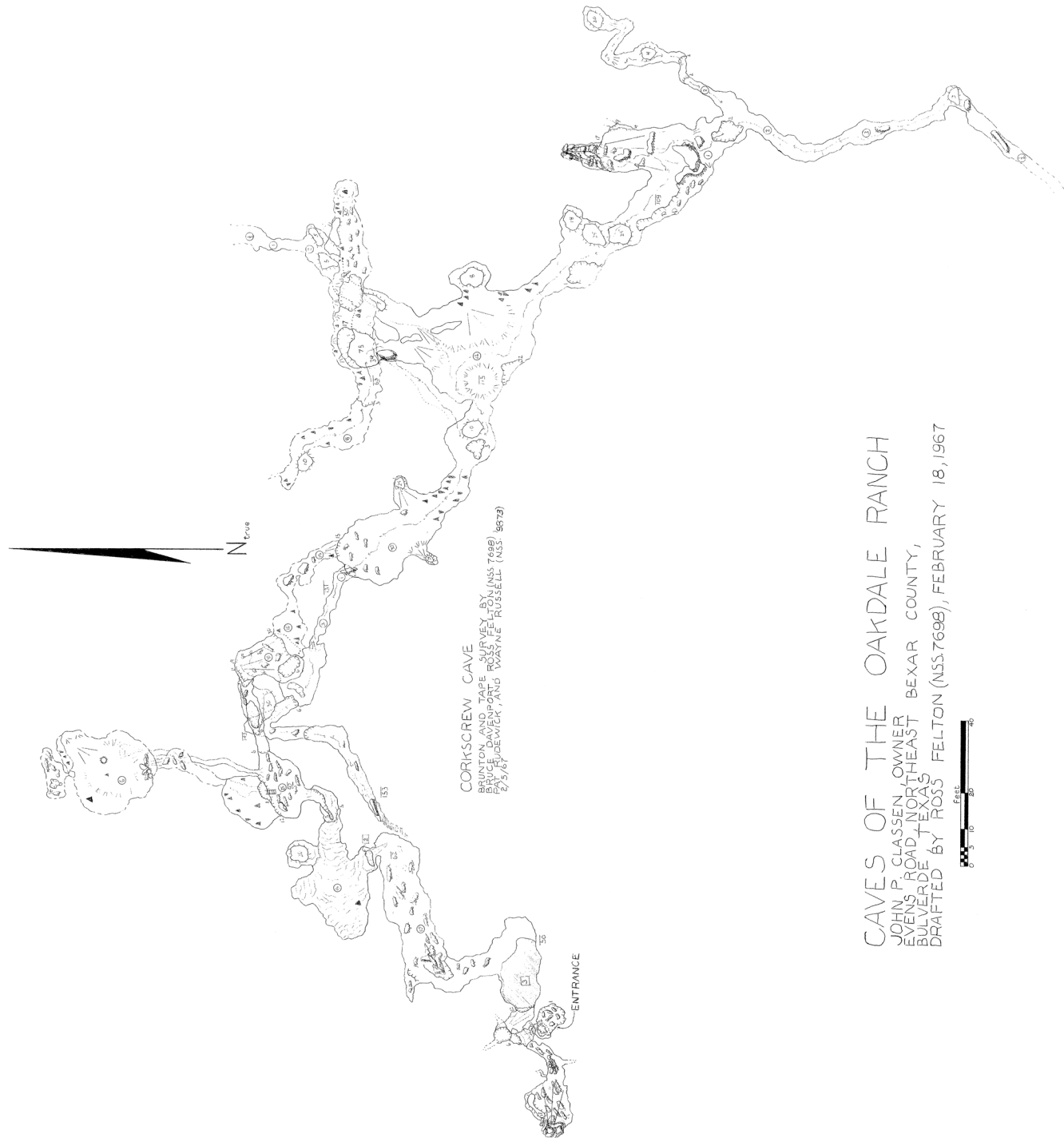
joe@mitchellcave.com

Marvin Miller, TSS Database Manager

cave0miller@gmail.com



LOOSER ROCK CAVE
BRUNTON AND TAPE SURVEY BY
BRUCE DAVENPORT, ROSS FELTON (NSS 7698)
9/14/66
PAT RUDWICK



CORKSCREW CAVE
BRUNTON AND TAPE SURVEY BY
BRUCE DAVENPORT, ROSS FELTON (NSS 7698)
PAT RUDWICK, AND WAYNE RUSSELL (NSS 8673)
2/5/67

ENTRANCE



WHISTLEDROP CAVE
BRUNTON AND TAPE SURVEY BY
BUTCH SURMAN (NSS 9011)
9/11/66

ENTRANCE

CAVES OF THE OAKDALE RANCH
JOHN P. CLASSEN, OWNER
EVEN'S ROAD, NORTHEAST
BEXAR COUNTY,
BULVERDE, TEXAS
DRAFTED BY ROSS FELTON (NSS 7698), FEBRUARY 18, 1967



Neel's Cave Resurrection Project 2025

by Peter Sprouse, Cruz St. Peter, Brooke Tolson

Project Background (Peter Sprouse)

Neel's Cave is the downstream part of Powell's Cave. Powell's Cave is the second longest cave in Texas at 25,368 m. Neel's was connected to Powell's by a sump dive conducted by George Veni and Randy Waters in 1982, but the 300-m-long connection passage was not surveyed. Neel's Cave has a surveyed length of 3275 m, having been mapped in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is essentially one long flowing stream passage. It was reportedly explored downstream to a sump. The stream has been traced to Wolf (Coughlan's) Spring, 1.5 km to the east, which comes out of a short cave.

I had met Eric, the new owner of Neel's Cave, a year previously, and shared the partial map that I had been able to draft from what was usable from the old survey notes. Our immediate goal was to resurvey what remained of the previously mapped passage, then try to continue mapping in the upstream and downstream directions.

Project Trip #1: January 10–12, 2025 (Cruz St. Peter)

A few years ago, cave diver Ryan Hoffman and a team of eager tank haulers decided to check the dive lead from Powell's to Neel's that had been connected many decades previously, but which still needed to be surveyed. The team was eager, but bad air canceled the trip quickly. Ryan eventually made it back to the sump at Powell's, but he decided that the dive needed to be pushed from the Neel's side due to the direction of water flow silting out the visibility from the Powell's side.

Fast forward to January 2025. Peter Sprouse organized a trip to help resurvey Neel's Cave and assess the dive lead toward Powell's. After some cancellations and personnel moving to the next trip weekend, we ended up with a smaller team than originally expected, with a primary goal of resurveying rather than scoping the dive lead. The entrance into Neel's is downclimbable for most cavers, but a few of us needed rope and vertical gear to confidently access the stream passage. After Ryan assessed the upstream squeeze toward the sump, he decided that a smaller cave diver should check the upstream sump.



Jack Reader looks down stream.
Photo by Peter Sprouse.

We eventually broke into the following teams:

Upstream 1: Casey McCampbell, Chelsea Dau, and JT Shelley
(Houston, Texas)

Upstream 2: Jack Reader (Houston, Texas) and Peter Sprouse
(Austin, Texas)

Downstream 1: Liz Hoffman and Ryan Hoffman
(Chattanooga, Tennessee)

Downstream 2: Aria Mildice (Washington) and Cruz St. Peter
(Houston, Texas)

All teams were underground surveying for about five hours. In total, we surveyed 636 meters between the four teams. Everyone experienced symptoms of bad air. The upstream teams measured 2.67% CO₂, while the downstream survey teams measured 1.5%.

Each team exited the cave before dark, and we enjoyed a delicious meal prepared by our fantastic host, Eric. Fun stories of caver lore were told around the campfire after dinner.

Project Trip #2: January 17–19, 2025 (Brooke Tolson)

On the second trip weekend, eight cavers travelled to Menard to continue the resurvey of Neel’s Cave. On Friday night, we set up camp near the ranch house and enjoyed a fire with our wonderful host, Eric. Saturday morning, we made the short drive to the cave entrance with a quick stop on the way to investigate a LiDAR lead, which proved unfruitful.

We split into two teams, both surveying downstream:

Team 1: Peter Sprouse, Emma Kate Lowe, Angela Young, and John Young

Team 2: Aria Mildice, Ben Dau, Megan Necessary, and Brooke Tolson

A few bats clung to the cave walls near the entrance. After a week of colder temperatures, the air quality in the cave had improved since the weekend before. We only felt slightly affected during the crawl out, if at all. The cave was warm, and most of our team felt comfortable in a farmer john wetsuit. Together, the two teams surveyed 686m. After exiting the cave and driving back to camp, Eric fixed us a delicious, hot meal.

This article is original content produced by human minds — it was not produced by means of any A.I. tools.



