

The

The Kansas City Area Grotto

# Guano

Volume 18

Issue 1-2

February 2004

## Caving with BMG in Arkansas

including Whippoorwill Cave,  
Pine Creek Cave, and Picnic Cave  
Plus trips to Copperhead Cave, Skull Pit,  
and a hiking trip to Indian Creek

# Table of Contents

---



## KCAG/BMG Caving Weekend

report by Gary Johnson, photos by Mike McKinney, Gary Johnson, and Michael Schreiber

page **4**



KCAG/BMG Caving Weekend

## Whippoorwill Cave

trip reports by Marianne Krist and John Prigmore, photos by Jeff Page, John Prigmore, and Gary Johnson

page **6**



KCAG/BMG Caving Weekend

## Picnic Cave

trip report by Gary Johnson, photos by Michael Schreiber and Michael McKinney

page **10**



KCAG/BMG Caving Weekend

## Pine Creek Cave

trip report by Pam Rader, photos by Michael McKinney and Jeff Page

page **12**



## Copperhead Cave

report by Pam Rader, photos by Michael McKinney and Jeff Page

page **14**



## Skull Pit

trip report by Mike McKinney, photo by Pam Rader

page **18**



## Indian Creek

trip report by Gary Johnson, photos by Michael McKinney and Gary Johnson

page **19**

---

### Cover photo

The lower canyon of Indian Creek at Buffalo National River ends at this towering bluff. The remnants of old cave passages dot the bluff. For a sense of the scale, look at the center of the photo. You'll see a tiny dot. That's Gary Johnson. He's standing inside a large shelter cave with a 40 foot high ceiling. Photo by Mike McKinney.

## Events

### March 20-22, 2004

Cave Research Foundation — Ozark Riverways trip. For more information, contact Scott House at [scott\\_house@semo.net](mailto:scott_house@semo.net).

### April 14, 2004

KCAG business meeting — 7:00pm in the Magg Conference Center at the corner of Volker and Cherry (on the UMKC campus).

### April 16-18, 2004

Cave Research Foundation — Ozark Riverways trip. For more information, contact Scott House at [scott\\_house@semo.net](mailto:scott_house@semo.net).

### April 30-May 2, 2004

Spring MVOR — Location: Hulston Mill, near Stockton Lake, in Dade County Missouri. Check for additional details at [www.mvornss.org](http://www.mvornss.org).

### May 12, 2004

KCAG social meeting — 7:00pm - 9:00pm at Waldo Pizza at 74th and Wornall Rd.

### May 15, 2004

MSS meeting at Rolla, MO.

### May 16, 2004

Cave Research Foundation — USFS trip near Rolla with camping at USFS campground. For more information, contact Scott House at [scott\\_house@semo.net](mailto:scott_house@semo.net).

### May 20-23, 2004

SERA 2004, hosted by the Appalachian Grotto at Camp Davy Crockett in St. Clair, Tennessee. For more information, see the Appalachian Grotto's website at [www.caves.org/grotto/appalachian/](http://www.caves.org/grotto/appalachian/).

### May 28-31, 2004

33rd Annual Speleofest 2004 at Camp Carlson in Fort Knox-Meade County, Kentucky. For more information, visit the Louisville Grotto's website at [www.caves.org/grotto/louisvillegrotto/](http://www.caves.org/grotto/louisvillegrotto/).

# The Guano

February 2004, Vol. 18, Issue 1-2

The Guano is published bi-monthly

Submit articles via e-mail to the editor:  
guano-editor@kc.rr.com. Preferred file format for trip report attachments: Microsoft Word. Multiple photos are typically required for each trip report.

Guano subscription rate for nonmembers: \$6.00 annually. Electronic: FREE.

**President:** Jeff Andrews (president@kcgrotto.org)

**V.P./Treasurer:** Jeff Page (info@kcgrotto.org)

**Secretary:** Bill Gee (bgee@campercover.net)

**Web Master:** Sam Clippinger (samc@kcgrotto.org)

**Editor:** Gary Johnson (guano-editor@kc.rr.com)

**Co-editor:** Bryon Carmoney (Packratt@aol.com)

**Copy editors:** Bill Gee & Pam Rader

The Kansas City Area Grotto is affiliated with the National Speleological Society and the Missouri Speleological Survey. In addition, KCAG is a founding member of the Missouri Caves & Karst Conservancy.

Business meetings are held quarterly. Check [www.kcgrotto.org](http://www.kcgrotto.org) to determine the dates.

**Annual Dues:** \$15 for full members (three caving trips with KCAG, nomination, and vote of membership required.)

**NCRC Callout number – Emergency use only:**

Central Region (502) 564-7815. This number may be used for cave rescue emergencies in the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

# A Message *From* the President

This is my first letter as President of KCAG. As a member of this grotto for the past eight years, I have watched an amazing evolution. When I first started going to meetings, this newsletter was usually two pages with one of those pages being donated from another grotto. Now through the considerable efforts of Bryon, Gary, and contributors, this newsletter has evolved into a "quality magazine" (quoting Jeff Page here).

In the last couple of years, we have seen our sport evolve from something talked about by only a few people to being used as a major marketing tool (thank Nissan's ad agency). As many of you know, this sparked many heated debates among cavers centered on the topic of conservation. As cavers, conservation is one of our greatest concerns. This grotto has taken several steps to become more active in conservation: we have adopted a cave, we have organized a better approach in helping scouts learn about caving, and we have been active in the NCRC. Several members have taken NCRC orientations or at least gone to Level One training. Way to go KCAG members.

As we move through 2004, I would like to put this question to you. How do you see the evolution of KCAG? E-mail me your thoughts.

As always Cave softly,  
Take only Pictures, and  
Leave only Footprints.

*Jeff Andrews*

KCAG President

## Trip reports tentatively scheduled for future issues of *The Guano*

Skaggs Cave and Cave Lodge Cave ... Paddy Creek Natural Arch and Slabtown Natural Arch ... Miller Cave and Stone Mill Spring at Fort Leonard Wood ... Look for these trip reports and more in future issues of *The Month's Guano* ... And if you've been caving, please share your experiences by submitting a trip report.



# Reports from the KCAG/BMG Caving Weekend

report by Gary Johnson  
photos by Michael  
McKinney, Gary Johnson,  
and Michael Schreiber

In October 2003, the Kansas City Area Grotto got together with the Boston Mountain Grotto of Fayetteville for a caving weekend. Ten people from Kansas City made the drive south, meeting several members of BMG at Withrow Springs State Park. The caving destination lay just a few short minutes north—Madison County Wildlife Management Area. This WMA is home to over 20 caves. Members of KCAG had visited the largest cave in the WMA, Whippoorwill Cave, twice over the last several months. In addition, members had visited Kiddy Mix Cave, but these were the only caves in the vicinity that we knew anything about. However, because the grotto makes a yearly trip to nearby Beaver Lake and members typically end up in the WMA doing some caving, I decided it was time we expanded our repertoire of caves. Luckily, I had met Michael Schreiber of BMG earlier in 2003 when we had both been on a trip to Fitton Cave organized by Wade Baker (also of BMG). So I sent Michael a message, asking if he knew anything about caves near Beaver Lake. And he responded with an encouraging note about several possible caves. After a couple dozen more messages, we had a trip set up that was opened to members of both grottos.

Everyone got together at Withrow Springs State Park to set up camp. Camping is also allowed at the WMA, but there are no facilities, no showers, no water. Withrow Springs, on the other hand, has showers and heated restrooms. In addition, it's easy to find the state park, whereas the camping areas at the WMA



**Top:** Withrow Springs issues from a small cave and flows through a man-made channel. This spring is located beside the group campsite at Withrow Springs State Park (photo by Michael McKinney).

**Bottom:** The group campsite at Withrow Springs made a good place for KCAG and BMG to get together for a caving weekend (photo by Michael Schreiber).

are widely scattered and a bit more difficult to locate. We needed a spot that would be easy for everyone to find, especially when some participants would be arriving long after dark. So Withrow Springs was an easy choice.

I tried to anticipate all the needs of the trip. I had arranged for the group campsite and even called the local sheriff's office to get the regulations for alcohol possession—for Madison County is a dry county. But thankfully, Terry Mitchell of BMG knew something about what's required for a caving weekend: he showed up with a

trailer load of firewood in tow. And with weather reports predicting a drop in temperatures and all-day rain for Saturday, he pitched a large group tent, so we'd all have somewhere to huddle against the elements. Luckily, however, the rain never materialized and the weather in general cooperated to perfection.

