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NSS NEWS

AMERICA'S CAVING MAGAZINE



NSS NEWS

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Feel free to ask questions about submitting features and photos.

Style and submission guidelines can be found on the NSS website:

<https://caves.org/nss-news-submission-guidelines/>

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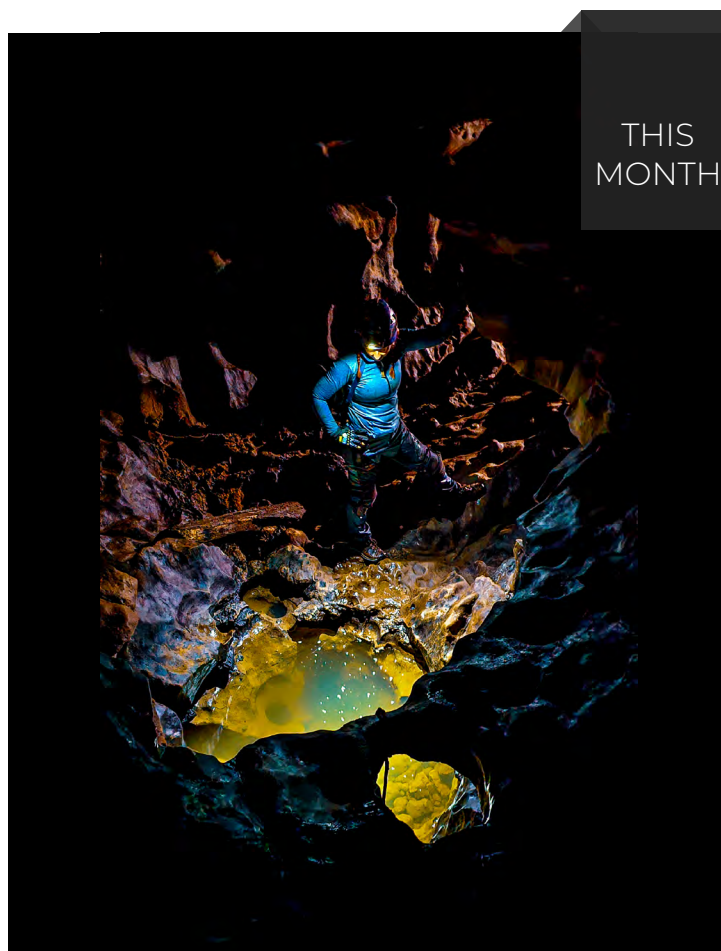
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MONTH

THIS MONTH'S COVER

Photo from the 2026 NSS Convention - Photo Salon
Titled: "Nuclear Glow"

Photo by Charles Blanton

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Sept. 3 to 7, 2026

75th Annual Diamond Reunion - Old Timers Reunion *The Original Underground Party; Come as you were!* - Dailey, WV

The year was 1950 and the NSS was only nine years old. Cavers throughout the region were busy discovering and exploring caves in West Virginia, and celebrated that by establishing an annual Labor Day weekend tradition. Long-time OTR attendees will have no trouble reaching into their personal way-back machines to draw on their own rich histories of OTRs gone by. New OTR attendees are invited to choose from any of our past themes and imagine what those past decades were all about! Themes started in 2000, but even before then, the DooDah Parades were a vast display of caver creativity. Come join the spectacle and become a part of OTR history! Website at: <https://www.otr.org> and <https://otr.org/2026/01/otr-themes-since-1999/>

September 13, 2026

Celebrate! The International Day of Caves and Karst is on September 13th!

This is a day set by UNESCO to tell the world about the importance of caves and karst. Local cave and karst activities will make the outreach day successful! It's a worldwide opportunity to tell YOUR world about why we systematically explore, study, and protect caves and karst! Register your Dave of Caves Events at: <https://dayofcaves.org>

October 8-11, 2026

2026 TAG Fall Cave-In - Mentone, Alabama

The TAG Fall Cave-In is an annual caving event hosted in the TAG (Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia) region. This event celebrates caving and community and is a longstanding tradition. Hosted by the Dogwood City Grotto (DCG) with the assistance of grottos from all around, it features a weekend of caving, socializing, a large bonfire, entertainment, and much more. The event is also a major fundraiser for the grotto and proceeds go back into the community to support conservation, research, and rescue efforts. <https://dogwoodcitygrotto.org/TAG-Fall-Cave-In>

April 29 to May 2, 2027

NSS Spring regional meeting of the Mississippi Valley Ozark Region, April 29 - May 2, 2027 at Shrine Camp, Buckhorn, MO (past NSS Convention site). Website is not up yet, but information will be available on facebook page [MVOR-MVOR.ORG](https://www.facebook.com/MVOR-MVOR.ORG)



June 14-18, 2027

2027 NSS Convention - Del Rio, TX

!Bienvenidos! For cavers, there's a reason to return to the Lone Star State for the fifth time: our biggest and best convention yet!



Texas cavers welcome everyone to the border city of Del Rio for the 2027 NSS Convention, June 14-18. This will be a real Tex-Mex Convention, with piñatas, mariachis, and of course, caves on both sides of the border.

Website at: <https://caves.org/convention/2027-convention>

FEATURES



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by Dean Wiseman and Laura Demarest



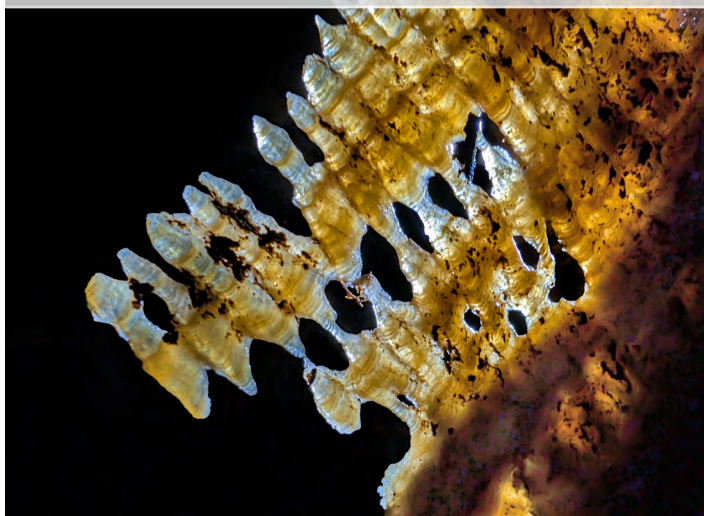
08 2026 NSS Awards

by the NSS Awards Committee



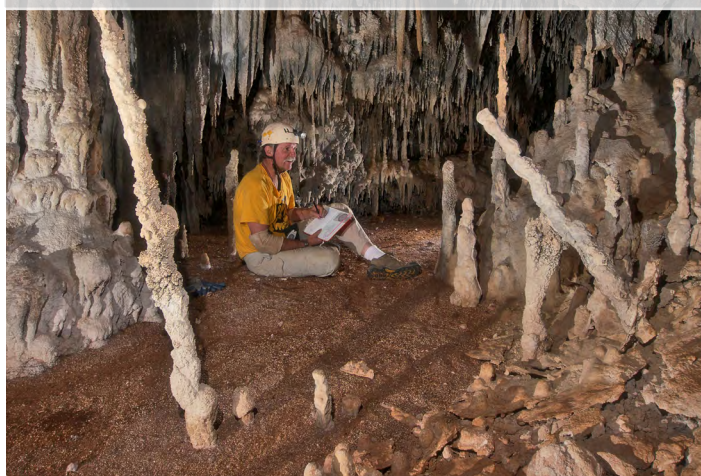
16 2026 NSS Salons

by the NSS Salon Committee



28 Spelean Spotlight: Ray Keeler

by April Gocha



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BACK COVER

Photo from the 2026 NSS Convention - Photo Salon
 Titled: "Desert Windows"
 Photo by Dave Bunnell

Special Thanks to Dave for numerous
 convention photos seen in this issue.