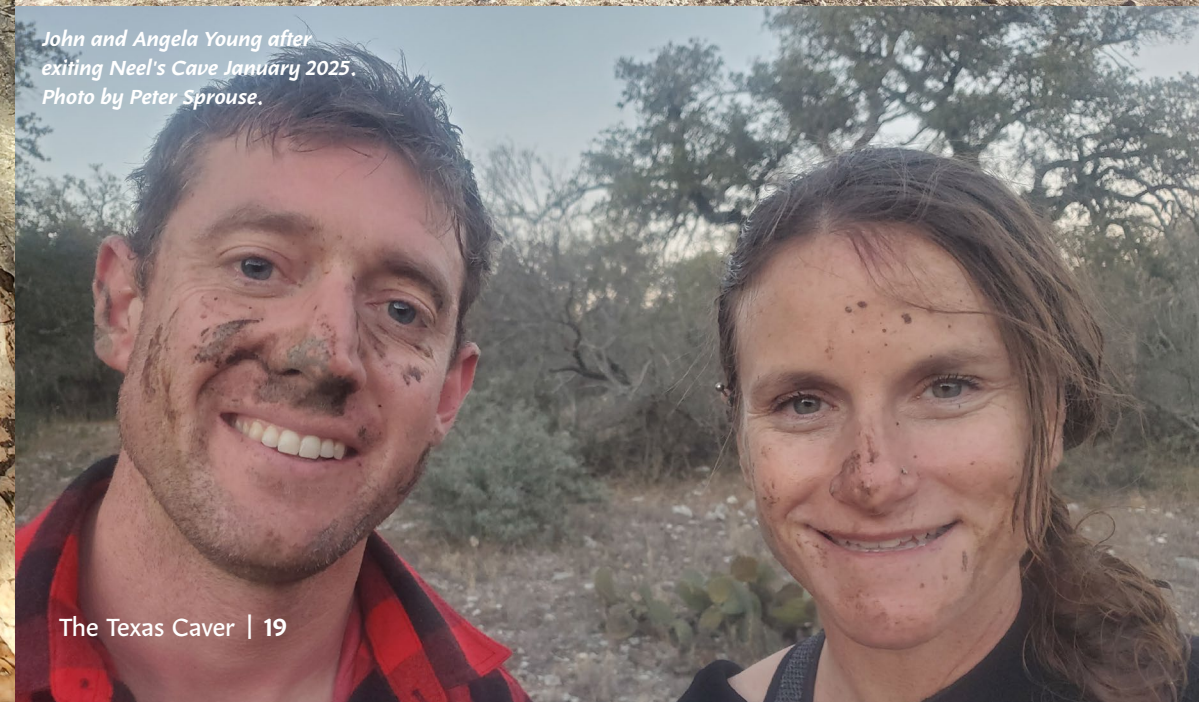
Ryan Hoffman at entrance to Neel's Cave January 2025. Photo by Peter Sprouse.



Upstream Survey Team: Chelsea Dau, JT Shelley, Casey Campbell. Photo by Chelsea Dau.



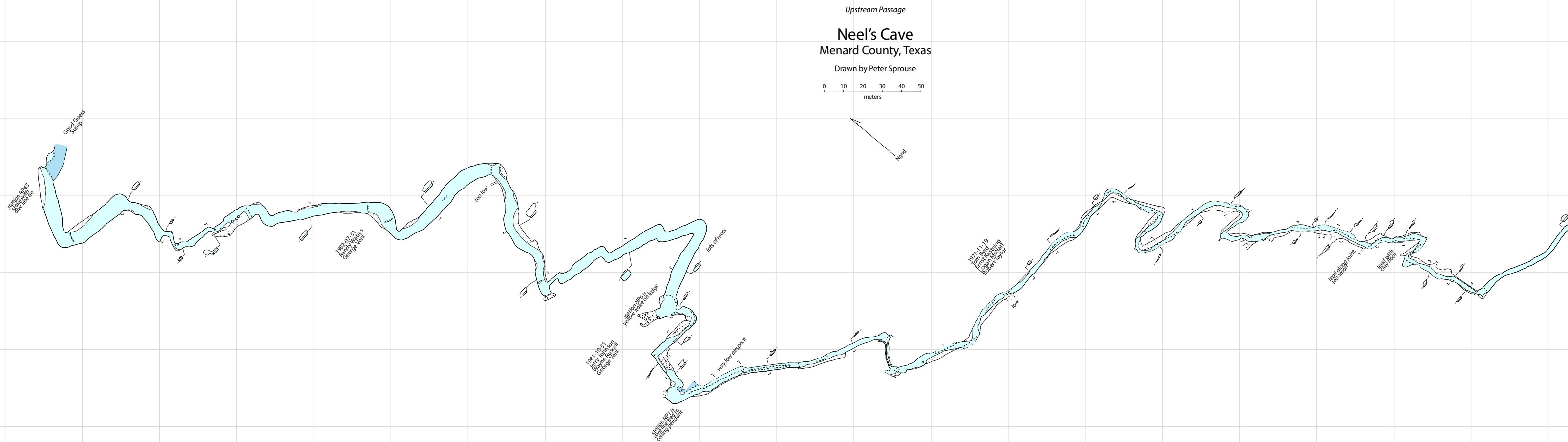
Neels Group 2. Photo by Eric Bischofhausen.



John and Angela Young after exiting Neel's Cave January 2025. Photo by Peter Sprouse.

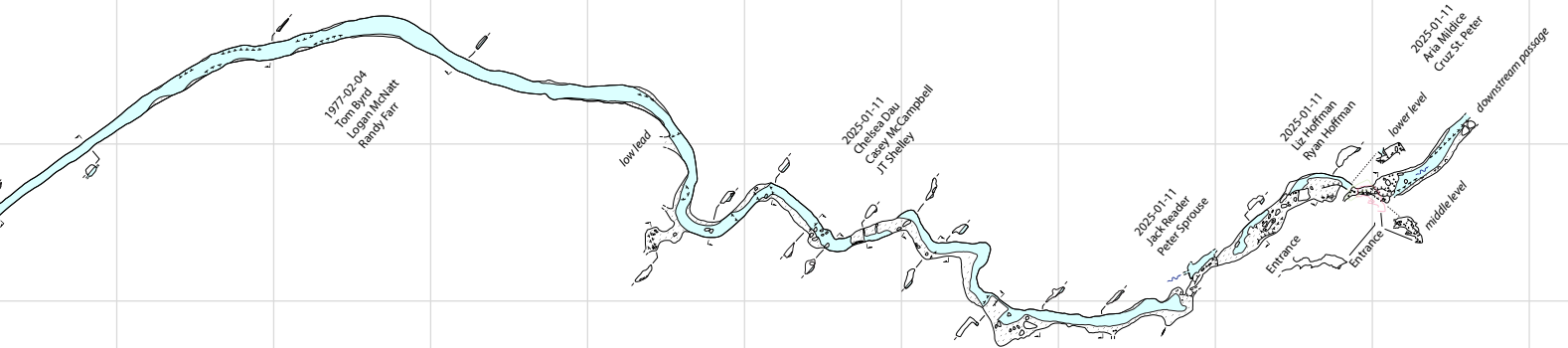
Neel's Cave

Drawn by Peter Sprouse





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Workshop at Wurzbach: Graffiti Gone!