This was a great weekend for caving. The plentiful firewood made for a great campfire and that helped pull the grottos together as we warmed ourselves around the fire and shared stories. Vertical cavers couldn't resist a large nearby tree and soon



**Top left:** War Eagle Trail at Withrow Springs State Park climbs small ridge that looks over War Eagle Creek (photo by Gary Johnson). **Above:** Bill Gee peeks into War Eagle Cave (photo by Gary Johnson). **Left:** Sam Clippinger cooked breakfast for everyone on Saturday morning (photo by Michael McKinney). **Lower left:** Grotto members set up many small tents in the group campsite at Withrow Springs State Park (photo by Michael McKinney).



## Withrow Springs State Park

Withrow Springs State Park is a small park nestled beside Hwy. 23 and War Eagle Creek. A west branch of Hwy. 23 runs through the campground, which is located in a small valley between two ridges. No campsite is more than 100 feet away from the road, so there isn't a lot of privacy here. All the campsites are in the open. But we didn't see (or hear) much traffic down the road. It was quieter than I expected. Our campsite was tucked beside the park's namesake, Withrow Springs. A modest stream branch flowed underneath the road and into a pond. The spring issued from a small cave. There was no rise pool. The cave contains several hundred feet of passage, but the passage is only about two feet high and it contains a few eardrums along the way. (A large-scale map of the cave hangs on the wall of the park administrator's office.) No one bothered entering the cave and in fact the state park discourages entry (although there are no signs expressly forbidding it). The cave is at the base of a steep hill and the spring branch flows through a man-made channel with stone retaining walls. It's a modest little spring in a pretty location. (The spring flow probably doesn't exceed a million gallons a day, so it's a relatively small spring.)

Bill Gee and I arrived earlier than everyone else (in fact Bill arrived on

had a rope rigged for practice. Sam Clippinger served as breakfast chef on Saturday morning, whipping up biscuits and gravy, and that evening Michael Schreiber served chili.

On Saturday morning, two caves were on the agenda, Whippoorwill and Picnic. Members of KCAG and BMG decided which caves they wanted to see and joined the appropriate teams. Terry Mitchell served as the guide to Whippoorwill. He had been in Whippoorwill several times over the past couple years while resurveying the middle section of the cave and drafting a new and improved cave map that actually makes sense of the upper and main passages. We couldn't have hoped for a better guide. Michael Schreiber led the

way to Picnic Cave. He had been in this cave several times and knew it quite well.

On Sunday, we had two more caves to choose from—Pine Creek Cave and Gaffney Cave. Everyone from KCAG was so tuckered out after Saturday's activities, however, that they all chose the less challenging cave, Pine Creek. This made me feel a little bad because I knew Michael had done considerable work scouting Gaffney and becoming familiar with it, but luckily a couple additional members of BMG showed up that morning and Michael led them on a trip to Gaffney. So Mike's work wasn't wasted. Terry Mitchell led the trip to Pine Creek and afterwards showed the curious the location of Gaffney. (Gaffney Cave requires vertical gear and a temperament for negotiating tight squeezes.)

Altogether, this was an outstanding trip. We owe the members of BMG a big thank you for hosting this caving weekend and showing us the caves of Madison County WMA. In particular, we owe Michael Schreiber for organizing the BMG folk and convincing them that this was a worthy endeavor. Thank you, Michael. Thank you, Terry. Thank you, BMG.

*Before we move on to the trip reports, here's a few notes on the state park where we setup camp:*

Thursday evening), so we spent part of Friday afternoon hiking War Eagle Trail. The trail starts by the Hwy 23. bridge over the War Eagle Creek and follows the creek for a half mile before climbing a modest ridge. Along the lower portion, the trail leads to War Eagle Cave, which consists of a single large room about 150 feet wide and 100 deep. The ceiling is about 30 feet high. The left side of the room largely consists of breakdown. A small stream winds through the breakdown and joins another stream that comes from a small cavity in the back wall. The water then flows out the mouth of the cave, through a break in the bottom of an old stone man-made wall. The water then joins the War Eagle Creek. A nice formation, now dry, hangs from the center of the ceiling, with a counterpart 20 feet below on the floor. The stalagmite is carved out on its top to form a small basin. The formation pair is sort of like a dry version of Angel Falls from Ozark Caverns, although here the two portions are much further apart.

We had heard stories about another room, so Bill and I dropped past the breakdown and peeked into several cavities occupied by the stream, but we didn't find any indications that the cave continued. I suspect the stories we heard were just wishful thinking, but our search wasn't exhaustive. We were primarily dressed for hiking, not for getting wet following the stream passage underneath the breakdown, so I suppose it's possible there was a passage that we didn't find (but I highly doubt it).

After exiting the cave, we followed the trail to the top of the ridge. It's a nice hike, with the ridge rising high above the creek. You'll find several nice rocky promontories with stunted cedar trees, providing views over the creek to the east. On the other side of the creek, the land is owned by farmers and ranchers, so the view is somewhat marred by farm equipment and fences. But this is still a nice trail, with modest but impressive bluffs that rise vertically 50 to 70 feet above the creek.

Overall, this is a nice park. I'm not sure I'd return here on my own to do any camping. When I go camping, I like places that are a little more remote. But the Withrow Springs State Park served our purposes well. In addition, park ranger Chris Marley was very helpful and provided good tips about hiking trails (as well as many old-timer tales about rumored caves in the vicinity). Chris even accompanied us caving on Saturday. ●

In Whippoorwill Cave, Peddgie Heinz and Bill Gee inspect a thin layer of chert that resembles Swiss cheese (photo by Jeff Page).



## KCAG/BMG Caving Weekend

# WHIPPOORWILL CAVE

trip reports by Marianne Krist and John Prigmore

photos by Jeff Page, Gary Johnson, and John Prigmore

### Marianne Krist's Report

It was cold Friday night. Kansas City cavers had been trickling down to Withrow Springs State Park in Arkansas that afternoon and evening. After setting up our campsites, we gathered around the campfire to discuss (among other things) the next day's caving.

For Saturday, our Boston Mountain Grotto hosts gave us a choice: Picnic Cave or Whippoorwill Cave. I don't recall much discussion about Picnic Cave, except that it is strenuous and requires lots of crawling. Several Kansas City cavers are veterans of Whippoorwill Cave, and their vivid recollections were daunting to this new caver. There was talk of a terrible,

narrow, icy water crawl, with only a few inches of air space.

I'm an adventurous person, and I love a challenge as much as anyone. But as a vegetarian/Californian without much natural body insulation, I just don't "do" cold. No way. I would do Picnic Cave. Come morning, I waffled. I changed my mind after hearing a few people describe Whippoorwill as a multi-layered, fascinating cave. KCAG member Sam Clippinger remembered Whippoorwill as having a "Swiss cheese" look. I don't remember anyone saying anything quite so intriguing about Picnic Cave. So in the end, I decided my choice should be based not on physical comfort but on which would be a more interesting caving trip. This

would be my third wild cave experience; I was not disappointed.

In the morning, eight of us left for Whippoorwill. Our leader, Terry Mitchell of BMG, led us on a 15-minute drive into Arkansas forest on a dirt road. A short hike led us to a hole in the ground—the cave entrance. There are two entrances to Whippoorwill, or rather an entrance and an exit, so there is no need for backtracking through the cave. One by one we left the sunshine and swirling fall leaves above ground and slid through the narrow entrance into the first of many large rooms and canyons in Whippoorwill.

Rather than give a chronological account of the trip or detail the cave layout, I'll describe what I remember most:

Whippoorwill is indeed multi-layered. I loved the possibilities in this cave! Rather than just straight forward, every room seemed to have up or down possibilities too. It is probably possible to walk upright through most of the cave, but I believe a trip through Whippoorwill can be as easy or as difficult as a caving group chooses. In the larger rooms, our group would stop and allow the more agile cavers to climb up slippery clay ledges to explore rooms at higher levels or down over breakdown into adjoining rooms.

Whippoorwill is not very “decorated” in the usual way with stalactites and stalagmites. Yet to me it was very interesting geologically. Limestone layers were separated by thin, flat layers of chert. There were many chert ceilings in the cave. One room in particular reminded me of a house from the animated TV program *The Flintstones* with its flat chert roof.