2026 NSS Ohio River Valley Convention Wrap-Up



by Dean Wiseman and Laura Demarest

As Co-Chairs of the recent 2026 NSS Ohio River Valley Convention held in Corydon, Indiana July 6-10, we wish to thank everyone who attended and helped make it one to remember! We are profoundly grateful that you all helped us to bring to life a truly extraordinary event. Convention this year saw over 1,100 attendees from all around the nation and the world: 43 states, two Canadian provinces, Vietnam, Japan, and New Zealand.

Our planning team, with members spread across 12 states, has dedicated many hard-working hours over the past four years to ensure that this Ohio River Valley Convention delivered on five major goals: good food, excellent entertainment, awesome caving, a great program, and first-rate service. Alongside those core goals, we hoped to introduce a generation of new cavers to the deep history, culture, and awesome caving in this corner of the United States—and showcase this special region to our more experienced cavers and community members in new and novel ways. We certainly couldn't have done it without a superb staff of caver volunteers, as well as local partners in Harrison County and the surrounding region. The Corydon community truly rolled out the red carpet for cavers! Our sites at Corydon Central High School and the Harrison County Fairgrounds provided excellent hub locations for a week filled with caving and camaraderie. And we thank the “weather gods” as this year's event did not experience

any of the extreme meteorological drama for which past NSS conventions (including Indiana) are well known! When we originally hatched our plan for an Ohio River Valley convention, our intention was to hold the event in June, as the weather is traditionally not as hot and humid, and less chance for those “dog day” thunderstorms. But as it turned out, June was extraordinarily wet this year, and so we really lucked out in that regard. Other than a bit of rain here and there to cool off the intense mid-summer heat, the weather as a whole was quite cooperative.

One of the most interesting statistics to report from Convention this year: Roughly one third of all convention attendees managed to get underground! Many attendees took advantage of curated tours of Wyandotte Cave led by Keith Dunlap and John Benton, and many Convention goers enjoyed the field trips and hands-on workshops: Geology, Biology, Speleology for Cavers, Cave Photography, Sketching, Contingency Considerations in Caving, Karst Hydrology of the Lost River, and Speleothem Repair. Even folks who otherwise didn't go underground enjoyed a relaxing Stargazer Float Trip hosted by Cave Country Canoes one evening. That aspect of Convention was very important to our team: Create a Convention that would be accessible not only to cavers seeking underground adventures, but also to those who appreciate caves in so many other unique ways.

There were also contests for vertical caving, cartography, sketching, fine arts, a writer's workshop, and a cave storytelling event hosted by the inimitable former Indiana caver, Bill Steele. Other highlights included the enormous 60-foot x 60-foot 1:600 scale (1 inch = 50 feet) Mammoth Cave System Map on display, and the vendor area was the largest that has been hosted at any NSS Convention in years. And for our younger participants we had the Junior Speleological Society engaging in a variety of daily field trips and activities, including some in-cave rescue training with the help of National Cave Rescue Coordinator, Gretchen Baker, and other NCRC Instructors.

Evening activities kept the energy high throughout the week with Howdy Party and Banquet dinners provided by Schnitzelbank, a German-themed restaurant and catering company from the nearby town of Jasper, Indiana. We also enjoyed customized cave-themed beer and cider selections from Feed Store Beer (Greene County, Indiana) and the Corydon-local Turtle Run Winery. We also want to acknowledge our fantastic live performances from under the grandstand: The Creekers for Howdy Party, Muchos Garcias on our Wednesday night campground party, and finally The Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band for our post-Banquet celebration. The really, really fun part about these three bands is that they all share a genuine love for caves! And they all absolutely rocked out...

with one participant commenting "when she [Creeker Anna Blanton, also an NSS Member] sawed that fiddle with her light saber bow, I about fainted!"

We are also grateful for Indiana Caverns hosting an open house at the cave for the Howdy Party, and keynote Speaker Genevieve von Petzinger joining us at 2:00 am Ireland-time for a Zoom presentation "The Deep Time Relationship Between People and Caves" which was recorded for the NSS Webinar Series. We were also delighted to be able to host CaveSim, brought to Convention thanks to the support of many generous sponsors. The Cave-Sim team demonstrated incredible dedication by driving all the way from California and overcoming a vehicle breakdown along the way to make it happen!

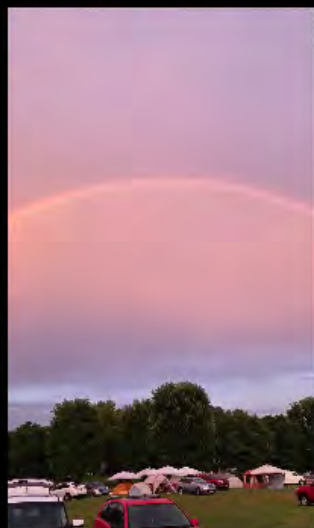
An event of this scale relies deeply on community support and strong partnerships. Special thanks go out to the Harrison County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, Cave Country Canoes, and Indiana Caverns, all serving as our primary sponsors for the event. We are also extremely grateful to the Wyandotte Cave staff, Indiana DNR officials, and local law enforcement for overseeing safety and access across multiple cave locations, as well as the private landowners and trip leaders who generously shared some amazingly special places with convention attendees. Above all, we must thank our volunteer staff who poured their hearts into the support of this monumental event, working tirelessly (and attending many Zoom meetings!) since planning started in July 2022.

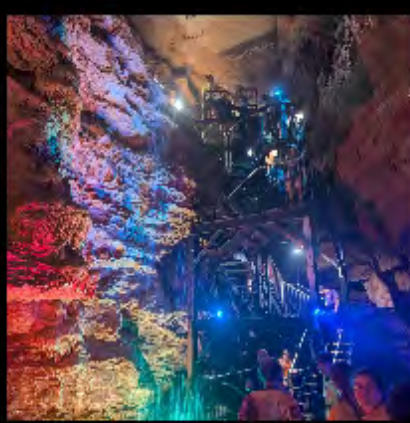
We may not know exactly when the NSS Convention will next return to the Ohio River Valley, but there is no doubt that Corydon will be remembered for many years as an amazing host location. This event demonstrated the power of regional collaboration and showcased the character of our local community and caves to a national audience. We have much to be proud of and thankful for as we close the books on another memorable NSS Convention. And last—but certainly not least—we hope you had as much fun as we hoped you would!

Many thanks from your grateful 2026 NSS Convention Co-Chairs.



PHOTOS IN THIS SPREAD COURTESY OF DAVE BUNNELL AND CONVENTION COMMUNITY COLLECTION





2026 NSS AWARDS

BY THE NSS AWARDS DEPARTMENT



The NSS recognized the following members at its National Convention in Corydon, Indiana on July 10, 2026 for their contributions to the exploration, scientific study, artistic expression, and conservation of caves. The awards were presented at the Friday Awards Banquet.

2026 William J. Stephenson Outstanding Service Award – *Gary Moss, sub-chair*

This Award is presented annually to one NSS member for their outstanding service to the Society and its goals. This year's recipient was **Pete Johnson**, (NSS 62728) FE, CM.

Pete has been instrumental in moving the NSS forward to our new management structure with an Executive Director by leading the Executive Director steering committee and changing the entire structure of the NSS.

He and a team developed his idea to secure tens of thousands of dollars in Google search grants to drive traffic to grotto websites across the country. It's increased the visibility of local NSS chapters to so many prospective cavers without costing the NSS a dime.

In Montana, Pete has co-organized the Tears of the Turtle project and built a small team to explore and map this difficult cave, the deepest in the USA. The Bridger-Teton Cave Project is another example of productive caver-Forest Service collaboration in the country in mapping caves with the Forest Service. He spearheaded the creation of the Rowdy Rendezvous Grotto in 2025 to help new cavers get started in locations that were previously not served by any nearby Grotto.

Pete assisted the Rocky Mountain Regional Coordinator for the Vertical Training Commission with many hours of service in managing VTC data and building the infrastructure for this effort. Along these same lines at the Tennessee con-



Outstanding Service Award recipient Peter (Pete) Johnson

vention in 2024, when registration faced technical failures, Pete stepped in with others to form an unofficial ad hoc "advanced technical solutions department."

When the NSS began pursuing grant opportunities to improve infrastructure at Parks Ranch Cave, Pete organized a team of NSS volunteers to handle grant-writing logistics for this project.