by Jennifer Arbeiter

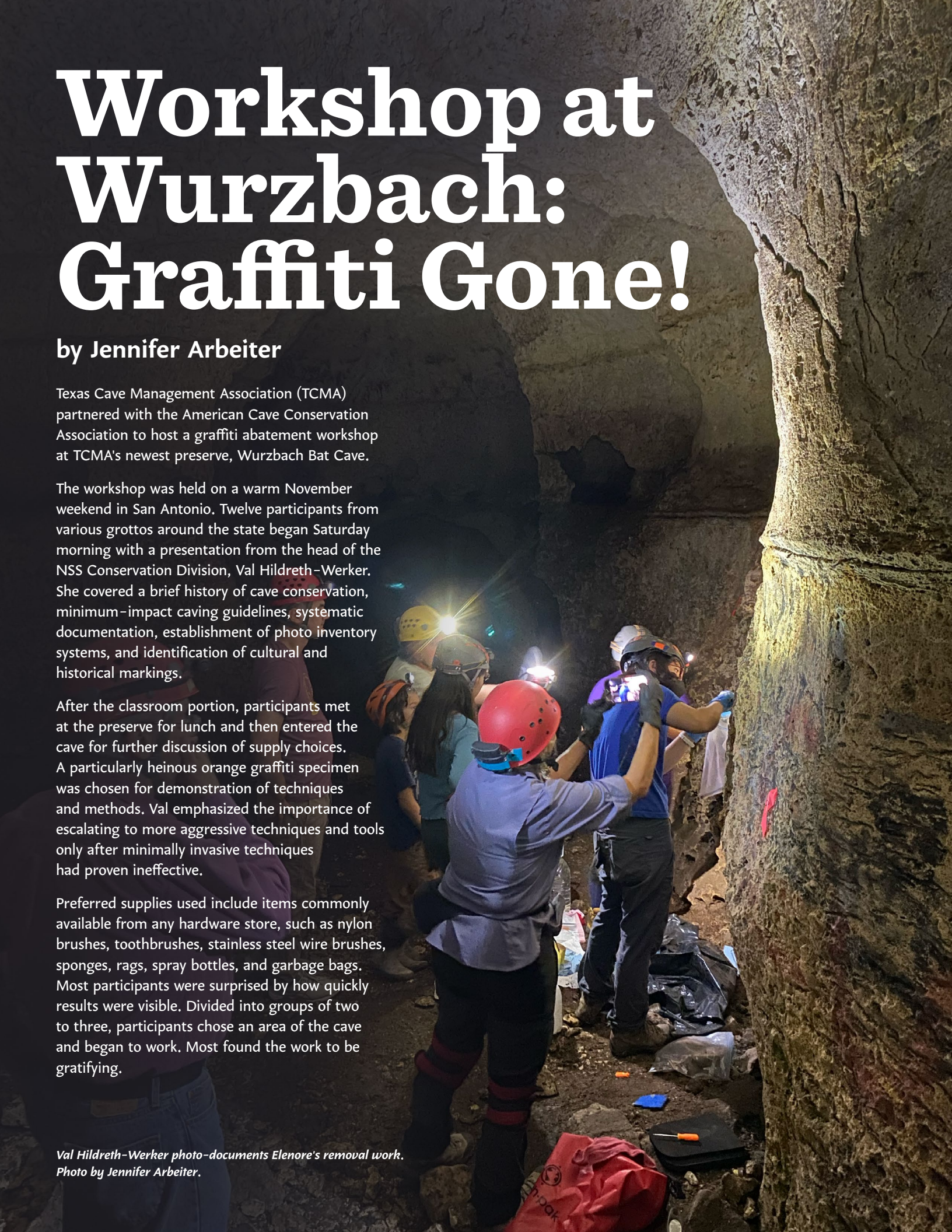
Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA) partnered with the American Cave Conservation Association to host a graffiti abatement workshop at TCMA's newest preserve, Wurzbach Bat Cave.

The workshop was held on a warm November weekend in San Antonio. Twelve participants from various grottos around the state began Saturday morning with a presentation from the head of the NSS Conservation Division, Val Hildreth-Werker. She covered a brief history of cave conservation, minimum-impact caving guidelines, systematic documentation, establishment of photo inventory systems, and identification of cultural and historical markings.

After the classroom portion, participants met at the preserve for lunch and then entered the cave for further discussion of supply choices. A particularly heinous orange graffiti specimen was chosen for demonstration of techniques and methods. Val emphasized the importance of escalating to more aggressive techniques and tools only after minimally invasive techniques had proven ineffective.

Preferred supplies used include items commonly available from any hardware store, such as nylon brushes, toothbrushes, stainless steel wire brushes, sponges, rags, spray bottles, and garbage bags. Most participants were surprised by how quickly results were visible. Divided into groups of two to three, participants chose an area of the cave and began to work. Most found the work to be gratifying.

*Val Hildreth-Werker photo-documents Elenore's removal work.
Photo by Jennifer Arbeiter.*





Alexander Rush and Sandott Corona organize their supplies.
Photo by Jennifer Arbeiter.

"I thought we would toil for a long time for mediocre results, but I was very surprised to see how quickly the graffiti disappeared. Our team was able to work on three panels instead of the expected one. With enough people, we could make most of the graffiti recede into the background in two weekends," said Eléonore Le Corvaisier of the Underground Texas Grotto.

Jenna Crabtree, former Aggie Speleological Society president, explained, "I found the restoration workshop particularly rewarding for reasons beyond simply restoring Wurzbach to its former glory. It provided a unique opportunity to reconnect with fellow cavers, many of whom I see only rarely.

"There's something special about spending a Saturday and Sunday doing purposeful, physically easy work in close quarters, allowing time to catch up on each other's lives and share stories," she said "Restoration not only restores cave features but also strengthens the friendships that make our caving community so meaningful. I look forward to taking the skills I learned and recreating these experiences through Aggie Grotto restoration trips in the future."

During this weekend, a bird survey was also completed by Zachary Tonzetich of the San Antonio Audubon Society. Fifteen bird species were observed, including one long-billed thrasher, a resident of Texas brush country with a northernmost range just reaching the southern edge of the Edwards Plateau.

Curious neighbors stopped by to see what was happening at the property, and one family excitedly agreed to the offer of a tour. It was an excellent opportunity to establish good relationships with neighbors and yielded the promise of some future digs on a nearby property. TCMA hopes to build many more connections in the future.

Each participant has committed to lead future work groups for graffiti abatement. If you want to get involved, please contact your local grotto's participant.

Val is the co-editor of *Cave Conservation and Restoration*, which is available for purchase in the NSS bookstore. We were honored to have her lead this workshop and appreciative of her contribution to cave conservation efforts. Cave Softly!



Juliana Rincon and Diana Tomchick carefully brush away paint while Alan Cobb supervises.
Photo by Jennifer Arbeiter.

*Alexander Rush (left) and Sadott Corona (right)
using a dry brush technique to remove spray paint.
Photo by Alexander Rush.*





Eleonore Le Corvaisier while Tobin Simpson catches flakes.
Photo by Jennifer Arbeiter.



Val Hildreth-Werker demonstrates soft-brush technique, capturing paint flakes for later disposal.
Photo by Jim Kennedy.



Work Areas and Supplies.
Photo by Sierra Shepard.



Jette Polasek and Kras Kennedy-Avila employ the techniques they learned during the workshop to bring back the natural beauty of Wurzbach Bat Cave.
Photo by Unknown.

Greater Houston Grotto Sardinia Caving Trip 2024

by Alberto Gaudio, Alexander Rush, and Bethany Carter

Greater Houston Grotto of the National Speleological Society

Since 2022, the Greater Houston Grotto (GHG) has organized a caving trip abroad with the aim of learning more about the world's karst systems and fostering an international network of cavers to share knowledge, techniques, and experiences. In 2024, the GHG Summer Field Trip took place between May 15 and May 26 in Sardinia – a beautiful Italian island rich in culture, history, nature, and karst systems. The trip was a great cooperation among eight GHG participants and a number of cavers from Sardinia and other Italian Regions and Grottos.

Sardinia is a real geologic wonder: the result of multiple and complex phases of tectonic deformation of a Paleozoic metamorphic and igneous basement overlaid by Mesozoic to Quaternary sediments and volcanic rocks (Carmignani *et al.*, 2001).

The caving trip was focused on two karstic regions located on the eastern side of the island where two large Jurassic–Cretaceous limestone patches host two major karst systems: the Gulf of Orosei and Supramonte (Figure 1).

Note: For some (not all) caves in Sardinia, you must contact local authorities and/or local grottos to have access granted. If you plan a caving trip in this region, it is suggested to search and collect all the information and procedures in advance to access the caves. As always, remember to “Leave only (few) footprints and take only pictures.”

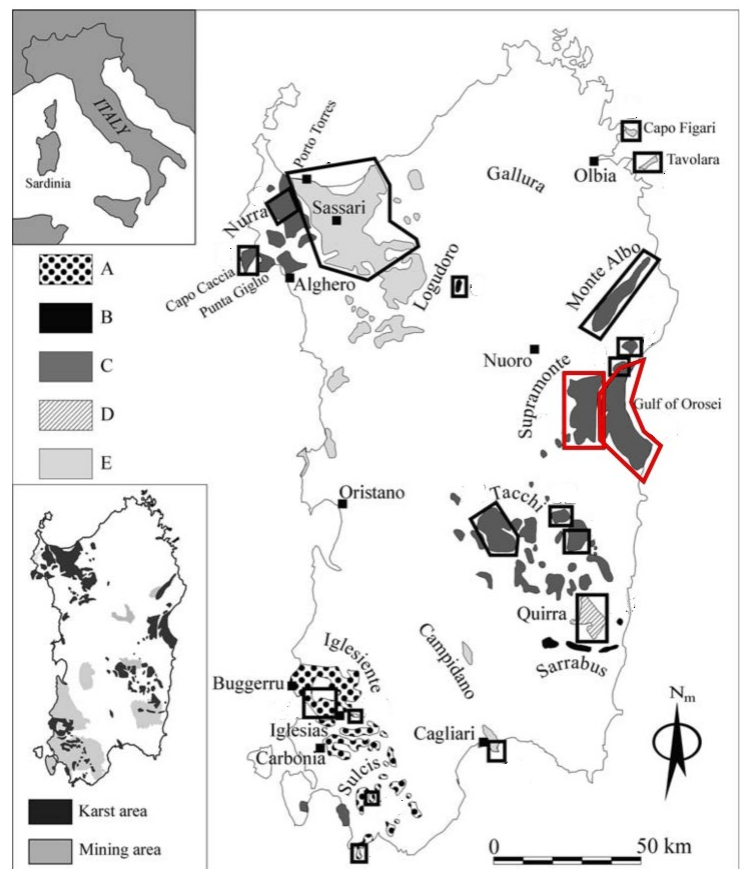


Figure 1: Location map of karst areas of Sardinia. Areas marked with red color: Supramonte and Gulf of Orosei karst massifs. A) Metalimestones and metadolostones of Cambrian age (Iglesiente–Sulcis); B) metalimestones of Devonian and Carboniferous age; C) dolostones, limestones and dolomitic limestones of Mesozoic age (Supramonte, Monte Albo, Gulf of Orosei, Nurra, Tacchi); D) nummulithic limestones of Eocene age (Saltodi Quirra); E) limestones and marly limestones of Miocene age (Sassari, Campidano). (Modified from De Waele, 2009).