It seemed that whereas water had easily eroded the limestone, creating large open spaces, it was taking its time with the chert. We saw layers of chert that were exposed to view from above and below. These layers were perforated by irregular holes and looked like Swiss cheese (as Sam had described).

Many of the large rooms had several round adjoining rooms that I'll call



**Above:** Peddgie Heinz backs through Whippoorwill Cave's dry entrance. This entrance was dug out by Arkansas cavers to provide easier access to the cave. The cave's main entrance requires a wet crawl to reach the cave's main passages (photo by John Prigmore).

“closets.” These round closets appeared (to my inexperienced eye) to have been eroded by the force of swirling water.

One of the most dramatic features of Whippoorwill are its stone-walled canyons. The limestone walls were so high I couldn't see the cave ceiling. This gave it the illusion of being outside (on the surface somewhere) at night. Or maybe I needed to more effectively use the light on the helmet I borrowed from Jeff Page. In any case, the result was stunning. The effect of water was evident in the wavy sides of the tall, narrow canyons. The flat sand floors of these canyons were quite different from the slippery, uneven clay and chert floors we encountered throughout most of the cave.

We saw plenty of bats on this trip. Except for the few that flew right into me (yes, I screamed), most roosted singly on cave walls. The wavy canyon walls seemed to be a favorite bat hangout.

After several hours of exploring, we stopped to eat in the “Lunch room.” Lunch was not a highlight of the trip, and I decided that on future cave trips it will be worth it to lug a few extra pounds in the form of a thermos full of hot coffee or soup. Oh, yes, and cold clay isn't very accommodating. From now on, I will bring something to sit on. And something to... urinate into (the small soy

milk bottle presented a bit of a challenge).

Our group was comprised of a nice mix of cavers. Because there were three “newbies” on the trip, Terry didn't set an intimidating pace. I'm glad I wasn't the only one with not-quite-there-yet gear. The experience and knowledge of the rest of the group made the trip interesting and comfortable. I especially enjoyed Peddgie Heinz's enthusiasm!

After lunch we split up. About half the group headed for the exit while the remainder of us explored more amazing canyons and rooms. There were a few tight belly crawls and some challenging climbs to keep us on our toes. I was having so much fun I almost forgot about the dreaded water crawl.

And then we were there. It looked to be a fairly tight hands-and-knees crawl over sharp breakdown and through icy water. A few cavers went before I did, and they seemed to be doing ok. “If you can do this water crawl, you can call yourself a real caver,” our leader Terry promised me. I began the crawl into the water and got about 3 yards out. I felt my body seize up from the cold, so I turned around and quickly got out of the water and thought about what I was doing. If I didn't do this crawl, I'd have to backtrack to the cave entrance, and Terry would have to take me. I took a few deep breaths and tried again. It was easier. The

crawl takes an L-turn, so when you're starting out you don't see the end—only a dark wall straight ahead. After about 15 yards I took the turn and—daylight! Ha! Piece of cake! Another 10 yards and I was done.

It's impossible to exit Whippoorwill with any dignity. The cold pool spit me out on my belly onto a pile of breakdown. Once we'd all made our exits, we gathered for a few group pictures and then walked to our cars and our dry clothes for another undignified part of the trip—standing on the cold leafy ground, peeling drippy, muddy clothes off and putting our dry clothes on.

Caving is very dirty and cold, and it can be awkward. But I look forward to doing it again. Whippoorwill was a blast!

### John Prigmore's Report

Whippoorwill Cave is the longest cave in Madison County, at about 1.2 miles. It is a good cave for beginners and has an exciting wet bellycrawl exit.

Terry Mitchell of the Boston Mountain Grotto served as our guide. Terry has been to Whippoorwill several times and has even re-surveyed and remapped the middle section of the cave. He is very knowledgeable of all the various passages that we could explore, thus making him an excellent choice as a guide.

Withrow Springs State Park is located not far from Madison County Wildlife Management Area, approximately 5 miles south. We got in our cars and followed Terry from the state park to the cave. Once in the WMA, the road began to fade away under the cover of leaves. We parked in a small area with only room for two or three cars. Then we walked up a trail to the cave's dry entrance. Terry told the group a little about the history of the cave (which he repeated for me by way of e-mail):

"Rodney Tennyson, a member of the MOLES, dug open the Sassafras entrance after finding roots at the end of Sassafras Passage. Knowing that Sassafras trees have shallow roots, he determined that it couldn't be too far to the surface. He dug it out and placed a barrel in the entrance, which was still in place until five or six years ago.



**Above:** Most formations in Whippoorwill Cave are the same brown color (photo by Jeff Page). **Right:** Small crystals encrust a wall in Whippoorwill Cave (photo by Jeff Page.)

"Apparently, even the wet entrance must have been partially blocked at one time, and Rodney opened it up for exploration by modern man. It has been said that in the days before the dry Sassafras entrance was dug, the cavers would take dry clothes in waterproof bags with them as they crawled in through the water, then change clothes in the No-Name Room for further exploration and surveying.

"I was first led into Whippoorwill in December 1999, and the old barrel or tube, made of two 55-gallon drums welded together, was no longer in the Sassafras entrance hole but was laying on the ground nearby. The hole had eroded larger to the point that the barrel was no longer needed. I'm was also told that squirming through that old, rusty steel tube was somewhat daunting for many cavers. When I returned to Whippoorwill for the second time in September 2001, the old 'barrel' had been hauled off."

The new Sassafras entrance looked like a small sinkhole. One by one, we entered the cave by sliding down through the hole. The Sassafras Passage was easy going and wide, with plenty of head room. Terry guided the team to the back of the passage, where a large room opened up to the right, called the Middle Room. From the Sassafras Passage, you could look down into the Middle Room and see an upper section passage above it.





**Left:** Because most cavers are so anxious to get out of their wet clothes after exiting Whippoorwill Cave, few photos exist of the cave's main (wet) entrance (photo by Gary Johnson). **Below left:** A faint trail leads to the pool at the back of the entrance passage at Whippoorwill Cave (photo by Gary Johnson).



Among the cave's highlights, besides the water exit, were the cave's various side passages, called canyons. The first canyon we explored was the First Chert Canyon. The width of the canyon was about three shoulder widths across until you got to the back of the canyon and then it narrowed down to one shoulder width. There was some climbing also after you reached the back of the canyon. Many team members ventured to the back of the canyon, while Terry, Richard and I waited. When they returned, they reported that they found some nice flowstone. During the wait, I could hear water dripping somewhere in the cave. Terry informed us that there was also a lower section of the cave where the natural spring ran through, but it was too small for anyone to explore.

At first, I thought the cave was warmer than the ones I experienced in

Missouri, but during the wait and the inactivity, you could begin to feel the cold temperature of the cave. Afterwards, when the group returned, we ventured on to the middle section of the cave, towards the Heart Room. It was called the Heart Room because the room was shaped like a heart.

The middle section of the cave was more challenging for beginners. The passage narrowed down considerably to about shoulder width across, and it began to twist and turn back and forth, meandering its way to the Heart Room. One could not stand straight up in the passage. You had to bend over to go around each and every turn.

Before reaching the Heart Room, the team came across two other canyons and an open area, called the Fluted Dome, which contained flowstone. The first canyon we encountered was called Chimney Canyon because one must chimney down to the passage and then chimney up afterwards. Jeff Page, Jeff Chase and Marianne Krist decided to explore Chimney Canyon while the rest of us went ahead to the Heart Room. We stopped at the second canyon, which is called the Fluted Canyon. A couple of the team members did a quick check of the area before we moved on toward the Heart Room. Peddgie found a new smaller passage that Terry didn't know about. Finally, we made it to the Heart Room where we took a break for lunch

and waited for the others to catch up with us.

After lunch, Terry talked about breaking the group in two so that one group could stay behind and continue to explore some of the other canyons that ventured off from the Heart Room. The other group, which would be led by Terry, would go on to the water passage and out of the cave. Terry would then return to the Heart Room and to the waiting group.