2026 Honorary Member Award – *Geary Schindel, sub-chair*

This Award is for contributions to speleology broadly defined. The 2026 NSS Honorary Member Award was awarded to **Dr. William B. White** (NSS 2237RL, OS, CM (twice), and SC) of State College, Pennsylvania.

Dr. White is Professor Emeritus of Geosciences in the Department of Geosciences at Pennsylvania State University. He joined the Penn State faculty in 1963. Dr. White's research activities have been divided between materials science and geological science. The former includes investigations of crystal chemistry; glass science; optical and phosphor materials; and infrared, Raman, and luminescence spectroscopy. The geological sciences include mineral physics and the hydrogeology and geomorphology of caves and karst. Overall, the research has been reported in more than 440 technical papers and 15 books. Recent books include the *Encyclopedia of Caves*, *The Caves of Burnsville Cove*, and *Caves and Karst of the Greenbrier Valley in West Virginia*. His textbooks on Geomorphology and Hydrology of Karst Terrains and Karst Hydrology: Concepts from the Mammoth Cave Area have been widely used.

Dr. White received the NSS Outstanding Service Award in



Winner of the Honorary Member Award Dr. William White

1975 and the Science Award in 1994. In 2001 he received the Karst Waters Institute's Karst Award and in 2004 the Distinguished Career Award from the Quaternary Geology and Geomorphology Division of the Geological Society of America. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Mineralogical Society of America, the American Ceramic Society, and the NSS. He was the Chief Scientist of the Cave Research Foundation.

2026 Lew Bicking Award – *Rene Ohms, sub-chair*

The Lew Bicking Award recognizes the dedication of an NSS member and cave explorer (or pair of explorers) for the thorough exploration and mapping of a cave or group of caves. Recipients of the Lew Bicking Award exhibit a high level of persistence and a hard charging attitude and are pioneers in cutting age cave exploration.

The recipient of the 2025 Lew Bicking Award was **Adam Weaver** (NSS 62352) FE. Adam grew up in West Virginia, but later moved out West and went on his first caving trip with his college outdoors club. On this trip he was immediately captivated by the possibility of cave exploration and discovery, and the next day he even bought a Sten light!

He jumped right into exploration at South Dakota's Jewel Cave and went on every trip he could. He soon became a trip leader at Jewel, then learned to sketch. This caver has now surveyed over 30 miles of passages in Jewel and led or participated in dozens of cave camps. Over the last 15 years he has been the first person to discover several of the cave's largest and most impressive passages.

In 2012 he went on his first trip in New Mexico's Fort Stanton Cave. This cave was like a dream for him – an underground wonderland where you could travel 10 miles or more one way, survey more than a mile of virgin cave, then exit, all in one long "day" of 35 hours. He has now done 15 trips to Fort Stanton, including several multi-day bivy camp trips, and has surveyed over 17 miles of the cave. He has set many world records there, including the most cave traveled in a single trip (28 miles), the furthest point reached from a cave entrance (over 13 miles), and the largest amount of cave discovered and mapped in a single day (a ridiculous 2.34 miles of survey).

2026 NSS Spelean Arts and Letters Award – *Marian McConnell, sub-chair*

The NSS Spelean Arts and Letters Award is presented annually to recognize one or a pair of NSS members who, through joint specific actions qualify equally for the award, over time has advanced spelean arts and letters by significant artistic expression, management, or criticism.

The 2026 NSS Spelean Arts and Letters Award was awarded to **Dave Bunnell**, (NSS 14760) FE, OS. Dave's countless contributions to spelean arts and letters span more than half a century with caving trips, expeditions both foreign and domestic, survey projects, newsletters, books, reports, photography, websites, digital creations, and more. His involvement in these activities led to him authoring over 40 feature articles in the *NSS News*. He participated in expeditions to Gunung Buda in Borneo and later produced the teams' reports using all-digital prepress for the photos. He and his companion Djuna produced the Virtual Cave website, a guide to cave formations with he maintained and expanded it over the years and worked with Pete Johnson to incorporate it into the NSS website.

In 1996, he became editor of the *NSS News*. With digital halftones versus traditional photographic line screens, the photo quality in the printed News improved dramatically. He also ushered in a color cover in every issue with a four-page color insert. In 2010 he made the News full color, again without a large budget increase and a new printer. He has authored and produced four books published by the NSS. About ten years ago he became chair of the NSS Special Publications



Rene Ohms presents the Lew Bicking Award to Adam Weaver

This year's Lew Bicking recipient is a go-getter who sees what needs to be done to facilitate exploration and then makes it happen. He offers sound ideas to cave managers, is a negotiator and diplomat, and volunteers hundreds of hours to maintain relationships with cave owners and managers and ensure access for cavers. He was instrumental in establishing new camps in Jewel Cave, provided recommendations for bivy gear at Fort Stanton Cave, and has hauled huge loads of equipment to the ends of these caves.

Although his many nomination letters focus primarily on his achievements in Jewel and Fort Stanton, he has also surveyed and contributed greatly to projects in dozens of other caves, including Lechuguilla, Wind Cave, Bethlehem, Helms Deep, and South Dakota's latest frontier of exploration, Gem Cave.

Committee and with his wife Elizabeth, did layout on six other NSS books. He has plans to work on more books of his own, especially one on the great Sea Caves of the world. In 2022, he retired from the *NSS News* after 26 years. He says he felt blessed to work with so many wonderful people in our caving family who encouraged his continued work on it. Along with his cave photography, it opened many doors for cave visits world-wide.



Dave Socky awards the Arts and Letters Award to Dave Bunnell

2026 Alvin McDonald Award –

Rene Ohms, sub-chair

New for 2026, the Alvin McDonald Award recognizes a young cave explorer age 25 or younger (changing to age 30 in 2027) for outstanding accomplishments.

The first ever recipient of the new NSS Alvin McDonald Award was **Paul Slayback** (NSS 70497), a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines and an active participant in the Williams Canyon Project at Cave of the Winds. He serves on the Williams Cave Project Board and Science Committee. He is an accomplished cave surveyor, with trips to several caves in Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, and South Dakota. He served as the Colorado Cave Survey representative for the Colorado School of Mines Grotto from 2020-2023, and since graduating he has continued to mentor and encourage several new young cavers.

In 2024, he became the representative for an agreement between the White River National Forest and the Colorado Grotto, which he pushed to establish in order to find, map, and protect caves.

2026 NSS Science Award –

Dr. Hazel Barton, sub-chair

The NSS Science Award recognizes a member of the society who, over time, has demonstrated an outstanding dedication to the scientific study of caves.

The winner of the 2026 Science Award is **Dr. Bogdan P. Onac** (NSS 46462) SC, whose career has spanned more than three decades of pioneering research into the geology, mineralogy, and paleoclimate records preserved within caves. Dr. Onac is internationally recognized for advancing the use of cave deposits to reconstruct past sea levels, climate change, and environmental history, with research that has appeared in leading scientific journals including *Nature*, *Science*, *Nature Geoscience*, and *Science Advances*. His work has expanded our understanding of cave minerals, cave ice, and speleothems, while also demonstrating the value of caves as archives of Earth's environmental history. Beyond his own research, Dr. Onac has helped shape the international cave science community through his leadership as Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Speleology*, his mentorship of students and early-career scientists, and his longstanding service to the



Alvin McDonald winner Paul Slayback

One of his projects with the Forest Service includes regular ridgewalking. He often uses LiDAR to prioritize areas to ridgewalk, and this paid off when he discovered and surveyed a new deep pit in Colorado



Dr. Hazel Barton announcing the winner of the Science Award

International Union of Speleology. Dr. Onac's career reflects sustained scientific excellence, international leadership, and a lifelong commitment to advancing the scientific study of caves.

2026 Peter M. Hauer Spelean History Award –

John Benton, sub-chair

The Peter M. Hauer Spelean History Award is given annually to an individual who has made a significant contribution to spelean history.