Gulf of Orosei

The first part of the trip was dedicated to exploring the Gulf of Orosei karst massif, and our headquarters for operations was set in an apartment rented in the town of Urzulei.

The Gulf of Orosei is located on the east coast of Sardinia where Mesozoic dolostone and limestones, overlaying the Paleozoic basement, outcrop for more than 200 km² and along more than 37 km of the coastline. The limestone rocks are the results of a Jurassic transgression that persisted for approximately 100 million years. In this shallow marine environment, dolostone and limestone were deposited forming a stratigraphic succession more than 800 m thick that was involved in a compressional tectonic system around 20–15 Ma reaching the present structural settings. From north to south, this carbonatic massif is incised by deep canyons discharging on famous beaches (Cala Fuili, Cala Luna, Cala Sisine, Cala Goloritzé) (Sanna & DeWaele, 2010). Such canyons are generally dry and become active in heavy rainfall conditions (Cossu et al, 2007). The Gulf of Orosei has over 400 caves known for a total development of approximately 100 km, with the recharge systems located in the higher alpine karst and the discharge systems located at and below the coastline (Sanna & DeWaele, 2010). While the alpine caves in the higher portion of the Gulf of Orosei karst area are dominated by erosion and dissolution processes operated by meteoric waters, speleogenesis in the coastal and subsea caves is enhanced at the freshwater–saltwater boundary by mixing corrosion processes.

Codula Fuili

Codula is a Sardinian dialect word used to indicate a canyon. Therefore, a good start for stretching the legs and warming up the vertical gear was the descent of the Fuili Canyon. The access is quite easy, since the car can be parked with a less than 15-minute walk from the head of the canyon. The best logistics are to leave one car at the exit of the canyon (at the entrance of the beautiful Fuili beach) to be used as a shuttle to retrieve the car left at the head of the canyon. This canyon opens in the Mesozoic limestone. It is generally dry and, as mentioned, becomes active only in case of intense rainfall. Looking around at the canyon walls, you can immediately have the feeling of being in a karst area, due to the cave-like morphologies and several holes that likely discharge groundwater in case of heavy rains. The canyon is therefore



Figure 2: Descending the Canyon Codula Fuili. Photo by Yee-Bien Chuah.

quite easy to run across, and it is a spectacular sequence of rappels, the majority of which are around 20 m (60 ft) high (Figure 2). The full descent takes around five hours with this large group of people. After the last rappel, there is about one hour walking on a gentle slope to get to the exit at the termination of the canyon: the beautiful Fuili beach. This is the best exit of a canyon ever, because you can get rid of the harness and gear to swim in the incredible light blue crystal-clear waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea in an unbelievable landscape. The beach has an exit in the hydrographic left, where a steep stair is carved in the flank of the canyon which brings you to the parking area where the shuttle car should have been left.

*Figure 4: A majestic formation hides tiny helectites in its folds.
Photo by Alessio Rossi.*



Grotta del Bue Marino (Monk Seal Cave)

The Grotta del Bue Marino is one of the major cave systems in Sardinia. It opens at sea level, and the entrance can only be reached from the sea. The cave system is divided into three branches: North Branch, Middle Branch, and South Branch. While the North Branch is one of the most famous show caves in the region, the others can only be accessed by cavers and researchers (to get access, a specific request must be sent at least a month in advance to the Dorgali municipality). Having all the paperwork and permits in place to explore the South Branch, we sailed with two rubber boats from Cala Gonone, heading to the cave entrance. After a 20-minute sail, we were alongside the cave entrance dock (used for the show cave). Also, it should be noted that there is a cellular phone signal at the entrance dock in case of emergency. The cave is horizontal, and the only gear required (other than caving helmet and lights) is a wetsuit. The cave can be described as a big gallery about 50 feet wide with a majority of flooded swimming sections and some dry walking passages that runs for approximately 4 km (Figure 3). In the dry sections, sand banks shaped by occasional water flow indicate that also these sections are flooded in heavy rain events. The cave is extremely decorated with magnificent formations (Figure 4). One word: Bellissima.

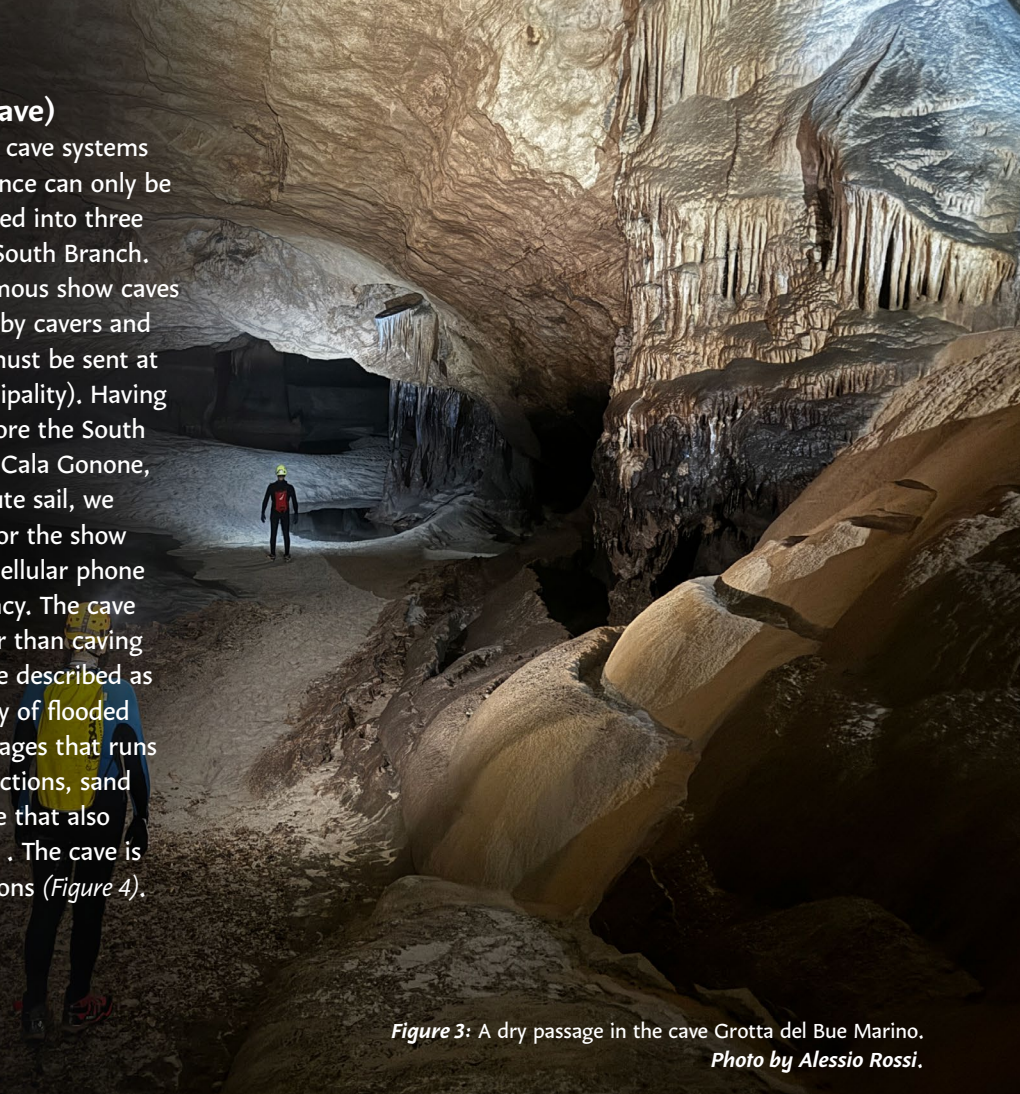
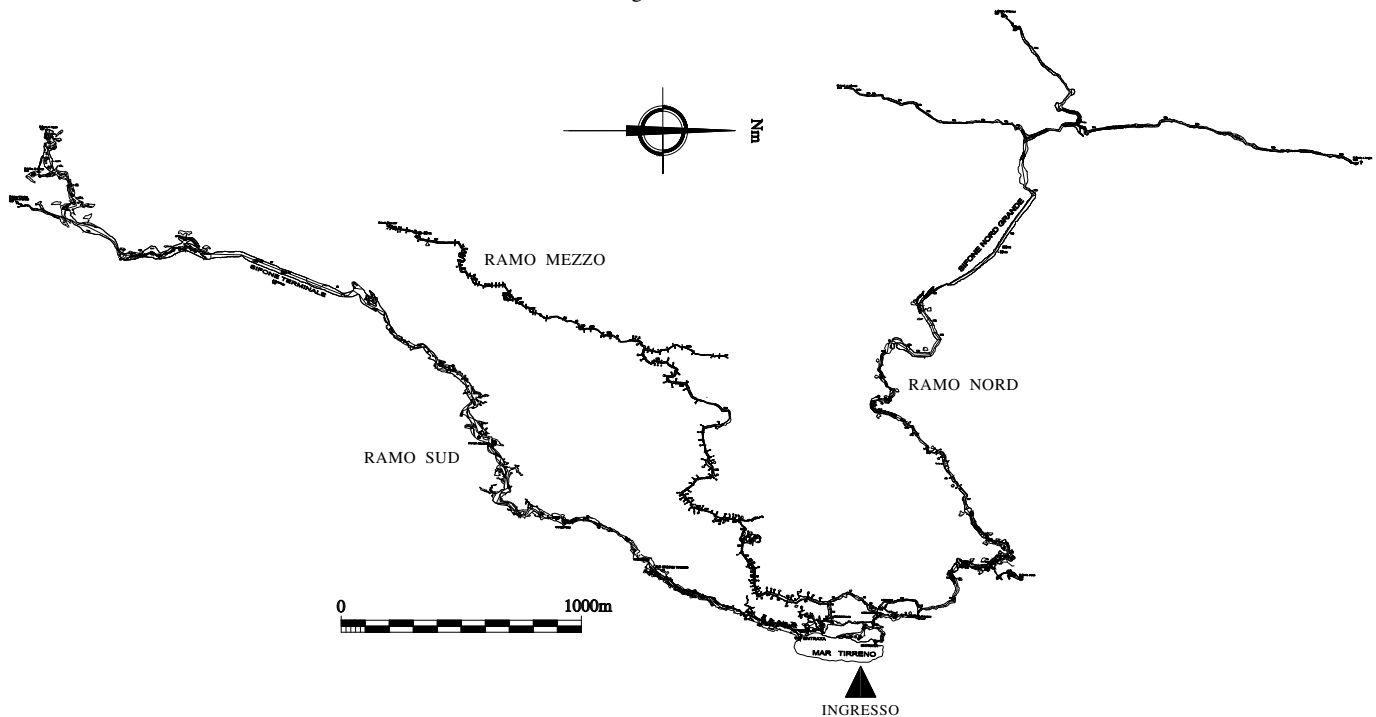
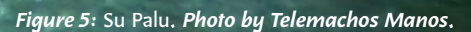