Peddgie, Richard and I elected to go on to the water passage and out of the cave. The water passage was not far from the Heart Room. Before you knew it, we were there. Terry showed us where the passage started. The entrance to the passage was approximately 2 feet high and 3 feet wide. I made sure everything in my pack was protected from the water. Peddgie was first to crawl into the small passage. After approximately ten feet, she entered the cold spring. The water level was a couple of feet deep, about to one's neck, if you were on your hands and knees. The spring was so cold, it literally took my breath away. The water passage was another fifteen to twenty feet long, with a dogleg to the right, before reaching a small opening into the natural entrance portion of the cave. I was second, and Richard brought up the rear. The three of us spent nearly 4 hours in the cave. The others came out an hour or so later.

I really enjoyed going through Whippoorwill cave. As a beginner, I didn't have to worry much about where I was stepping. Most of the areas were large and open. I thought the meandering of the middle section was a little challenging. However, the water exit was the most challenging part of the cave. I didn't know if I could do it. Nevertheless, I did it and I felt great afterwards. I now know why it has become a "rite of passage" for beginning cavers in Northwest Arkansas. ●

KCAG/BMG

*Caving Weekend*

# PICNIC CAVE

trip report by Gary Johnson, photos by Michael Schreiber and Michael McKinney



Picnic Cave is one of several caves located alongside Pine Creek. It gets its name because it's near one of the picnic/camping areas in Madison County Wildlife Management Area. It didn't get its name because it's an easy cave. As several members of BMG told us: "Picnic cave is no picnic." We ended up spending about five hours in the cave, and of that time, we probably spent less than 30 minutes with our packs on. This is almost entirely a pack-off cave.

Michael Schreiber led the trip. He directed everyone to park their vehicles within a couple hundred yards of the cave. Then we piled into the flatbed of Dave Wyckoff's truck and he drove us further up the road, where there was only room for a single vehicle to park. From there it was a short walk through the brush and across the creek, to a bluff with a modest overhang. We followed the bluff south for 20 to 30 yards. The cave entrance wasn't large, only about three feet high. We ducked into the cave's first room, which was about 20 feet wide and five feet high.

To continue further back into the cave required negotiating two tight crawls. The crawlways were fairly wide but they were only about a single foot high. To get through the second crawl,

I took off by helmet so I could get a better perspective. These crawls were almost tight enough to cause my claustrophobia to kick in, and indeed before starting the first crawl, I had to take a few extra seconds to shake off some welling feelings of claustrophobia. But none of the crawls in Picnic Cave were particularly long. I could always look through the crawls and see where someone was sitting or standing up. Pam Rader also has a tendency for claustrophobia, and we had talked about the crawlways. (Michael had passed out maps of the cave, so we knew we were in for some tight passages.) I think it helped her to see me make it though the crawls.

After the second crawl, we were in a nice sized room with 20 feet of ceiling. The room was about 50 feet long and 20 feet wide. The floor mostly consisted of breakdown. From here, we squeezed down into a passage that required hands-and-knees crawling and a little bellycrawling. The passage led to what was undeniably the highlight of the cave—a dome/pit about 40 feet high called Sam's Dome. The crawlway led to a spot about two thirds of the way up the dome. From there, we had to free climb up for at least 10 feet.



**Top:** Mike Bayona, Lois Wintersteen, Chris Marley, and Dave Wyckoff in a narrow passage in Picnic Cave (photo by Michael Schreiber). **Above:** Pam Rader negotiates one of the many tight crawlways in Picnic Cave (photo by Michael McKinney).

This free climb was a little bit scary. You made the climb by using ledges of chert. These twisted fragments of chert layers were sturdy, but I kept imagining what would happen if one were to give away. It would mean plummeting to the bottom of the dome, and encountering other sharp fragments of chert along the way, which stuck out like knives, just about right for cleaving your head from your shoulders.

After climbing up the dome, the group rested. Chris Marley (who is a park ranger at Withrow Springs State Park) and I climbed on up to the Eyeball Room. It looks out over a nice-sized room, roughly circular, about 30 feet high and 30 feet across.

Meanwhile, Michael and Dave climbed to the bottom of this room and investigated the passages. Eventually, everyone returned to the dome and then we began the long descent to the bottom. This descent was necessary because this is where the cave passages continued.

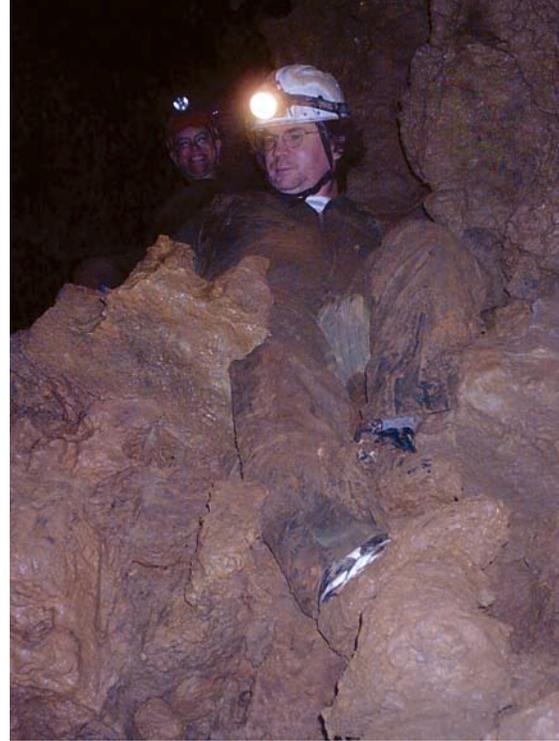
I stood at the top, watching as one by one everyone made the descent. It was sort of cool to look to the bottom of the pit, 30 feet below, where the cavers were walking around, their headlamps just dots. I was somewhat concerned about the clay now caked on my shoes. I tried to scrape the clay off as best I could. I kept envisioning myself slipping off the chert and tumbling to the bottom. But when I finally started the descent, I found it was fairly easy. The chert ledges were arranged just right. A couple times I had to spend a few seconds planning where I would go, but I didn't think the descent was particularly difficult. Some of the participants had some minor troubles locating a route down and needed guidance from those people who had already reached the bottom. My biggest problem with the descent was a sharp piece of chert that ripped away a section of the seat of my pants. But I was fortunate compared to Lois Wintersteen of BMG, who found the entire right cheek of her pants had been ripped away. The last few feet of the descent was a simple chimney.

I found the bottom of the dome room consisted of gravel. A steady rain fell from the ceiling. From here, two passages led out. One passage headed for the stream passage and twisted back toward the entrance. We took the other passage, which was about three to four feet high and only about a foot and half wide. It was lined with small fragments of chert that ripped away at our cave suits like razor blades. This chert passage did a number on my suit, ripping several new holes. (My cave suit is now in the trash.)

I don't remember much of the rest of the cave. It was intermittently walking, stooping, and crawling height. These passages led back probably 2,000 feet. The one noteworthy section was a vertical passage that could be climbed to a fair-sized room with a few small formations. We followed the passages all the way to the back of the cave and then turned around. There was one minor incident on the way back out: while chimneying back up Sam's Dome, Lois slipped and fell. I didn't see her fall, but I heard the thud as she landed. She scraped her back on the fall, but luckily she was otherwise unhurt. Her hard plastic kneepads likely saved her from damaging her knee. The pads slammed hard against a rock at the bottom, but she rose and shook off the fall and started to chimney again.

In general, the cave mostly consisted of rock and breakdown with no flowstone and only a few soda straws and stalactites. Picnic Cave is not a particularly pretty cave, but it is demanding. For those people who approach caving as an athletic endurance test, Picnic Cave is a good cave. It contains well over 4,000 feet of passageways and will keep you busy for several hours. For those people who go caving to see pretty stuff, you should probably look elsewhere.

Michael Schreiber did a great job of leading the trip. Without his knowledge of the cave, I doubt that I could have made it through the tight passages. Thank you, Michael. ●



**Top to bottom:** 1) Gary Johnson descends Sam's Dome in Picnic Cave while "Grinin" Sammy Clippinger awaits his turn. 2) Dave Wyckoff helped other cavers descend Sam's Dome. Lois Wintersteen is dimly visible behind him at the bottom of the pit. 3) Michael McKinney and Pam Rader at Sam's Dome. 4) Michael McKinney performed an impromptu rub-a-dub-dub in Picnic Creek after exiting the cave. (Photos by Michael Schreiber.)

# PINE CREEK CAVE

trip report by Pam Rader

photos by Michael McKinney and Jeff Page

Sunday morning began with the discussion of who would be going to Pine Creek Cave. I had slight reservations after going into Picnic Cave, but what the heck. I was up for more adventure.