This year the recipients were **Catherine and Charles Bishop** (NSS12100) FE, LB and (NSS 9355) FE, LB. Catherine (Cat) is the author with assistance from her husband Charlie on *THE JAMES CAVE PROJECT; 60 YEARS INSIDE BALD KNOB*, 497 pages published by the NSS. The book is an extensive and detailed look at the history, exploration, geology, biology, cavers, stories from pre-history, the 1960's to present and more.

Since before 1970, the two cavers have given numerous talks, written articles, explored, surveyed, documented, researched, the caves of Bald Knob and others near Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky. The two are long time members of the Blue Grass Grotto in Kentucky. Congratulations!



John Benton on left awards the Hauer Spelean History Award to Catherine and Charles Bishop

2026 Victor A. Schmidt Conservation Award – *Val Hildreth-Werker, sub-chair*

The Victor A. Schmidt Conservation Award recognizes an NSS member who has demonstrated outstanding dedication to cave conservation over time. This year's recipient was **Gretchen Baker** (NSS 50323) FE, CO.

Gretchen exudes the spirit of conservation in everything she does! In her dedicated enthusiasm for time underground, her excitement for cave critters, her exploration of cave passages, her facilitation of scientific discoveries, and in her teaching of minimum-impact techniques in all things caving.

She has organized over a dozen lint and restoration camps and developed and led the Cave Animal of the Year committee for six years. She wrote grant proposals for and led projects protecting Lehman Caves through improved infrastructure, which includes a new electrical system to reduce algae near lights. She wrote grant proposals for Protecting Wild Caves of White Pine County, Nevada, which included overseeing the Dream Team to do multidisciplinary studies on caves, and purchasing a CaveSim for use at Great Basin

2026 Group Conservation Award – *Val Hildreth-Werker, sub-chair*

This award recognizes the conservation efforts of an NSS Group or Internal Organization and is selected by the Conservation Division. For 2026 it was awarded to the **Indiana Karst Conservancy (IKC)**.

This all-volunteer caver organization was founded in 1986 in response to the extensive vandalism of the iconic Garrison Chapel Valley caves. In Wayne's Cave the infamous 1,200-foot crawlway and the equally long Backbreaker countless hours were spent tediously removing graffiti. The first gate was installed in Wayne Cave in 1986. Unknown trespassers endangered permitted visitors by jamming locks while other cavers were still inside.

This conservancy acquired its first preserve, where Sullivan Cave is located, in 1998. Six additional preserves totaling almost 300 acres have been added representing caves and exposed karst landscapes.

Beyond their seven preserves, the IKC manages access to

NSS Outstanding Landowner - Caver Relations Award – *Julie Schenck-Brown, sub-chair*

The NSS Outstanding Landowner-Caver Relations Award recognizes cave landowners whose efforts have been exemplary in supporting cavers and the mission of the NSS through access to their caves and property, as well as their support of conservation, exploration, and education. **Keith Dunlap** was recognized as this year's NSS Outstanding Landowner.

Keith Dunlap has been described as the bedrock in his caving community and has worked for 30+ years with tireless dedication and efforts to preserve the karst of Indiana. As a founding member of the Indiana Karst Conservancy (IKC), and as a private cave landowner, he has helped protect some of the most spectacular caves in the state.

For decades, Keith has purchased property around existing IKC properties to expand their boundaries. After massive cleanup efforts, he resells these properties to the IKC at a significant financial loss. Acquiring properties and expanding the boundaries of existing IKC lands increases the footprint



Val Hildreth-Werker presenting award to Gretchen Baker

National Park.

She incorporates cave conservation in her books and articles, NCRC training, and cave trips. She treasures her time underground, exploring cave passages, assisting with scientific discoveries, and teaching minimum-impact techniques in cave conservation.



Val Hildreth-Werker presenting award to the IKC

privately owned caves, as well as state-owned caves, Spring Mill State Park, and Cave River Valley Natural Area. They partner with The Nature Conservancy and the City of Salem in managing other sites.

This IKC is “dedicated to the conservation and preservation of caves and karst features in Indiana and other areas of the world.” It is 350 members strong, is committed to advocating on behalf of Indiana's caves and karst, the lifeforms that depend on them, and the promotion of safe and responsible caving.



Landowner Award chair Julie Schenck-Brown to Keith Dunlap

of management above significant cave systems, protecting them from run-off and future development.

As the owner of three significant caves, two of which are important bat hibernacula, Keith supports the mission of the NSS promoting conservation, access, and fellowship. It is extremely special to have a private cave landowner who preserves access to so many incredibly important properties and cave systems. It is an honor to recognize Keith Dunlap as the recipient of this award in 2026!

2026 James G. Mitchell Award – *Roy Jameson, sub-chair*

The James G. Mitchell Award is presented for the best scientific presentation by a student NSS member at the annual convention of the Society. This year's recipient was **Riannon Colton** (NSS 68404) for her presentation titled: "Understanding the variability in gas concentrations of Carlsbad Cavern".

One of her projects with the Forest Service includes regular ridgewalking. He often uses LiDAR to prioritize areas to ridgewalk, and this paid off when he discovered and surveyed a new deep pit in Colorado



Roy Jameson awards the Mitchell Award to Riannon Colton

2026 Steve Hudson Cave Rescue Award –

The Steve Hudson Award for Cave Rescue is presented for service to cave rescue. The annual award is to recognize a person or persons who have made contributions to cave rescue and/or the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC). The 2026 recipient was **Phil Whitfield** (NSS 12901).

Phil has spent decades in the cave rescue world teaching hundreds of cavers, organizing and assisting with many classes, and being an inspiration. Known by some as the father of cave rescue in Canada, Phil has influenced more than a generation of cavers, including being a mentor for many. He has also helped established cave rescue response in western Canada.



NCRC National Coordinator Gretchen Baker announces the Hudson Cave Rescue Award goes to Phil Whitfield

2026 NSS Board of Governor Certificates of Appreciation

These members were recognized and awarded certificates of appreciation at the banquet. Congratulations!

Tony Amundson	NSS 35490
Michael Cicherski	NSS 36668
Jay Clark	NSS 3896
Jolene Creighton	NSS 72966
Emily P. Davis	NSS 62810
Laura Demerest	NSS 64981
Melody Eady-Pumplin	NSS 45731
Kristine Ebrey	NSS 58439
Preston Forsythe	NSS 14161
Shari Forsythe	NSS 24794
Pete Johnson	NSS 62728
Maureen Handler	NSS 23239
Curt Harler	NSS 22735
Val Hildreth-Werker	NSS 28963
Dave Hughes	NSS 14550
Pat Kambesis	NSS 17304
Vince Kappler	NSS 7274
Michelle Kesler	NSS 75835
Donald McFarlane	NSS 23525
Nina Martin	NSS 41664
Aira Mildice	NSS 68874
John Moses	NSS 7009
Kara Posso	NSS 68946
Bob Roth	NSS 66216
Julie Schenck-Brown	NSS 30493
Ed Strausser	NSS 14719

Carol Tiderman	NSS 10604
Bill Torode	NSS 5013
Michelle Vaughn	NSS 55064
Tim White	NSS 26949
Becky Williams	NSS 71168
Dean Wiseman	NSS 32690



The 2026 convention co-chairs passing the helmet to the 2027 co-chairs, Jim Kennedy and Ethan Perrine

2026 Certificates of Merit –

Bert Ashbrook, sub-chair

The NSS Board of Governors awards the Certificate of Merit for a specific, recent accomplishment in cave exploration, study, or conservation or which furthers other goals of the Society. For each specific, recent accomplishment, up to three individuals or organizations may be recognized. For 2026, the Board of Governors awarded a Certificate for Merit for two different accomplishments, both involving government-owned caves in the western USA.

The first accomplishment concerns cave access in the Big-horn Mountains of Wyoming and Montana, and in particular Big Horn Cave and Horsethief Cave. The situation there is complicated, with cave entrances in two different states and ownership split between the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Crow Indian Tribe. Fifteen years ago, the FBI was called out to apprehend scientists who visited a cave in the area. Then, one person began forging relationships and earning the trust of these government agencies. As a result of this person's persistence and professionalism, today the Tribe and agencies cooperate with cavers and manage the cave system with a unified management philosophy that allows cavers and scientists access to the Big Horn-Horsethief System and other caves nearby. This year, the BOG recognized **Jason Forberg** (NSS 700046) CM, for "years developing relationships with the NPS, BLM, and Crow Tribe focused on cave access."