Figure 3: A dry passage in the cave Grotta del Bue Marino.
Photo by Alessio Rossi.

0012 SA\NU GROTTA DEL BUE MARINO
Dorgali, Cala Gonone





Su Palu is a cave, part of the karst system Codula Ilune of the Gulf of Orosei. The cave has a total development of 15 km and a depth over 150 m. The cars can be left in a parking spot at the end of the road, next to a creek. Then a 15-minute walk on a gently climbing trail in the woods brings you to the cave entrance. The entrance (protected by a gate) opens in a diaculis. One hundred feet of “walking” leads to the first rope drop in the same diaculis (approximately 120 feet with three rebelayes). The repel

Greater Houston Grotto Sardinia Caving Trip 2024

Supramonte

The second part of the trip was dedicated to exploring the Supramonte karst massif and our headquarters for operations was set in the Nuoro Grotto's (Gruppo Grotte Nuorese) fieldhouse in the Lanaitto Valley.

The Supramonte is a karst massif made of Jurassic–Cretaceous dolostone and limestone overlaying the Paleozoic crystalline basement. The area extends for approximately 170 km² and occupies the east–central part of the island. The speleogenesis is mainly driven by rock dissolution from meteoric waters flowing mostly at the contact between the Mesozoic carbonatic rocks and the basement rocks, and following the main fault patterns (Cabras et al, 2008). More than 400 caves are known in Supramonte. Water circulates through the system via dominant conduits, which convey it from the distal recharge area in the south to the main outlets in the north, forming an interconnected system. (Sanna & De Waele, 2016). The major and best known spring of the karst system is the Su Gologone Spring in the Lanaitto valley, on the northern side of the karst massif, while other springs are permanently drowned because of a dam forming an artificial lake in the Cedrino River. (Figure 6).

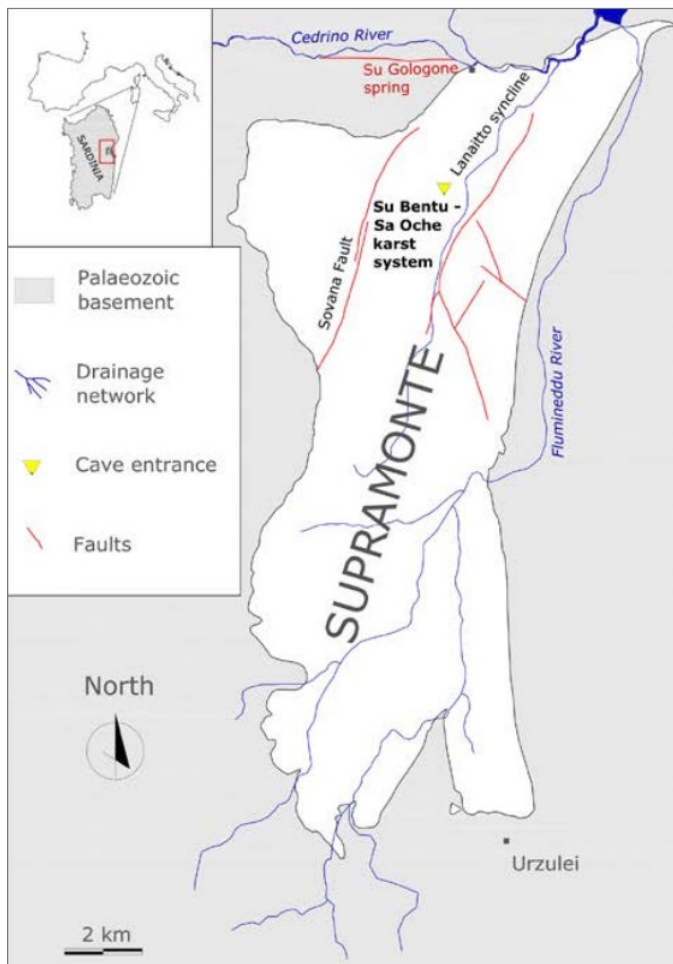


Figure 6: Sketch map of Supramonte karst massif (white area). Yellow triangle indicates the Su Bentu Cave entrance location. Modified from Sanna & De Waele, 2016.



Figure 7: The ruins of the Nuragic Village of Tiscali. Photo by Alessio Rossi.

Tiscali Archaeological Site

Sardinia has a long and fascinating history since the island has been inhabited since at least the Stone Age. Among others, one of the most fascinating and mysterious civilizations of the island was the Nuragic Civilization that lasted from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age (approximately 1700–700 BC). Traces and ruins of this civilization can be found in the archaeological sites spread across the whole island. In the Lanaitto Valley, located in the northern part of the Supramonte karst region, a one-hour walk on a trail leads to the summit of Mount Tiscali, where a large karstic sinkhole opens up. Within the sinkhole is an archaeological site that consists of the remains of a round dwelling of an ancient village, located mainly all around the sinkhole's perimeter walls (Figure 7). The village was settled by the Nuragic civilization approximately between the 15th–14th century BC and the 9th–8th century BC, even though it is believed it was re-populated and restored also during the Roman Age.

Walking and observing this village are definitely exciting experiences, giving one the sensation of having traveled through time. Return to the valley floor by another trail on the other side of the mount requires a steep descent to a deep, incised creek that leads back to the starting point. The whole trail takes approximately three to four hours, including the visit to the archaeological site: It is a great way to spend an afternoon.



Figure 8: Su Bentu Cave. Photo by Alexander Rush.

Su Bentu (The Wind)

Su Bentu “The Wind” is a spacious cave located in the northwestern part of the Supramonte karst massif. Su Bentu is over 15 km in length, with passages still being explored and surveyed. The cave system is well-known and is connected to the Su Gologone spring. In an interesting note, the European Space Agency (ESA) in cooperation with ESA CAVES uses Su Bentu for training purposes, to help train astronauts. The cave is spacious and isolated enough for astronauts to conduct extended tests in isolation, deep inside the cave. The objective of our trip was to travel to a large room in the cave that was occupied in 2016 by various international astronauts

during a training mission. The trip into the cave began with a short, 10-meter rappel and a small hike, before beginning an 800-meter traverse with multiple rappels. The cave was awe-inspiring in its depth and breadth, with passages over 80 meters tall and small ledges that must be traversed 50 meters above the spring below (*Figure 8*). The cave is made easy to navigate due to it being extensively and permanently rigged with bolts, ropes, and steel cables. The entire trip to the base camp and back out took approximately eight hours, with an hour break to have a nice lunch consisting of locally made cheeses and capicollo.