We formed a caravan and began the short drive to the same turn off that led to many different caves, including Kiddy Mix, Picnic, Wagon Shed, and Pine Creek Cave. As we were driving, we past a house with a cave in its backyard that was being used as a storage shed.

We arrived at a little meadow and our guide, Terry Mitchell of BMG, directed us where to park. There was a little creek that led up to a rather impressive bluff, with an opening to a cave passage below. That opening led to Lower Pine Creek Cave. Terry told us that when the springs are flowing Lower Pine Creek Cave is pretty wet. Terry then pointed up a steep path and said, "That's were we are going."

We changed into our caving clothes, checked our packs and lights, and hiked up the path. At the large cave entrance, graffiti littered the left wall. The floor sloped down and on the right hand side a vertical slit opened up, leading down into a stream passage. I looked down into the opening and could hear the distinct sound of trickling water. Terry said you could usually hear water roaring through the passage. This was Lower Pine CreekCave, which contains 200-300 feet of passage.

The upper section of Pine Creek Cave is much longer than the lower section. Its entrance is futher up the bluff. We climbed up and found the second entrance. To enter the cave, we climbed between several

large boulders, and then start up a slope that was sticky Arkansas mud. You know, the stuff that sticks to your boots and won't let you get any traction. You have to rely on hand grips and just the luck of foot placement so you don't slide back down. At the top of the slope, I navigated around slick unsteady rocks to a large circular room that housed a waterfall. There is a ledge on the right that upon closer examination has pieces of burned wood and little circles of black at close intervals. Terry said the local witches' coven meets in this little room on nights of the full moon to hold their rituals. They light candles and small fires for warmth and light.

The waterfall has a small flow and drops about 30 feet. The pool at the bottom of the falls appeared to be 5-10 feet deep with a smooth back wall. Michael McKinney asked Terry if anyone has ever scaled the wall and checked out the stream that feeds the waterfall. Terry said, no, and the fact that there are no anchors on the wall tells us he is accurate.

After we had sufficiently looked around this room, Terry led us to the left over some large rocks and breakdown that were



**Top right:** Pine Creek Cave's entrance has been marred by graffiti but the setting is scenic nonetheless. **Above right:** The lower entrance at Pine Creek Cave drops to a stream passage. **Right:** Terry Mitchell in the upper entrance of Pine Creek Cave. (Photos by Michael McKinney).



at times hard to navigate. If it weren't for convenient handgrips on the boulders, I would have fallen more than once. After zigzagging through several spots that involved stooping, crawling, and more stooping, we made it to a smooth tunnel. The tunnel began as a walking passage and slowly shrank. First, we were stooping. Then, we were kneeling, and then we were "spider" crawling through the passage, negotiating around "pot hole puddles." At the end of the passage, we crawled up and over a bigger puddle and were able to stand up in a little passage. Thank God, some walking passage, but it didn't last for long. Terry pointed to a small hole, just up ahead, that required "packs off." By this time, I had started taking my cues from

Gary Johnson: if he can make it through, then so can I. This is where we started working our way through some breakdown. We climbed down, then up and over, then under a lip, emerging into a big room with breakdown littering the floor. Climbing over the breakdown, I wondered what this room would have looked like before the ceiling had fallen.

We climbed down the breakdown and entered a smooth passage, all walking height, for a couple hundred feet. The passage came to an abrupt halt. Terry told us that by crawling past breakdown we could go another 50-75 feet, but that was as far as anyone had been able to go. However, if we could find a way through the breakdown, he would be happy to push on. Jeff Page gave it a good try, but with no luck. We did find a great many fossils in the breakdown as we waited for Jeff to finish his solo adventure.

We backtracked to the big breakdown room and took another path that led to the "prettiest room" in the cave. This path involved a vertical "slide" down to a room that had several stalagmites, stalactites, and draperies. We reached the decorated room, rested, exchanged caving stories, and took

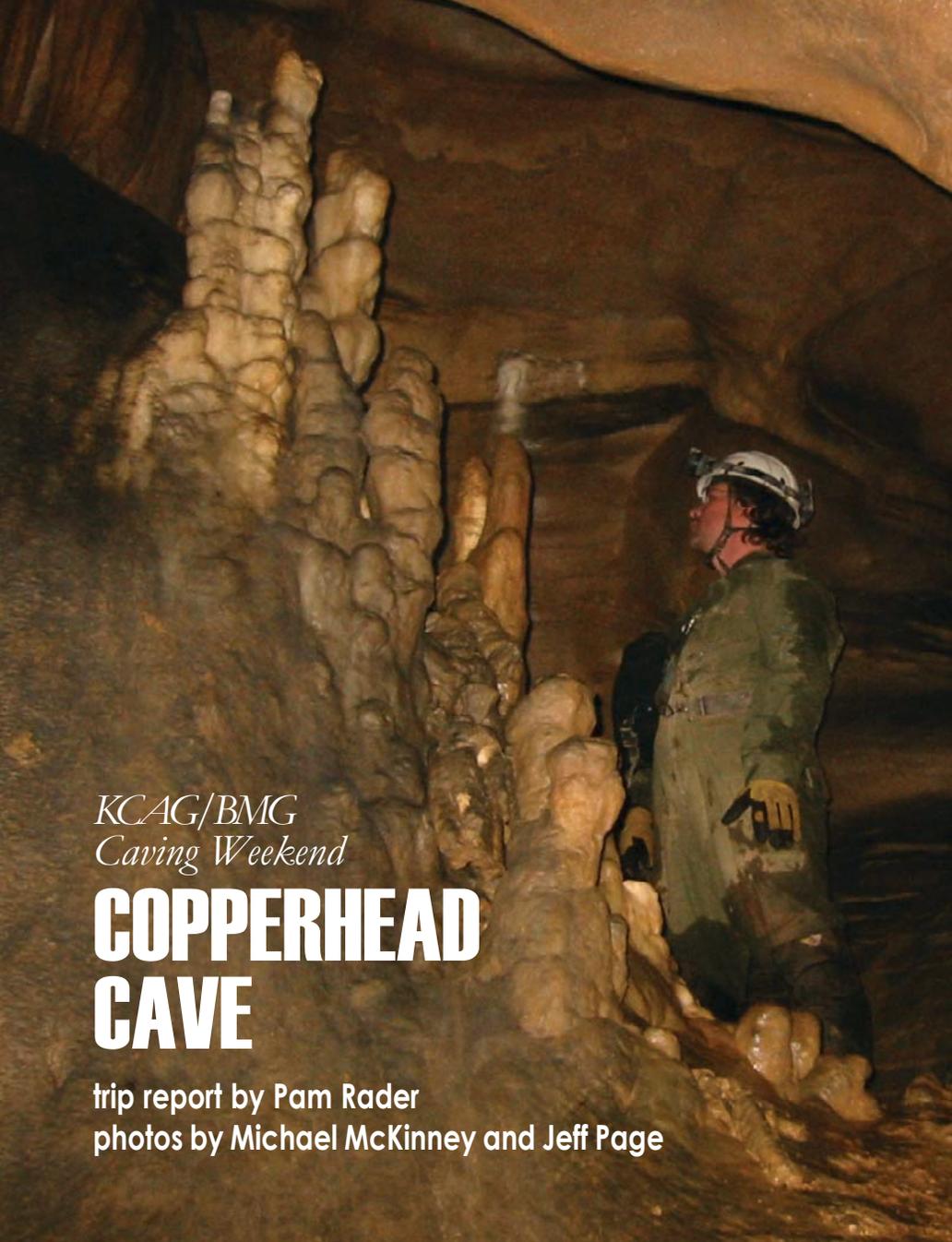
**Left:** Gary Johnson at the base of a tall waterfall in Pine Creek Cave (photo by Michael McKinney). **Above:** Several small formations line a shelf at the back of Pine Creek Cave (photo by Jeff Page). **Below left:** A fortuitous shutter click captured this image of a bat flying beside Pam Rader in Pine Creek Cave (photo by Michael McKinney).

a few pictures. One of those pictures would reveal a bat in mid flight positioned right next to me.