The second accomplishment concerns caves in White Pine County, Nevada, within Great Basin National Park and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The Park Service and



Bert Ashbrook awards a Certificate of Merit to Louise Hose and Gretchn Baker

the Forest Service own a lot of caves in this part of the basin and range, but they did not have a good handle on the resources they had. To find out what they had, what was important, and how to protect their cave resources, they got the help of—who else—the cavers. For three years, a "dream team" comprising sixty different cavers worked in 42 different caves, producing a 1,550-page report with cave maps and resource inventories. They've presented their work at numerous scientific and professional conferences and established a baseline from which future speleology can proceed. And perhaps most importantly, they have instilled in the agencies an appreciation for these caves and all that they have to offer. The BOG has recognized the Protecting Wild Caves of the White Pine County Project for "studying 42 caves in Great Basin National Park and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest."

2026 Fellows of the Society –

Carol Tiderman, Sub-Chair

The NSS bestows the title of Fellow of the NSS on members who, over time, have exemplified by their actions their dedication to the mission of the NSS or to the Society itself. The NSS honored the following members with Fellow Awards this year

Akers, Tony	NSS 20125
Bishop, Stephen	NSS 26178
Bosch Rachel	NSS 41043
Brown, Ben	NSS 63367

Covington, Matt	NSS 45648
Demarest, Laura	NSS 64981
Ficco, Katarina Kosic	NSS 65868
Gracinin, Tomislav	NSS 12529
Graham, Katie	NSS 67169
McClintock, Holly	NSS 62930
Pelsor, Matt	NSS 63305
Pumplin, Melody Eady	NSS 45731
Smith, Barb	NSS 30543
Walker, D J	NSS 52181
Willingham, Devra	NSS 60026
Wiseman, Dean	NSS 32690



NSS Awards Department chair Bill Steele

A Note From NSS Awards Department Chair Bill Steele:

Thank you for submitting your nominations and support letters for the 2025 NSS awards. For the 2027 NSS Awards, please be keenly aware that the firm deadline for nominations and support letters is November 15, 2026. Start early to do a thorough nomination write-up and get good support letters submitted. Many NSS members deserve recognition, but they need to be nominated to receive it.

See: <https://caves.org/nss-awards/>



VERTICAL SECTION 2026 CONVENTION REPORT

BY VERTICAL SECTION STAFF

The Vertical Section of the NSS experienced a very successful convention in Indiana. We opened the international rope climbing contest on Monday afternoon. By Tuesday afternoon we had 50 climbs. Congratulations to the impressive efforts of two new world record holders: Chelsea Dau and Peter Hertl! Chelsea set the new world record of 08:07.3 in the women's 120m Sit-Stand event (age 30-39). Once again, Peter Hertl set a new world record of 0:36.0 in the men's 30m Mechanical event (age 70-79).

Special thanks to Mark Skove, the Climbing Contest coordinator, and all the Vertical Section volunteers and other cavers who helped with pulling ropes and timing.

Male 30m Sit-Stand:

Age	Name	Time
13-17	Cayden Zarbock	03:13.3
20-29	Matthew Kok	01:34.6
20-29	Mark Poveda	01:56.0
20-29	Lars Vogel	03:07.2
20-29	Noah Synowlec	03:34.9
20-29	Charlie Trumm	03:54.0
20-29	Desomnd Bean	05:41.9
20-29	Zach Stone	06:53.2
30-39	Benjamin Dau OW	01:22.7
30-39	Eli Meyer	02:48.6
40-49	Matt Covington	01:37.0
50-49	Joel Flewelling	02:55.0
50-59	Erik Meitner	03:54.7
60-69	Bill Gee	04:08.4
70-79	Peter Hertl	01:51.0
70-79	Ernie Maier	02:53.8

Female 30m Sit-Stand:

Age	Name	Time
13-17	Kayla Mitchell	03:10.2
20-29	Sophia Remhof OW	01:32.2
20-29	Penelope Vorster	01:53.0
20-29	Emma Enos	04:22.8
20-29	Jacque Heggen	05:01.1
20-29	Maev Uhalde	05:08.7
20-29	Emma Enos	05:11.2
20-29	Sam Johnson	08:48.3
30-39	Georgia Schneider	02:08.5
30-39	Jennie Hawkey	09:27.0
40-49	Nikki Fox	03:37.0
40-49	Tiffnay Stoots	05:05.7
50-59	Amy Morton	03:08.4
50-59	Suzanna Brauer	03:26.0
70-79	Anne Grindle	08:43.7

Male 30m Mechanical:

Age	Name	Time
30-39	Mike Murhpy	01:06.1
60-69	Bill Gee	01:57.2
70-79	Peter Hertl	WR 00:36.0
70-79	Patrick Minnick	03:33.1
80-89	Bill Baus	03:06.0

Female 120m Mechanical:

Age	Name	Time
50-59	Julie Schenck-Brown OW	15:37.3

Female 120m Sit-Stand:

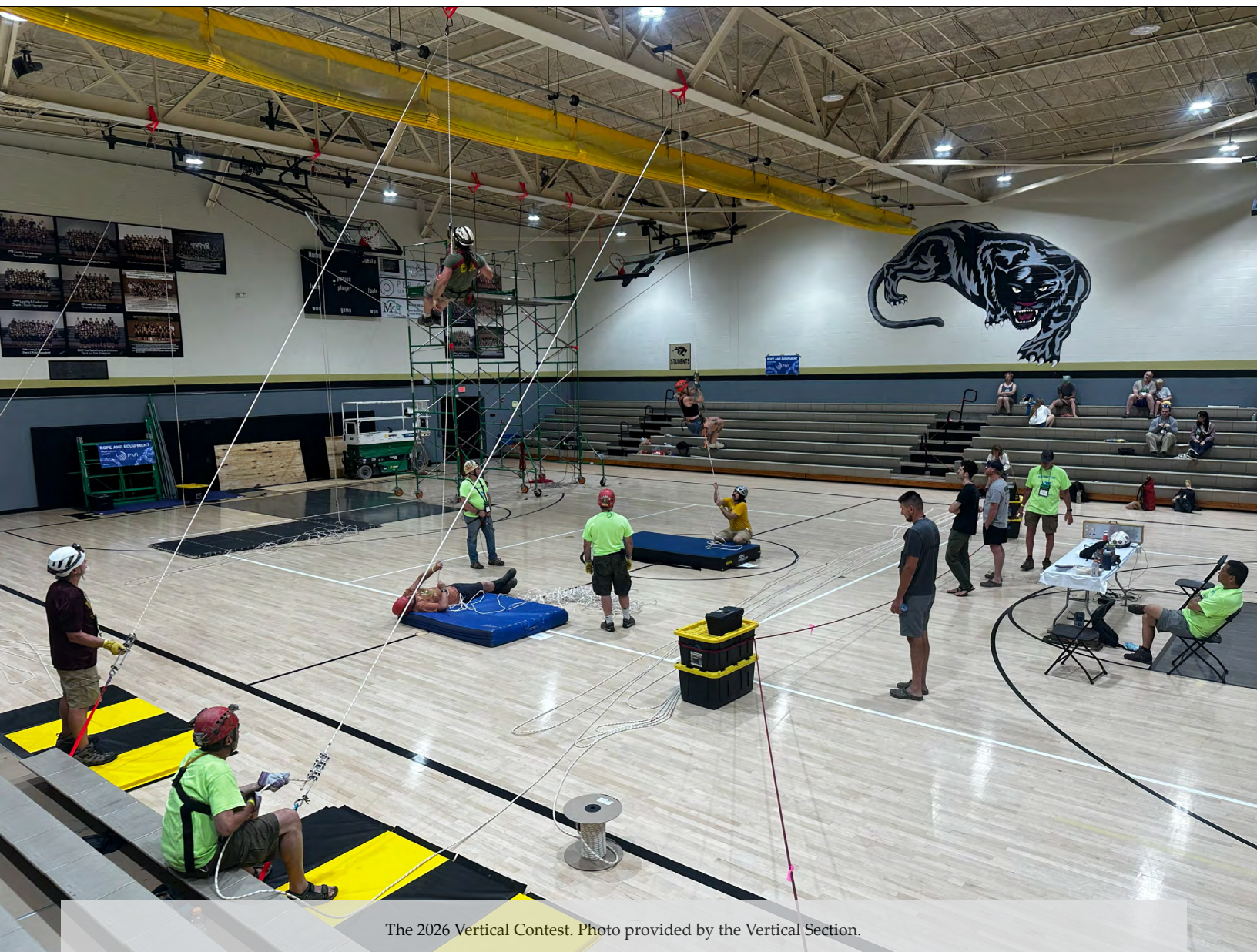
Age	Name	WR	Time
30-39	Chelsea Dau	WR	08:07.3
50-59	Suzanne Brauer		26:43.4