LIVELLO LAGHI





Figure 9: Cedrino River. Photo by Alexander Rush.

Su Gologone Springs – Cedrino River

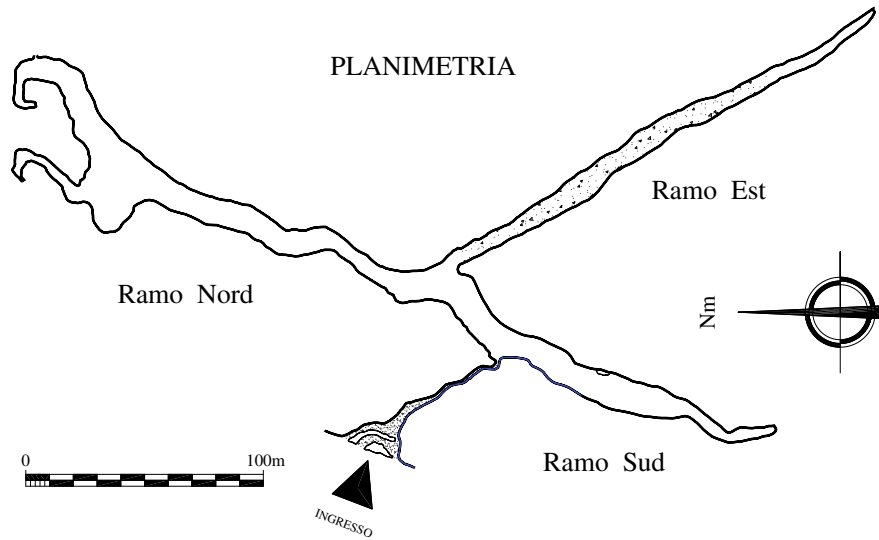
Su Gologone is the main spring where the waters from the Supramonte cave system are discharged. The spring is used to supply water to the nearby towns and settlements and can be reached with an easy path set up for tourists. Also, we rented kayaks to paddle the Cedrino River (*Figure 9*), where it is possible to see the locations of other springs related to the karst system, now completely underwater because of the presence of a dam. However, it is possible to infer the location of the submerged springs following the geometry of the faults affecting the limestone and checking the drop in temperature of the water with your hands. Another interesting geological feature is that in this location, the Cedrino River runs along the contact between Plio-Pleistocene columnar basalts that can be seen outcropping in the hydrographic left and the Mesozoic limestone outcropping to the right.

Voragine di Tiscali – Sa Nurre de Su Hoda

The last cave of the trip was the Voragine Tiscali, also known as Sa Nurre de Su Hoda. Access to the cave (that is protected by a gate) is a small artificial passage approximately 100 feet long leading to the main room of the cave. The cave is horizontal, quite easy to explore, and has a very unique feature: The main room has another entrance on the ceiling from where a beam of sun can illuminate the cave for one hour during the day, between noon and 1 p.m. So, we planned the trip accordingly: a real unique experience! (*Figure 10*). Then a passage on the side of a columnar formation gives access to the upper part of another huge room that can be explored descending through large fallen blocks of limestone. The exploration takes only a couple of hours, including the time we spent admiring the sun beam phenomenon. It's a nice end-of-the-trip cave to be explored when no overcast cloud cover is expected.



Figure 10: A beam of sunlight filters from the high entrance of Su Hoda. Photo by Alexander Rush.



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Going to the Dark Side: The Texas Connection to The Explorers Club

by Jay Jorden

Tales from Dark Places (TFDP). If you're a caver, that's enough to get your attention.

But at The Explorers Club (TEC), these stories are also compelling for those who dive the depths of ocean trenches as well as explorers of deep space. The day-long event, referred to as TFDP and showcasing stories from the deepest and darkest places on the planet, will be in its fifth year. On March 22, 2025, explorers will gather at the club's New York headquarters again to hear distinguished speakers share their experiences from both the depths of exploration and the frontiers of cutting-edge science.

Why do Texans care? The Explorers Club's membership has included a number of Texas explorers important to our caving community. Among this group are Bill Steele and Bill Stone – both Fellows of the club. Other TEC members living in Texas are Audrey Steele Briggs, Jenna Crabtree, Janet Fitzsimmons, Bill Klimack, Bennett Lee, Ted Lee, Don Morley, Terry Sayther, and Vickie Siegel. Don Broussard, who died in 2019, was also a member.

In the 2024 Tales, several Texans among the eight distinguished speakers were presenters. Among the morning's presenters last March, Bill Steele, an Explorers Club Fellow (FE'79) and Dallas-Fort Worth Grotto member, gave a thoroughly engaging and entertaining talk on "Exploring, Mapping, and Studying the

Deepest Cave in the Americas." The area in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Puebla has been studied by cavers since 1965, and multinational expeditions have carried The Explorers Club flag to Sistema Huautla 14 times since 1980.

"It is clear, after so many seasons of work, that we still have far more exploration of passages and mapping to do. And while we're there, we'll continue to gather specimens and data so that we may learn all we can about what there is to be found in one of the world's most magnificent caves," Bill wrote in The Explorers Journal. "I think cavers embrace the darkness. I know I do. I like it – it's a thickness you can feel," Steele told the audience about his experience in the cave.

The month-long PESH (Proyecto Espeleológico Sistema Huautla) project, returning to Huautla in April of each year, requires 6,000+ feet of rope to negotiate its 600+ pits and dozens of cavers to explore the system, which has 30 entrances. The first of these was entered in 1966 by Austin caver Rune Burnett.

Bill described some of the cave's features such as Anthodite Hall, an enormous room big enough to hold Mexico City's Azteca Stadium – with about 3,000 feet of rock above it. This room was discovered in 1979 through a high climb. Scientific studies in the cave have produced three masters' theses on archeology and geology, a dissertation on anthropology, plus



TEC presenters.
Photo by Jay Jorden.

new biological species and discoveries in paleontology and paleoclimatology.

On a side note, Bill Steele said he and Bill Stone joined The Explorers Club at the same time in 1979 at the suggestion of Russ Gurnee, former National Speleological Society president, who was also Explorers Club president from 1973 to 1975. The two went to lunch with Russ during the 1978 NSS Convention in New Braunfels and asked for his advice about organizing a project to conduct speleology in the caves of the Huautla de Jimenez, Oaxaca, Mexico area.

In the afternoon, former Austin caver Dr. Jean Krejca presented on "Cave Biology (And All the Trouble it Got Me Into)." Vickie Siegel, a cave scientist with Stone Aerospace in Austin, spoke on "When Cave Explorers Build Robots."

For more than 17 years, Vickie has worked with one of the world's leading field robotics teams in research projects using cold, icy environments on Earth as simulation environments for exploration on other worlds. Her day job is designing, building, and testing autonomous robot explorers that work not only in underwater caves but also under deep ice shields. The robotics adventure began in 1999 at Wakulla Springs in Florida, the world's largest freshwater spring, where an underwater scooter with mapping capability was deployed by divers. The action moved to a Mexican cenote in 2006 to test a robotic prototype vehicle, Artemis, created to dive, explore, map in three dimensions, and return to the surface on its own. Moving to Antarctica, the team then ran tests with Artemis under the Ross ice shelf and other sites, before bringing in a smaller robotic vehicle called Sunfish as a backup. After the Antarctica project ended in 2015, the focus moved from Artemis to Sunfish.

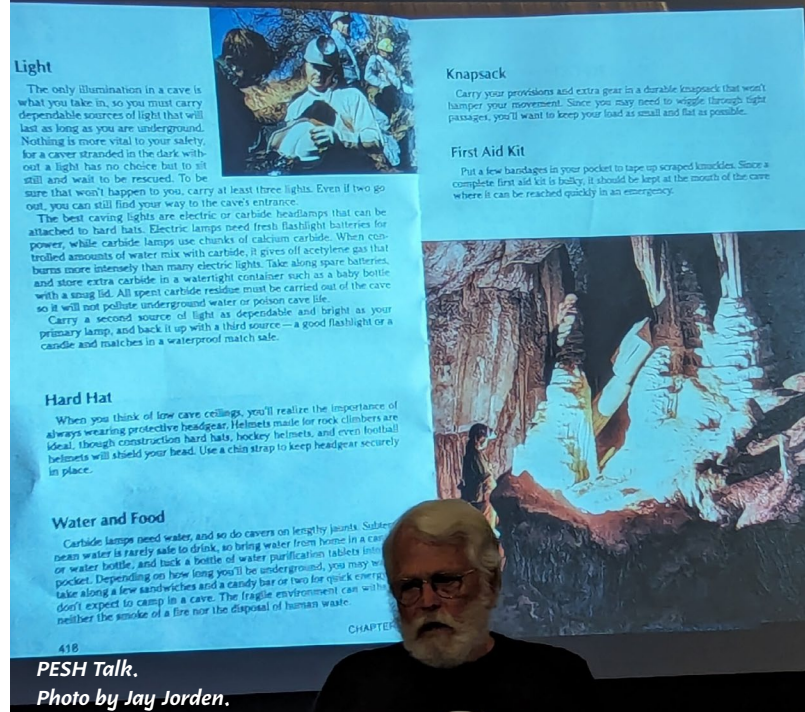
"Now, this is a company that is founded by cavers, run by cavers – and most of the engineers are cavers, and so our minds turned to cave exploration as one of the most challenging things you can do with a robot," Vickie told the explorers.