As we started our trek back out, several members of the group elected to follow Terry by taking an alternate route, a small crawlway that led underneath breakdown. Gary and I elected to not go through the crawlway. We returned the way we came and met the rest of the group. The remainder of the trip back out was uneventful except that we all went different directions around the breakdown near the entrance. Two members of our group ended up on top of the breakdown and had to climb back down the way they climbed up. Once back at the entrance, several of us posed for pictures.

Overall, it was a great cave trip. Terry was an excellent leader. He was very knowledgeable about the cave and the surrounding area. He shared quite a bit of information about the other caves in this area. He even took us on a brief cave location trip and showed us several other caves in close proximity to Pine Creek Cave. My favorite was called Wagon Shed Cave. Mike took a great picture from just inside the cave. It frames my X-Terra and me perfectly. Boy, wouldn't the Nissan people love to have that picture.

I look forward to making more trips back to Arkansas in the near future to explore other caves with my new found friends. ●



KCAG/BMG  
*Caving Weekend*

# COPPERHEAD CAVE

trip report by Pam Rader  
photos by Michael McKinney and Jeff Page

As we made our way from Kyles Landing to Copperhead Cave, I was reminded why I bought a 4WD X-Terra. The road is steep, rough, and narrow with non-existent shoulders on both sides. I'm sure it's not as bad as some of the "back roads," but we sure did a lot of bouncing. Not a road you want to do with a full bladder.

Once we arrived at the spot past the creek, near the "entrance" of Copperhead, we made a quick walk to "size up" what we would need to enter the cave. Keep in mind that I have never been to this cave and Mike McKinney says, "The Boy Scouts use this cave as a training cave for rappelling, but you can get into it with a simple hand line. Some people don't even use that." Because Mike knew the cave, he decided to rig the entrance with a simple hand line. Someone had placed a sturdy "pine tree" trunk across the entrance, making rigging easy. Hand loops were tied to make the descent easier.

Mike went in first, making his way through the slightly tight, awkward entrance, which just happens to be a hole on a path next to a creek. Mike hollered, "All clear. Send the next person down." I elected to be next. I pulled up the line, attached my cave pack, lowered it down, and then began my descent. The descent begins with a short drop through a small hole to a small lip. You sit down on the lip, then shimmy down to an outcrop on the opposite side of the chimney. I managed to turn around and not look down at the 20 foot drop where Mike was standing, giving me play-by-play directions on where to place my hands/feet/butt.

Once over the lip, I saw where Mike was standing and this caused me to panic because I saw no feasible way to get there. Silly me, I wasn't looking in



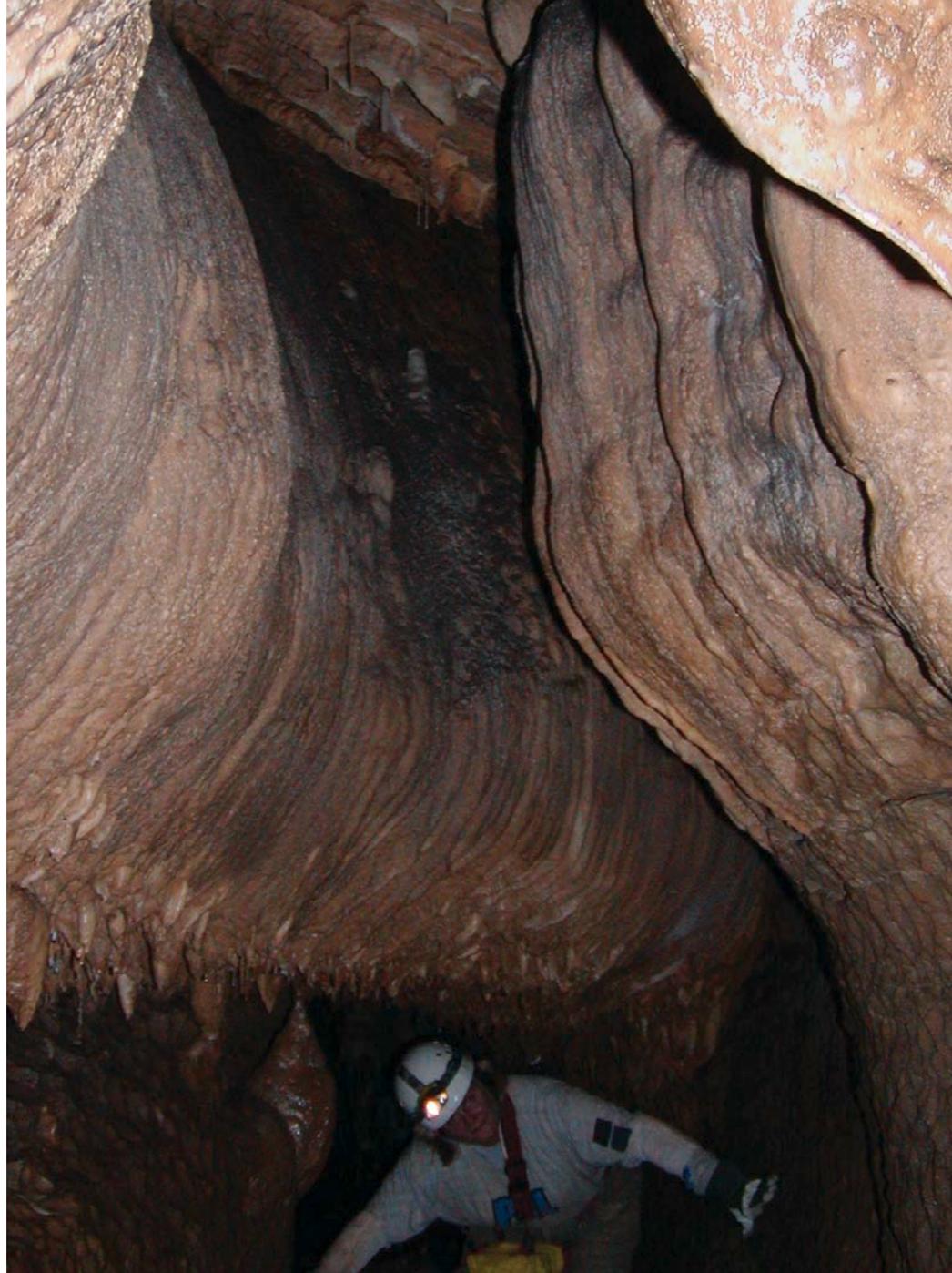
**Top:** Gary Johnson inspecting a collection of stalagmites in Copperhead Cave. **Left:** Gary Johnson and Pam Rader resting in a small, waterway passage in Copperhead Cave. (Photos by Jeff Page.)



the right direction. I should have been looking to my left, not down. There was a vertical chimney just waiting for me with conveniently placed chert stepping stones and hand holds to guide me to a crevice about 8 feet above Mike. He had climbed down to the stream below to help the rest of us navigate safely and to take a few pictures.

I have never been in a cave where pieces of rock just stuck out of the wall the way they do in this cave. I turned away from where Mike was to take a look down this passage I was standing in. It was body width, smooth, without mud on the floor. Farther back in this passage is a turn to the left with a small flowstone dam and slightly narrow spot you have to turn on your side to crawl through. Looking more closely at the pool, we spotted the first of many salamanders that we would encounter in this cave. This one was yellow with black spots—a long-tailed salamander.

The challenge in this cave is to see how long you can stay dry. As I made my way farther back into the cave, I encountered flowstone that ran together like ice cream scoops melting



**Above left:** Pam Rader slips between the flowstone walls of Copperhead Cave. **Above:** Pam Rader ducks beneath a large flowstone outcropping in Copperhead Cave (photo by Michael McKinney).

on the floor, but around the next corner, the passage was deeply rippled from large volumes of water rushing along the floor. The next obstacle was flowstone that we had to actually slide down. Boy was that formation going to be a bear to get back up. There were very few hand or foot holds near the bottom, so I knew getting started back up would be difficult.

In many of the passages, you have to straddle the water to keep your feet dry. At other times, you have to

chimney above the water. There is a lot of “walking” passage and then you stoop under large draperies to continue back farther. Many of these stoops involve what I describe as crab crawling, where you are on your hands and boot tips making your way under draperies and over water. You could easily hand-and-knee crawl, but the challenge was to stay out of the water as much as possible. At one point during these crawls, someone spotted salamander larva in one of the many



pools along the passage, so it became even more important to stay out of the water.