Male 120m Sit-Stand:

Age	Name	Time
17-19	Alex Christian	21:25.3
20-29	Nicholas Smith	26:46.5
40-49	Matt Covington OW	11:34.2



Julie Schenck-Brown after some rope work at the contest. Photo by Dave Bunnell



The 2026 Vertical Contest. Photo provided by the Vertical Section.

The Discover Vertical Caving program introduces cavers to the equipment used in vertical caving. This year we ran two sessions and both sessions almost sold out. Thank you to Mark Chai the DVC coordinator, and his talented team of volunteers from both the Vertical Section and Vertical Training Commission.

On Thursday over 80 cavers attended the Vertical Section Presentations chaired by Gracie Cornish. The presenters and topics included:

Philip Rykwaldner - *An Investigation of Permanently Rugged Ropes*

Ron Miller - *NSS Vertical Training Commission: July 2026 Progress Update*

Rachel Saker - *Fundamentals of Rigging*

Kevin Mulligan - *The Gauntlet*

Tim Whit - *History of Kernmantle Rope*

Jenna Crabtree - *From Incident to Insight: A College Grotto's Perspective on a Vertical Rescue in Wind-Hicks Cave*

Rachel Saker - *Bolting Considerations for High Traffic Caves and/or Bad Rock Quality: A Brief Introduction to Glue-In's*

Jerin Manalel - *Fun and Sketchy Things to Do with Rappel Devices*

Thank-yous go out to: The IN Convention committee, Laura, Heather, Rand, and others for doing such a great job organizing the event and supporting the Vertical Sections unique needs.

Thanks to Tim White and PMI for the donation of the climbing contest ropes. Special thanks to the dedicated Vertical Section volunteers who instructed at

the Discover Vertical Caving program, and those who worked the rope climbing competition.

Thanks also go out to Jim Kennedy and his TX convention staff, for coming by for a first-hand look at what the Vertical Section does. We're looking forward to another great convention next year in TX.



2026 NSS SALON AWARDS

BY THE SALON COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Graphic Arts Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Blake N. Jördan

The Graphic Arts Salon includes cover art, posters, postcards, pamphlets and brochures.

Honorable Mention Awards

Blue Ridge Grotto, Carbide Dump, June, Sept, & Oct 2025; Indiana Cave Capers Aug-Dec 2025; Meramec Valley Grotto, Caver, April 2026; Central Indiana Grotto, CIG, Jan-Mar 2025; Huntsville Grotto, Huntsville Grotto Newsletter, Jan & Oct 2024, April & July 2025; Indiana Karst Conservancy, IKC UPDATE, Sept & Dec 2025; Illuminations, June 2025; Helderberg Grotto,

Mudslinger, Sept 2024, Dec 2025; Pine Mountain Grotto, Pine Mountain Fault, Dec 2025; Bloomington Indiana Grotto The BIG Newsletter, July-Sept 2025 & Jan-Mar 2026; Evansville Metropolitan Grotto Petroglyph, Jan-Dec 2022 & Jan-June 2023 & Aug-Dec 2024 & July-Dec 2025; Speleonics, April 2026.

Merit Awards

UA Cave Appreciation Club, The Cackler, Aug-Dec 2025; Blue Ridge Grotto, Carbide Dump, Dec 2025; Meramec Valley Grotto, Caver, May & Aug & Nov 2025 & Jan & Feb & July & Oct 2026; Central Indiana Grotto, CIG, July-Sept & Oct-Dec 2025; Huntsville Grotto, Huntsville Grotto Newsletter, March & June & July & Aug & Nov 2023 & June & Aug & Sept & Dec 2024

& March & May & June 2025; Indiana Karst Conservancy, IKC UPDATE, Mar & June 2025; Illuminations, Dec 2025; Helderberg Grotto, Mudslinger, July 2024 & Mar 2026; Bloomington Indiana Grotto The BIG Newsletter, Oct-Dec 2025; 2026 Cat Calander, Dave Bunnell

Cavers Choice

2026 Cat Calender, Dave Bunnell

Best of Show

Huntsville Grotto Newsletter, April 2024, Artist James Lavigne, Layout Chris Cargal.

Judges: Graphic Arts: Deanna Stever, Cady Soukup, and Ed Smith

Tulip and Perla's Underground Adventures



Graphic Salon Caver's Choice - 2026 Cat Calendar - by Dave Bunnell

2026

Photo Salon Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Nikki Fox

In the 2026 Photo Salon, there were 19 photographers who entered 219 photos. Out of those, 103 made it into the program.

Honorable Mention Awards

A Caver's Sunset - Cathrine Bishop, Resting - Michael Stark, Sketching Afloat - Shane Fryer, Blue Gypsum Beneath the Desert - Dave Bunnell, We Miss You Charley . . . - Shane Fryer, Cool in Blue - Nikki Fox, In the Heart of Borneo - Kevin Liow, Biting the

Book - Shane Fryer, Mint Room Glory - Nikki Fox, Not Complete - Derik Holtmann, Quick Escape - Roy Lichtenheldt, Sittin' on a Rock in a Cave - Richard Vernier, As Above So Below - Roy Lichtenheldt, Meta ovalis Spider Egg Sac - Richard Vernier.

Merit Awards

Blue-Eyed Pearl - Dave Bunnell, A Team Descent - Jennifer Dillaman, Jungle Meets Lava Tube - Dave Bunnell, Mechanical Sally - Charles Blanton, New Years Eve Canyon - Roy Lichtenheldt, Old Ice Forest - John Cochran, Short Roped - Michael Stark, Texas Toothpick - Kevin Liow.

Runner Ups

3rd: Feeling Small - Nikki Fox
2nd: Dark Walls - Jennifer Dillaman
1st: The Double Scabard - Dave Bunnell