At Peacock Springs in northern Florida, the team honed Sunfish's capabilities in route-finding, obstacle avoidance, and surveying before moving to a more challenging project: Dragon's Breath Cave in Northern Namibia. Feeding data back through a fiber optic cable, Sunfish mapped Dragon's Breath's lake to a depth of 205 meters. The team is now looking to deploy Sunfish for infrastructure inspections of aging municipal water pipelines.

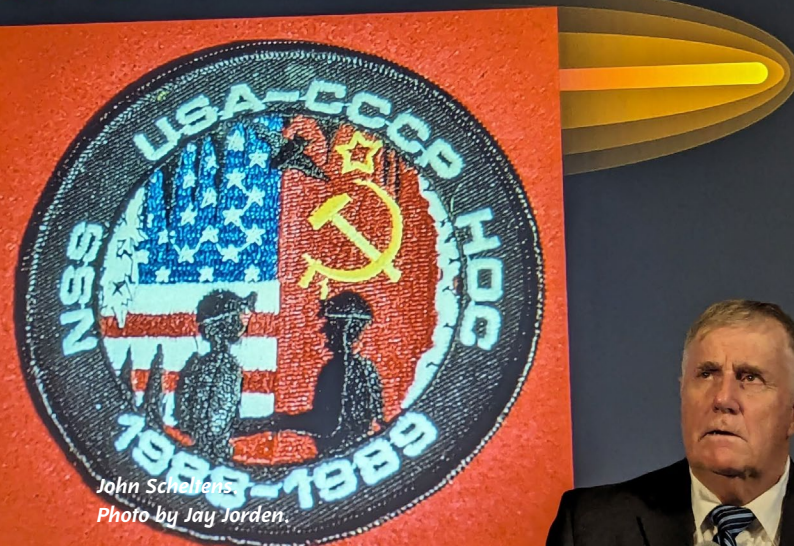
"Where's it ultimately going? Back to ocean worlds. That's still in our hearts, and eventually we will go to the ice-covered moons of Jupiter and Saturn," she said. "We will get through the ice into the ocean below, and something like Sunfish will be exploring them."

Working at the intersection of autonomous robotics, polar research, planetary science, and cave exploration, she has

Going to the Dark Side: The Texas Connection to The Explorers Club



ules From Dark Places Cave Exploration SA vs USSR 1988-89



John Scheltens
Photo by Jay Jorden.



The Author, Jay Jorden.
Photo by Jay Jorden.



Vickie Siegel: Robots.
Photo by Jay Jorden.

led expeditions with interdisciplinary teams to challenging environments worldwide.

Jean, nicknamed “Creature” on her first wild caving trip to Mystery Cave in southeast Missouri, described how she has spent a lifetime in search of interesting cave species, working on the front lines of conservation as an environmental consultant, and filling her weekends and vacations with cave exploration and survey. Currently living in Utah and caving in the western United States, she spoke about caving adventures in Texas, Mexico, Central and South America, Southeast Asia, and China.

During TEC lectures, former NSS president John Scheltens of South Dakota, who emceed and co-hosted the lectures with club member and caver Chris Nicola of New York, introduced Oleg Klimchouk, son of Ukrainian cave scientist Alexander Klimchouk, who died in 2023. The elder Klimchouk made an impact on the Lone Star State through his visits here and his fresh analyses of how our caves – in particular, maze caves – were formed.

The cave scientist’s son recounted his father’s participation in the NSS 1989 and 1991 Ukraine expeditions and other accomplishments – along with his own in bottoming Krubera Cave, the deepest in the world. Alexander’s widow, Natalia, also spoke about his life. Scheltens said at the meeting that Oleg Klimchouk had been named a new TEC Fellow. He joined the company of many esteemed global explorers as members, including Admiral Peary, Sir Edmond Hillary, President Teddy Roosevelt, and Neil Armstrong, since the club’s founding in 1904.

The lecture series was dedicated to Russ Gurnee, whose caving helmet, as well as a “Gurnee can” he invented to haul gear during long expedition trips, are displayed at club headquarters in New York. The NSS, which has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Explorers Club, held its board meeting at the club on the same weekend, with NSS President Kristine Ebrey presiding. Also meeting were leaders of the National Speleological Foundation, presided by TEC member Doug Soroka.

For this year’s event, Chris Nicola said caving luminary Roger W. Brucker’s talk on Mammoth Cave will feature his decades-long exploration as well as the efforts of an enslaved guide, Stephen Bishop, to map it in the 1830s and 1840s. Bishop’s pioneering work in the world’s longest cave (410+ miles) has earned him posthumous recognition in TEC’s Society of Forgotten Explorers after nomination by Chris. Other presentations will cover exploration in outer space, ocean depths, remote jungles, and more.

Explorers Club presentations on YouTube:

“Exploring, Mapping, and Studying the Deepest Cave in the Americas,” Bill Steele – 35:13

“When Cave Explorers Build Robots,” Vickie Siegel – 24:40

Fruitcake Diplomacy in International Caving

by Bill Steele (NSS 8072) FE, LB, CM, AL

DFW Grotto

Through my participation with the Texas Chapter of The Explorers Club, I made a friend named Linda Ryan, who at the time was an international coffee buyer. She traveled here and there in search of good coffees for clients in Texas.

Linda is a member of The Explorers Club. She joined our 2009 Los Toros Expedition to the Purificación area and did well with vertical caving. After a couple of years, I didn't see her in caving anymore, but I did see her at Texas Chapter of The Explorers Club events.

At one of these, I told her about our restart of Huautla caving with the name of PESH, Proyecto Espeleológico Sistema Huautla. She offered to try and get coffee donated to us by Collin Street Bakery for the upcoming expedition. I knew of Collin Street Bakery and have stopped many times at their Waco location which is right on I-35, a road I drive often. She succeeded, and we were blessed with excellent Costa Rican-grown coffee, which we took to Huautla.

The next year she arranged the donation of coffee again, and a couple of annual expeditions later she asked Collin Street Bakery to also donate their famed fruitcakes to us, which they did. We did not see the concept of Fruitcake Diplomacy coming.

Here's how it happened. We had two British cavers on a PESH expedition. They had rented a car at the airport in Mexico City and drove it to Huautla. They got out of a deep cave in the wee hours of the morning. Back at their rental car, they were quiet. But dogs at a nearby house started barking, kids woke up crying, and the parents were unhappy.

A couple of days later, we heard through our landlord in the village where we were staying that the upset parents had put

out the word that we were not welcome to park near their home again, and in fact, they did not want us to go back in the cave. We had ropes in there, and we were still exploring it, so we needed to apologize and assure them that it would not happen again.

Thankfully, I had the idea of giving them a Collin Street Bakery fruitcake as an apology gift. We approached their house with the colorful, fruitcake tin in hand. It was Vico Jones and me, and Vico is a gifted diplomat. Everybody likes Vico, but I could tell that this indigenous Mazatec couple were not happy with us.

After Vico told them we were sorry and it would not happen again, but we needed to go back in the cave to continue our work, I handed them the fruitcake tin. They looked surprised. I asked them to open it, and they smiled when they saw it covered in pecan halves and candied fruit. Vico smiled at me, and I knew we had won them over.

From then on, every time we passed their house, and they were visible, they smiled and waved. We learned later that fruitcakes are like the cakes the Mazatec people bake at Christmas time. They have a sweet tooth.

Now, several PESH expeditions later, Fruitcake Diplomacy is a thing. We gift Collin Street Bakery fruitcakes to anyone with whom we want to make a good impression. They've opened many doors. We've also received donations of their Petite Bites, which are like soft fruitcake cookies. We've found that they are malleable, and many can be stuffed into a one-liter Nalgene bottle for a high-calorie, delicious snack on the go.

See: <https://youtu.be/AS3ZohHdhZ0?si=gSH5E1C1Z7aCwwhO>



Alma Rodriguez gives fruitcake to brothers whose grandmother owns a 500-meter-deep cave. Photo by Bill Steele.