As we made our way further into the cave, there were many side spots that had very nice formations, but it was evident that many people had been back there and had dirtied up the formations. One formation near the back of the cave was a white flowstone with a very clear muddied trail leading

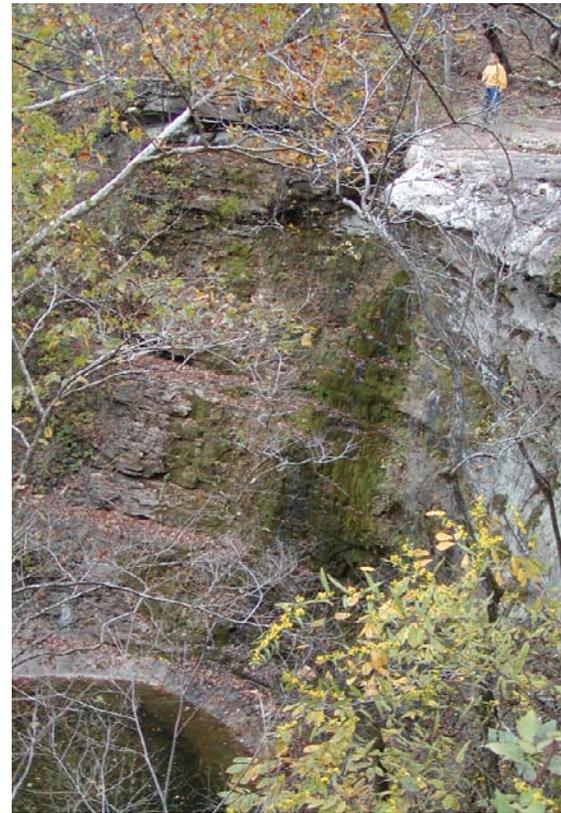
up the middle of it. We elected to not explore up that trail but did think that cleaning the formations that had been dirtied would be a good project.

We proceeded on toward the back, taking different paths from time to time. Mike and I would stay in the stream passage, while Jeff Page and Gary Johnson would climb up and take the “high” road. We eventually reached a spot where you have to climb up and chimney to avoid walking on a very clean rust-colored flowstone floor. It reminded me of a water park slide. Shimming up was going to be a challenge since my legs were shorter than

my other caving buddies, especially Mike’s. He always makes things look so easy. First I had to figure out how to climb up to where they were standing. My legs just don’t stretch as far as the boys’ legs do. It was a challenge, but up I went. At the top, Mike had continued farther back, but it involved crawling carefully over many small flowstone dams, not to mention it was narrow and there was a vertical slot right down the middle, like a small canyon, in which water was trickling. It was single-file crawling only now. Farther back, Mike said it became tighter. We all took turns crawling back to see, but after checking the time, we decided to not go back any farther and began our journey out.

Returning to the entrance was pretty uneventful until we got back to the big flowstone that reminded me of a large mushroom. Mike made it up like a spider on the wall, but my adventure up the mushroom was not as pretty. Initially, I tried climbing up on

**Top left:** A beautiful column is backed by flowstone walls in Copperhead Cave (photo by Jeff Page). **Top right:** These small strips of bacon line a wall in Copperhead Cave (photo by Michael McKinney). **Above left:** Flowstone is everywhere in Copperhead Cave (photo by Jeff Page). **Above:** A salamander larva in a shallow pool in Copperhead Cave (photo by Michael McKinney).



**Top:** A cave salamander in Copperhead Cave (photo by Michael McKinney). **Above right:** A grotto salamander in Copperhead Cave (photo by Jeff Page). **Above left:** Long-tailed salamanders are numerous in Copperhead Cave (photo by Michael McKinney). **Above:** Pam Rader watches with a park worker as the road from Copperhead Cave is repaired (photo by Michael McKinney). **Right:** Pam Rader standing at the top of Triple Falls (photo by Michael McKinney).

my own, but I was unable to get any kind of grip—even with my 3rd gripping device (my butt). It has been known to save me on more than one occasion. I finally had to resort to having the guys give me a boost. It was far from graceful, but the job was accomplished.

Back at the entrance, we made the reverse climb up and out. My third grip came into play as I wedged it against the wall as I made my way up to the lip at the entrance. I think climbing out was easier (well, of course, I had been here before). During the climb out, an object was dropped to the stream below. I think it was a cave pack or maybe it was a camera case, either way it was retrieved.

This cave was great. It had many different types of passages, flowstone, high water passages, and even some muddy passages. The entrance was a challenge for me, but I would gladly

visit this cave again. Hopefully I will get the opportunity.

The trip out of the valley was another experience. Slightly below the creek there were several paths to choose from that started at the road. We chose the path that led to the top of a waterfall. Water from Copperhead combined with another stream on a flat creekbed to form the waterfall's source. At this time of year, the flow was barely a trickle. The falls had to be nearly 50 feet high. With the water flowing so slowly, ferns and moss grew where the water came into contact with the rock wall. It was very pretty.

The drive out was also a new experience for me. As we headed up the hill, we were suddenly stopped by a BIG hole that stretched completely across the road. Did the road wash out? Did the Arkansas moles go crazy? No, next to the road was a dump truck, a backhoe, and several men in forest ranger uniforms. Yes, you

guessed it. They were repairing a drainage culvert. They apologized for the delay. They had seen our vehicles but had hoped to be done by the time we were ready to leave. It was pretty close. They were able to fill in the middle of the road enough for our 4WD vehicles to drive over it. The delay was only 15-20 minutes and we were back on the road again.

Overall my trip to Arkansas was absolutely wonderful. I learned how many layers of clothes I can wear to keep warm and still move. I learned how out of shape I really am. And how deep my passion for caving really is. ●

# A trip to **SKULL PIT**

trip report by

**Michael McKinney**

photo by Pam Rader

**S**kull Pit contains about 130 feet of spectacular vertical passage. It sits in a steep mountainside, just off the road from Kyles Landing, and overlooks a breathtaking bluff and Arkansas vista.

Locating the opening has proved tricky in the past, especially on the occasions when I thought I would walk straight to it. This time I made sure we'd find it...I brought Pam! Pam has an excellent memory for locations, and she knew EXACTLY where to go.

The pit, while not very wide across, is highly decorated and interesting. At the bottom is a small area that usually has water drizzling into it, and a small pool, which was dry this time. On previous yo-yo trips in Skull Pit, a small opening was noticed down in the lower corner of the cave...and it looked like it could go...

On this trip I finally decided that I would take off my vertical gear and slip into the small hole. I found myself in a small room, fairly tall. There were bones of some unfortunate animal setting on a shelf, as if on display. One end of the room narrows down to a small crack, which I could not pass. On the other side of this room, right next to the hole that allowed me entry, was a short, steep, smooth and slick up-slope thru a hole...the darkness beckoned.

I found a way to brace myself well enough to slip my way up thru this



opening. Ahead of me I could see boot prints in the thin coating that covered the slippery rock. There were small bat bones everywhere. This chamber was highly decorated, with tall, ornate columns and draperies. In the corner was an opening into a beautiful white-coated area with small stalagmites and formations, an area which is normally a pool, but which was now dry. I only looked, being very careful not to mess up this beautiful area.

I carefully made my way out of this beautiful chamber, being careful of everywhere I placed my feet. I met back up with Jeff Page, who was waiting for me just the other side of the small hole that led into this little visited area, and we ascended back up to the surface. ●

**Above:** Michael McKinney relaxes after making the long ascent at Skull Pit (photo by Pam Rader).



## *A hiking trip to* **Indian Creek**

trip report by Gary Johnson  
photos by Michael McKinney  
and Gary Johnson

Indian Creek is one of the best hiking destinations near the upper Buffalo River. It's also somewhat dangerous. Reportedly more hikers get injured here than any other place in Buffalo National River. During the recent caving weekend with BMG, I convinced a few of the KCAG members to stick around a couple more days and do some hiking and caving. High on my list of priorities was Indian Creek. I'd read about it in Tim Ernst's *Buffalo River Hiking Trails* book, and he made it sound like an absolute must see. Then Michael Schreiber and Michael Bayona of BMG they talked about the trail in glowing terms. So I knew I had to do this hike. They also said there were some caves along the trail.