Best of Show

Behind the Henkel - Jennifer Dillaman

Judges: Jake Lieber, Brian Mayfield, and Bill Nix

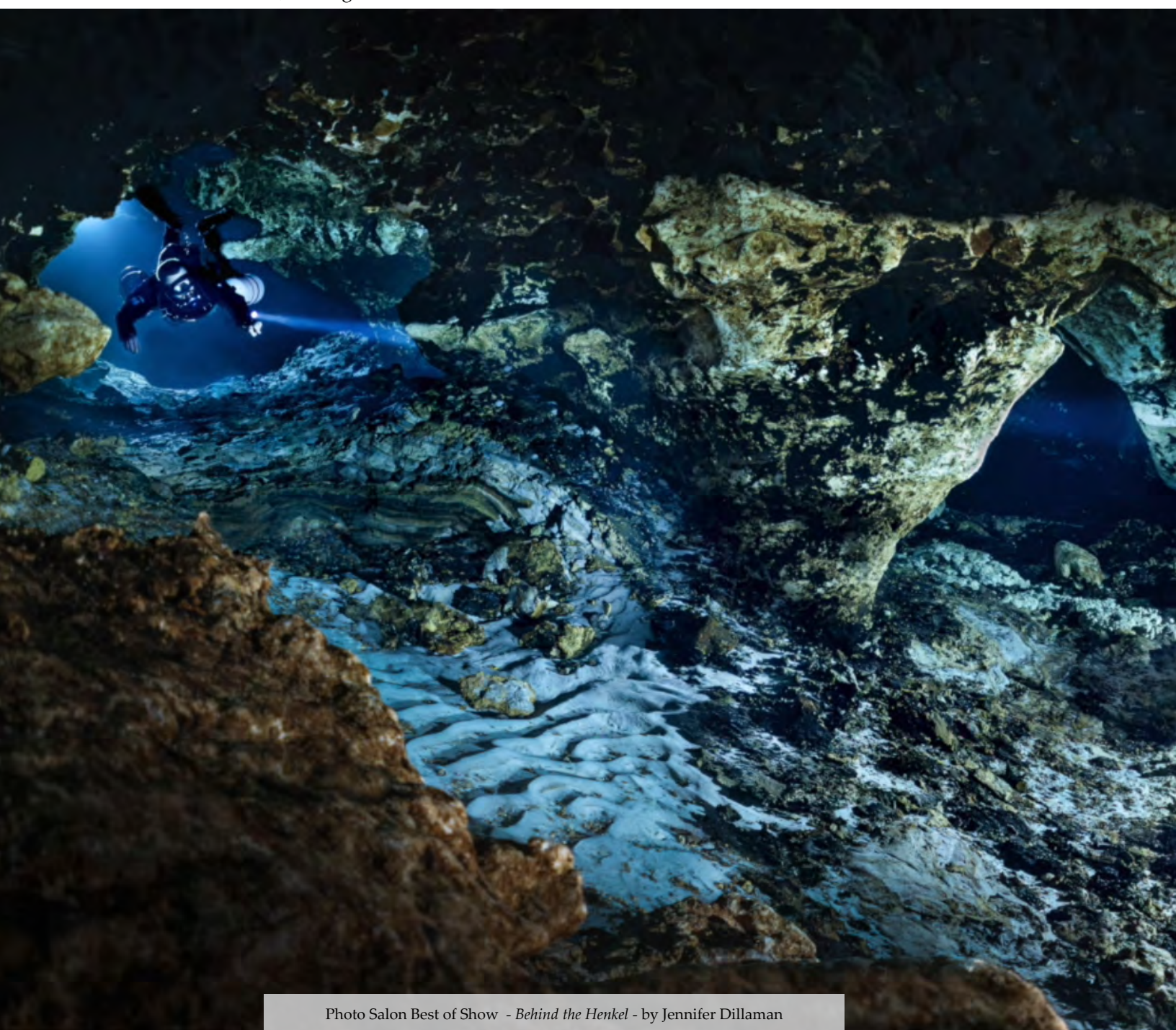


Photo Salon Best of Show - *Behind the Henkel* - by Jennifer Dillaman

Cave Cartography Award Winners for 2026

Chairs: Pat Kambesis and Jason Richards

Twenty-four cave maps were entered this year.

Honorable Mention Awards

Ana Tautua Cave, Ben Hutchins;
Bobsled Cave, Hans Bodenhamer;
Climax Cave, Kyle Kreutz;
Dinosaur Cave, Marvin Miller;
Falls Creek Cave Atlas, Garry Petrie;
Hendrie River Water Cave, Josh Brewer;
Latay Cave, Marion Ziemons;
Lehman Cave, Shane Fryer;
Lost Hollow Cave, Chad Holderfield;
Nimbus Cave, Philip Schuchardt;
Shady Valley Mill Cave, Nathan Curran;
Sisimen Awang Cave, Glen Malliet;
Sunray Cave, Hans Bodenhamer;
West Cemetery Cave TPU418, Jim Fox, Justin Huffman, and Jon Zetterberg;

Merit Awards

Carroll Cave, Dan Lamping;
Coon Cave, Dwight Livingston;
Blowing Hole, Section of Fern Cave, Marion Ziemons;
Lechuguilla-Lower Near East, Rod Horrocks; Macken Cave, Phillip Sullivan;
Nika Cave, Mary Hicks;

Cavers Choice

Sarah Furnace Cave, Bert Ashbrook

Best in show

Sarah Furnace Cave, Bert Ashbrook

Judges: Bert Ashbrook, Reilly Blackwell, Jim Borden, Josh Brewer, Paul Burger, Jenna Crabtree, George Dasher, Christian DeCelle, Walt Hamm, Rodney Horrocks, Pat Kambesis, Crash Kennedy, Dan Lamping, Kyle Lassiter, Joe Lieberz, Dwight Livingston, Ryan Maurer, Aria Mildice, Garry C. Petrie, Jason Richards, LJ Risteski, Stephanie Suen, Carol Vessely, Gabby Zawacki, Jon Zetterberg, Marion Ziemons

Sarah Furnace Cave in Clarion County, Pennsylvania, is the longest surveyed cave in the northeastern US (10.1 miles) and perhaps the densest two-dimensional maze cave in the world. The survey began after the cave was purchased by the Mid-Atlantic Karst Conservancy, lasted six years (2019–2025), and involved 160 different cavers on 174 trips. The map is on three sheets: (1) a plan view, (2) geologic sections (shown along both axes of a grid, sketched after the plan view was complete), and (3) place names and features (these did not fit on the plan view because of the dense maze). This Map was the Best of Show and Caver's Choice for the 2026 Salon.

Note and Map Right by Bert Ashbrook.

Sarah Furnace Cave

Barbara Schomer Preserve, Clarion County, Pennsylvania

Sheet 1 of 3 – Plan View

Datum 41° 01' North, 79° 36' West, 1125 feet elevation

Map version 141y, revised June 29, 2026

Surveyed by Team Sarah from March 2019 to February 2025

primarily using DistoX2 instruments with backsights

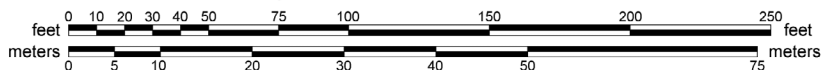
Surveyed length: 53,220 feet (10.08 miles; 16,220 meters)

Surveyed depth: 21 feet (6.4 meters)

© 2026 by Bert Ashbrook

Scale

Original drawn at 1:240. Labeled dimensions in feet.



Team Sarah

Sponsor: Mid-Atlantic Karst Conservancy

Cartographer: Bert Ashbrook

Data Managers: Chris Hill, Bert Ashbrook

Property Manager: Tom Metzgar

Surveyors (number of trips):

Chris Hill (154)	Lilly Hinkle (16)	John Merlo-Coyne (8)
Bert Ashbrook (151)	CoeDee Mowers (16)	Hunter Wodzinski (8)
Dwight Kempf (73)	Caitlin Kempf Clever (15)	George Breley (7)
Frank Vichok (61)	Aron Schmid (15)	Zack Carson (7)
Jeff Jahn (52)	Curt Harler (14)	Ed Frank (7)
Johanna Neller (38)	Katie Schmid (14)	Emma Enos (6)
Trevor Cicchinelli (35)	Gabby Zawacki (14)	Walt Hamm (6)
Hazel Barton (31)	Eric Sutterlin (13)	Dennis Melko (6)
Ed Epp (29)	Noah Synowiec (11)	Amanda Stofan (6)
Dave Field (26)	Sean Stone (10)	Cole Young (6)
Tom Griffin (20)	Hope Brooks (9)	Jacob Clark (5)
Tom Metzgar (20)	Christian Galen (9)	Alec Matheus (5)
Red Schock (20)	Kevin Hilling (8)	Derek Von Neida (5)
		Robert Wilson (5)

(4 trips): Helen Ashbrook, José Hannan, Shirley Wu

(3 trips): Almee Ballard, Vicky Cicchinelli, Scott Conway, Mike Cortez, Jon Hiser, Ryan Johnston, Jonah Kidder, Marissa Loftus, Ryan Maurer, Brian Osburn, Dan Peter, Bru Randall, Aishu Raveesh, Ira Sasowsky, Kerry Speelman, Wyatt Stimmel, Wernie Tablo, Maxwell Turnwald