PESH caver, Scott Trescott gives a fruitcake to a locally elected representante. Photo by Bill Steele.

Gill Ediger's Slide Collection, Digitized

by Chris Vreeland

For the last couple years, I have been working my way through Gill Ediger's slide collection, and getting it all digitized. This small sample doesn't begin to span the breadth of the pictures he took everywhere – traveling in Mexico, TSA & NSS conventions, parties, trucks – lots of trucks – and most of all, cavers caving. The photos range from the late 60's to the late 90's. The sampling here is mostly early 70's. I don't have much more info other than what he wrote on the slides, and the date stamps, so I'll let the titles speak for themselves. I'm on box 6 of 8, & the TSS is working on a plan to get them all on line in the near future, so keep an eye out. There's more gems like these to come. I feel like having these scanned and preserved will be a great boon to the history of Texas caving.



Feb. '69, Frio Bat Cave; S. Bittinger, George J. Hoene, S. Hulsbusy Ediger, C. Bittinger, Possibly G. Gaumda, Possibly T. Ranka



Oct. '70; 5 Women Climbing, Probably Devils Sinkhole



Tigre Jan. '72



Tigre Jan. '72

Remembering UT Grotto Glory Days, Midnight Cave, and more: The Hall of Texas and Mexico Cavers

by Jay Jorden

The first month of 2025 ended on a sad note with the untimely death of Noah S. Brown, a Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) Grotto member. And late last year, Central Texas cave scientist José Justo (Marcelino) Reyes Gómez died while visiting his family in El Salvador.

Earlier in 2024, the Texas caving community lost two more veteran explorers: Lawrence Dean Littlefield and Holmes Alford Semken. Both were University of Texas Speleological Society members – and both were 88 at their deaths. Also, a famous French caver who made his home in a Texas cave for a half-year, Michel Siffre, died at age 85.

They, along with Noah and Marcelino, are remembered on The Hall of Texas and Mexico Cavers at www.hall.cavetexas.org/ on the Texas Speleological Association website. There, you can find more complete tributes and accounts of Noah's and Marcelino's accomplishments – along with many others who lived to discover, explore, map, and document caves.

With a background in swiftwater rescue, Noah joined the DFW Grotto and quickly showed his enthusiasm for going underground. He registered for the National Speleological Society convention last year and traveled with fellow DFW caver Travis Clayton to Tennessee, where the two explored some of the featured wild caves during the week.

Demonstrating strong proficiency in rope technique and an interest in cave photography, Noah had a good year of caving with some amazing pictures to show for it. But tragically, he died on the evening of January 29 in a motorcycle accident during a heavy rainstorm. A former construction company owner in McKinney who had become a homebuilding superintendent, Noah leaves a wife, an 11-year-old son, Caleb Aaron Brown, and brother Dylan Olson of White Bear Lake, MN, among his survivors.



Marcelino Reyes Gomez

Born on December 17, 1956, in Ilobasco, Cabañas, El Salvador, Marcelino left during the country's civil war, migrating through Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico before arriving in California in 1978. He eventually made his way to Austin where he met cave biologist James Reddell in 1982. They became life partners the following year.

James introduced Marcelino to caving and cave biology during a trip to Mexico in 1983 where they collected in a cave at the ruins of Teotihuacan and in Grutas de Cahuilla. Marcelino then began helping process collections in James' laboratory at the University of Texas, which continued until his death. Collection sites included 40 caves across the Yucatan Peninsula in 2001–2003 and 2007.

In 1984, Marcelino began collecting in Texas caves for numerous projects centering on endangered species throughout Bexar, Travis, and Williamson counties. For 30 years, starting in 1990, the two documented at least 316 caves and more than 2,000 karst features on Fort Cavazos – formerly named Fort Hood – in what was the state's largest and longest karst project. Marcelino's work was highly regarded. Charles Pekins, the Fort's karst specialist, said of Marcelino that "his smile and enthusiasm were uplifting."

A second long-term project began in 1995 with studies in the Sun City area near Georgetown, spanning more than 20 years. Teaming up with Mike Warton, Marcelino and James located and documented many sinks and some new caves, while also studying the fauna and managing karst resources.

Marcelino's legacy includes two pseudoscorpions and six other species named in his honor, along with at least 1,433 collections in at least 810 Texas caves and other karst features in Bandera, Bell, Bexar, Burnet, Comal, Coryell, Culberson, Hays, Kendall, Kinney, Llano, Randall, Travis, Val Verde, Ward, and Williamson counties.

Following his death on September 30, 2024, he was buried in Ilobasco, El Salvador. Survivors include his wife Sonia, sons Sergio and Marcello, his daughter Rocio, a stepdaughter and two grandchildren.

Lawrence (Larry) Littlefield and Holmes Semken are described in Carl Kunath's 50 Years of Texas Caving as among the second wave of The University of Texas (UT) cavers who picked up the torch from the grotto founders, sustaining the club for many more years. They are listed among "the legendary figures of Texas caving" in the book. The grotto's second wave collectively supported organizing the Texas Region of the NSS, starting The Texas Caver, compiling cave files, and forming the Balcones Grotto.



While a geology major at UT in Austin, Larry joined the UT Grotto and became one of its more active members. In 1956, he explored Donaho Cave in Medina County.

Larry participated in the first exploration of Red Arrow Cave in the summer of 1955. With other UT cavers, both Larry and Holmes followed up initial exploration of Caverns of Sonora with mapping the discoveries, surveying a direct route from the entrance to the Helictite Room in 1956. On a second trip, they traced the first survey on the surface and accomplished more mapping in the East Wing. Among other explorations were Valdina Farms Sinkhole the following year.

Larry, who worked globally in multiple drilling sites from Argentina to Venezuela as a petroleum geologist, attended a 1994 UT reunion in conjunction with the NSS Convention in Brackettville, Texas. In October 2004, both he and Holmes were present at another UT reunion at Mo-Ranch.

At the inaugural Texas Region's convention in Rocksprings in 1956, Holmes presented a talk on cave conservation and "cave courtesy." He gave several presentations at the 1958 convention in Ozona, including cave fossils and holocrystalline speleothems, with Dr. William Halliday, a surgeon, author, and longtime caver who died on Sept. 24, 2024 at the age of 98.

In 1955, the UT Grotto instituted qualifications in order to become a member. Holmes was listed as the instructor for map reading that year and was elected as the club's president until 1957. He was on a club trip to Devil's Sinkhole in 1955 and was listed in the first directory for the NSS Texas Region in 1960. Favorite caves included Mayfield (Caverns of Sonora), Perry Water, and Frio Bat. Following graduation from UT, he worked as a vertebrate paleontologist and, after receiving a geology doctorate, became a professor at the University of Iowa. He and his students teamed up to excavate cave deposits in Iowa and Arkansas. His studies led to international field trips and digs in part to interpret past climates – last Ice Age to present – via fossil micro-vertebrates.



Although Michel Siffre from Nice, France was focused on international pursuits, he spent considerable time in Texas, including a scientific study on the effects of complete isolation upon the human mind and body. He chose Midnight Cave in southwest Texas for six months of isolation that began on Feb. 14, 1972 and ended 205 days later on Sept. 5.

Numerous Texas cavers who helped with the project and provided surface support included Peter Strickland, Logan McNatt, Robert Hemperly, Jon Everage, Ronnie Fieseler, Carl Kunath, Jon Vinson, Stan Moerbe, and Ollene and Luther Bundrant. Results of Siffre's experiments showed that without time cues, he had adjusted to a 48-hour rather than a 24-hour cycle so that his sleep-wake time was longer than 24 hours. Notes of his experiments were studied by NASA to understand effects on space travel. His exploits were also chronicled in several books and unpublished manuscripts.

As side notes, Michel's adventure had reprised his similar, shorter experiment in 1962 at an Italian cave, Gouffre de Scarasson, and he documented the results in his book, *Beyond Time*. There were also imitators. In 1989, Stefania Follini entered Lost Cave in New Mexico for a Siffre-like isolation experiment expected to last 4–5 months.

Additionally, Michel occasionally returned to Texas after his Midnight Cave isolation, and the author went caving with him once – in Dead Dog Cave No. 2 – while he was visiting his friends, Bill and Carol Russell. The narrow crawlways of Dead Dog were nothing like Michel's relatively spacious accommodations in Midnight, but we were rewarded at the end of a grim passage with sight of a big room and a waterfall!



Holmes Semken panning gold in Colorado.

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Chairman@cavetexas.org

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A photograph of several cavers inside a cave. In the foreground, a woman in a pink shirt and white helmet with a headlamp is looking down. Next to her, a man in a teal shirt and brown pants is sitting on the rocky ground, resting his head on his hand. In the background, another person is visible, illuminated by a bright headlamp. The cave walls are rough and textured, and the floor is covered in rocks and some gear.

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