We tried to squeeze in Indian Creek in the afternoon. In the morning, Jeff Page and Michael McKinney dropped Skull Pit. After lunch, we headed for Indian Creek. We had camped at Kyles Landing, which put us at the best trailhead for access to Indian Creek. I knew we'd be somewhat pressed for time. It would get dark around 5pm and we definitely didn't want to be up boulder-strewn Indian Creek after dark, so we set a turnaround time of 3:45pm and hit the trail. I'm afraid I set too fast a pace for Pam Rader. I didn't do it on purpose; it just kept happening. Eventually, she decided to head back to camp. Sorry, Pam. But in retrospect, it's probably a good thing I

**Left:** The lower canyon of Indian Creek ends at this huge bluff, which is pockmarked by shelter caves (photo by Michael McKinney).



was setting a fast pace or we likely wouldn't have reached the end of the lower canyon.

Indian Creek is a unique area. There are many steep valleys in Arkansas, but this one redefines what you mean by steep. At first, the sides are relatively modest, maybe 20 or 30 feet high. But the farther up the valley you go, the higher the ridges become on both sides. By the time you reach the end of the lower canyon, the walls rise 200 feet straight up on both sides. Topo maps indicate total differentials of nearly 500 feet from the creek bed to the tops of the nearby ridges.

For most of the route up Indian Creek, we hiked along the creek bed or just next to it. At times the trail can be difficult to follow, especially when it merges with the creek bed and then suddenly departs. If you're not watching carefully, you can miss when the trail leaves the creek bed, so it's good to hike with two or three other people so the odds are increased that at least one person will find the trail. In this respect, Jeff Page and Michael McKinney did a good job of finding the trail, although Michael didn't mind making his own trail by plunging straight up the creekbed, snapping photos furiously as he went.

Indian Creek is likely best appreciated in the spring, when the waterfalls are running. We could see several places where running water had stained the bluffs. At one place in particular, we noted at least five places on a large exposed bluff where water had flowed, with at least 70 foot drops to the creek. This area would be really something to see after a hard rain.

**THIS PAGE. Top left:** Gary Johnson points out the route to Indian Creek. **Above left:** The hiking group sets off for Indian Creek. **Above:** Flowers and fruit-bearing shrubs provide a splash of color in Indian Creek. **Left:** Across from Kyles Landing, bluffs rise above the Buffalo River. (Photos by Michael McKinney).

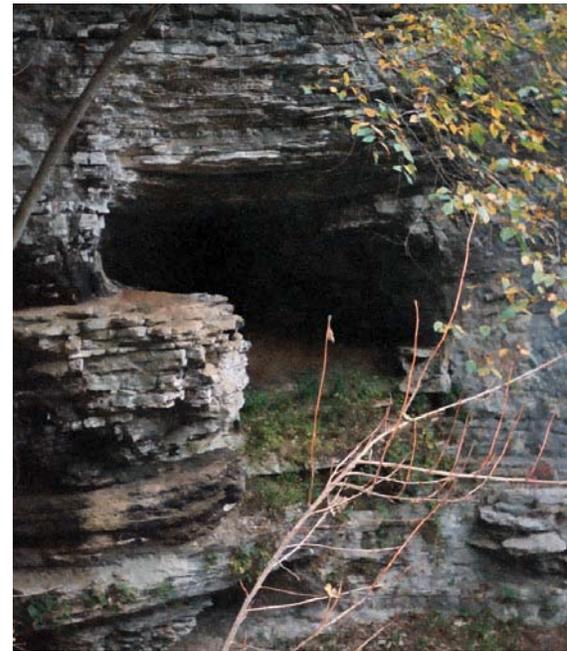
**NEXT PAGE. Top left:** Huge breakdown blocks nearly block the path up Indian Creek. For scale, look for Jeff Page in the upper right corner (photo by Michael McKinney). **Lower left:** Water pools in small depressions in the hollow's rock floor (photo by Michael McKinney). **Above right:** Water trickles through a cleft between boulders (photo by Michael McKinney). **Lower right:** Michael McKinney stands beside a small pit in the floor of Indian Creek (photo by Gary Johnson).





The trail was fairly level in the lower canyon. This is not a difficult section of trail. You must scramble up some rock ledges (more dry waterfalls) and past massive breakdown blocks, the size of entire houses. But the going is relatively undemanding as you follow the creek. At one point, I walked into a small shelter formed by a large boulder and then squeezed up through a hole.

Indian Creek Hollow is filled with cave leads. If you tried pursuing them all, it would take several days. All the leads we saw were relatively small, but they are clues that the vicinity likely harbors some cave passages. As you hike up the hollow, the lower canyon eventually reaches a dead end. You can continue but only by scaling the bluffs. On the left is Arkansas Cave, which is used by both Grey bats and Indiana bats, so it's closed year round. (I expected to find a sign that prohibited entrance to the cave, but I didn't see one. However, I had talked to Chuck Bitting of the National Park Service before we left on the trip, and he



confirmed that the cave was closed to all visitation.)

Hikers used to walk through Arkansas Cave. It's apparently a thru trip. Exactly how far, I don't know. I climbed up the bluff across from the cave (at this point the creek bed is only about 20 feet across and the bluffs rise vertically on both sides), giving me a better vantage point for looking into the cave. But I didn't see a sign. Jeff tried to get a little closer to the entrance by scaling the bluff. He found an old trail, but it had eroded badly and eventually he decided the trail was

**Top left:** This small tunnel (about four feet high) perforates a bluff above Indian Creek (photo by Gary Johnson). **Left:** The lower valley of Indian Creek comes to an abrupt end when the hollow's walls finally meet (photo by Gary Johnson). **Top right:** Jeff Page tests the ropes that have been rigged up the bluff at Indian Creek (photo by Michael McKinney). **Above right:** This shelter cave sits high above Indian Creek (photo by Gary Johnson).

too dangerous and gave up.

Indian Creek's lower canyon comes to an abrupt end when the opposing bluffs get so close that they meet. In the wet season, there is likely an impressive cascade of water into the canyon at this point. A stream is also supposed to flow from the mouth of Arkansas Cave, but we didn't see a stream. However, the bluff face below the cave mouth (the cave is located about 30 feet up the bluff) is vibrant green from moss and ferns.

At this point, we were very close to our turnaround point. It was 3:30pm, but when I looked up I knew I couldn't turn around just yet. The right side bluff was carved out underneath. A huge overhang at least 200 feet up the bluff marked a shelter cave and possibly more. I decided to investigate. The trail up the right bluff is extremely steep. However, a collection of ropes have been left behind. Typically I'm very leery of using ropes that have been left in place. But these weren't cheap hemp ropes. They were sport ropes that were still in fair shape. I gave each rope a good inspection before putting my weight on it. The ropes were well positioned. Whoever had placed the ropes knew what they were doing.

I climbed all the way up to the bluff overhang. It was indeed just an overhang, not really even a shelter cave, although at sometime in the distant past it had probably been part of a cave (as weathered remnants of formations indicated on the ceiling). To the right, I saw a promising cavity and went to investigate, following a narrow lip along the bluff. The cavity went back 70-80 feet and then seemed to terminate. I didn't check it out completely. I wasn't packing a light and it was hard to see anything as I peered into the shadows, so I might have missed something. Across the way was something very cool—a small tunnel pierced the bluff. The tunnel was only about 4 to 5 feet high, so I had to bend over to get through the tunnel.

**Above:** The path becomes rougher as you near the end of the lower valley at Indian Creek (photo by Michael McKinney).



Halfway through the tunnel, I noticed a small perpendicular passage. This was hands and knees crawling. It took me to the edge of the bluff for a stunning vista over the canyon below.

I could see Jeff and Michael at the bottom of the canyon. They hadn't followed me up the bluff, so I decided I'd better wrap it up and head back down. First, though, I wanted to get a peek at the Eye of the Needle. From the creekbed, we had seen it as we neared the end of the lower canyon. Now, I wanted a closer look at it before I turned around. I walked through the tunnel and followed the trail for 100 yards or so, but I didn't

see the Eye of the Needle (which is a large hole, about 60 feet across, in the bluff). I knew it must be nearby, but we were starting to lose light. So I climbed back down the bluff and joined Jeff and Michael for the hike back to camp. I was a few minutes tardy for our turnaround time of 3:45pm. But we made excellent time on the return trip and ended up with at least half an hour to spare before dark.

This is a great trail. It gets my highest recommendation. ●

Arkansas Cave sits over 30 feet above the floor of Indian Creek. Entry to this cave is strictly forbidden in order to protect endangered bat populations (photo by Michael McKinney).