(2 trips): Liam Ashbrook, Vivian Belenky, Judson Dommer, Garrett Gay, Nigel Good, Ashby Haines, Ed Kehs, Randy Kromer, Taylor Kveragas, Sage Levy, Diana Lepinyia, Matt Link, Ryan Mason, Lim McAllister, Kim Metzgar, Ethan Rang, Anne Russell, Daniel Silberstein, Cass Springer, Corina Tamas, Kaitlin Taylor, Lars Vogel, Will Washburn, David Wasson, Joseph Westra, Michael Young, Mike Zianni

(1 trip): Jamie Ashbrook, John Ashbrook, Cindy Barton, Katey Bender, Kara Bond, Jerry Bowen, Rich Cairncross, Sandy Chilton, Thomas Chirayio, Gwynette Chylla, Aaron Clair, Matt Clever, Larry Colten, Rhiannon Colten, Yves Dacoud, Jack Donna, Miles Drake, Matt Ellis, Kai Gietrost, Andrea Gilles, Kishly Giel, Phil Gowaty, Marge Harler, Noah Hennrich, Jennifer Hempen, Khai Hoang, Greg Jones, Caroline Keleman, Jill Kempf, Jim "Crash" Kennedy, Gideon Kidder, Reuben Kidder, Tom Leydon, Dwight Livingston, Jordan Lococo, Shawn Long, Ben Madore, Bart Martin, Cody Martin, Kevan Matthews, Terry McClanahan, Sam McCready, Anne Melko, Alex Merkel, Brian Mintner, Johnny Motto, Tyler Neiss, Matthew O'Brien, Hanna Pasqualini, Mike Patun, Eric Pelkey, Sarah Quebral, Braiden Reed, Julianna Reese, Akira Regotti, Sianee Rodgers, Nathan Reser, Rhett Schaeffer, Daniel Silberstein, Dylan Smith, Rick Smith, Chuck Snyder, Teresa Swinehart, Lori Taylor, Nick Travissano, Ed Trejo, Adrian Tussen, Kate Walsh, Talia Walton, Kendra Warlow, Chuck Williams, Paul Winter, Kat Wood

Financial support: Cleveland Grotto (Science Fund), National Speleological Society (Sara Corrie Fund), Mid-Atlantic Karst Conservancy, Tom Metzgar, Bert Ashbrook

Contour of the gorge of the Allegheny River at the datum elevation (290 feet above the water)

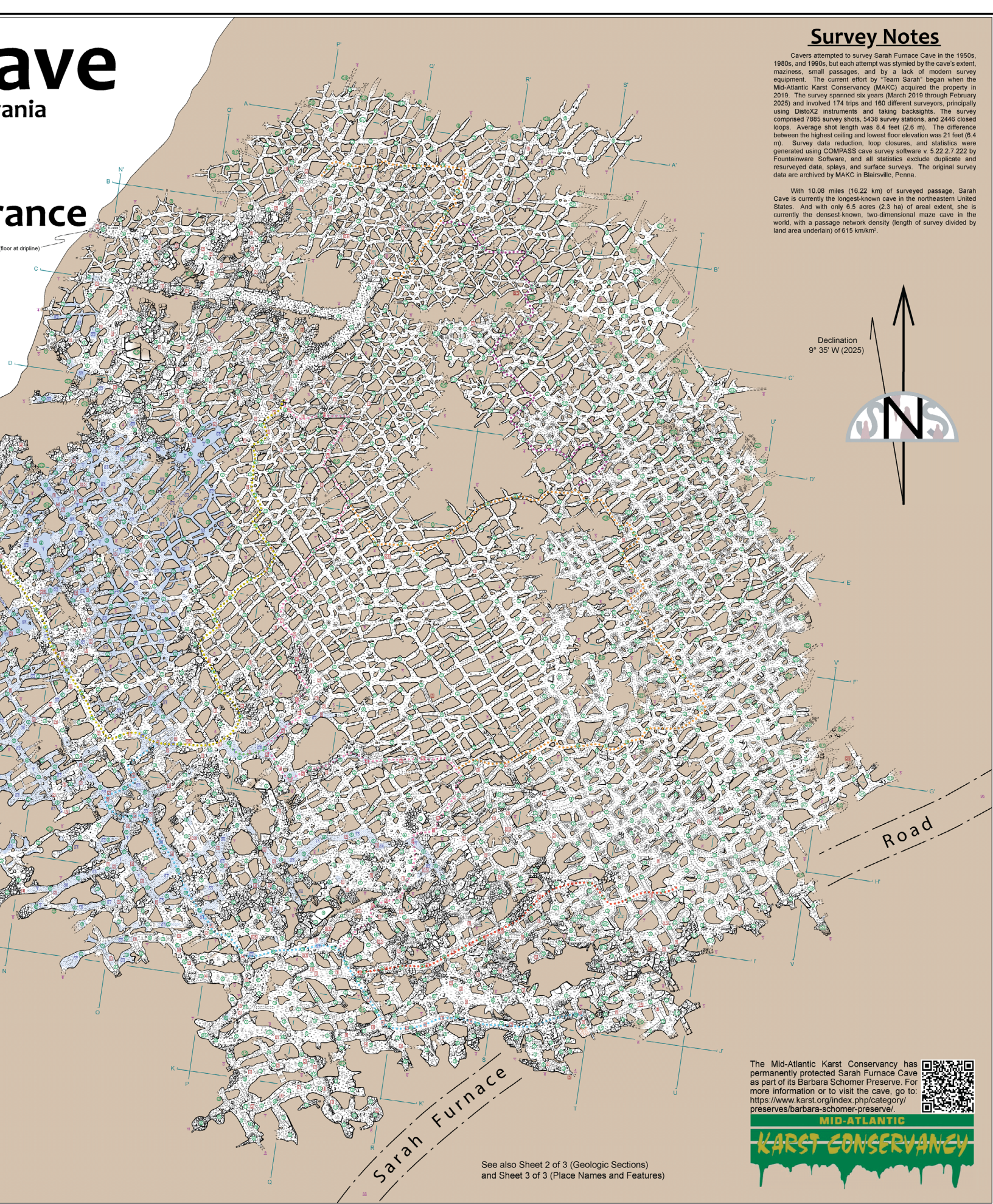
Legend

Symbols are from "1976 NSS Standard Map Symbols," NSS Bulletin, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 35–48 (June 1979), except where marked ".*" Shown at double scale.

- Passage walls - Underlying passage walls 1860s miners' stacked stone walls * 1860s miners' stacked stone pillars * - Floor slope (played toward downhill) - Floor ledge, ticks to lower side with drop dimension (feet) - Ceiling ledge, ticks to lower side - Wall shelf (open above and below) * - Removed geologic section location (ticks in direction of view on sheet 2)	- Ceiling height including any water depth (feet) - Passage termination, too tight - Passage termination, too low - Passage termination, breakdown choke - Passage termination, formation choke - Passage termination, sump * - Passage termination, intermittent sump *	- Survey datum (floor at entrance dripline) - Floor elevation above or below datum (feet) - Bedrock floor - Sediment floor - Dessication-cracked sediment * - Small rock floor - Breakdown 1860s mine gob rock pile * 1860s mine timber and prop. * - Modern prop. (near entrance)	- Trail (color matches flagging tape) - Flowstone; Yellow boy precipitate - Stalactite, Stalagmite, Column, Fallen formation, Soda straws - Selenite needles or arthroids, Helictites, Popcorn - Roots through ceiling - Standing water, * Any observed flow, Maximum observed depth (feet) † - Intermittent water, * Any observed flow, Maximum observed depth (feet) † - Water depths vary up to two feet seasonally (deeper in winter/spring, shallower in summer/autumn). Levels are often perched even in adjacent passages.
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ave ania rnce

floor at dripline)

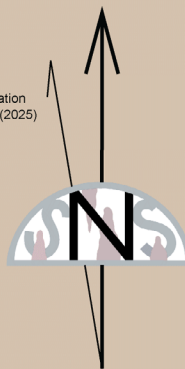


Survey Notes

Cavers attempted to survey Sarah Furnace Cave in the 1950s, 1980s, and 1990s, but each attempt was stymied by the cave's extent, mazes, small passages, and by a lack of modern survey equipment. The current effort by "Team Sarah" began when the Mid-Atlantic Karst Conservancy (MAKC) acquired the property in 2019. The survey spanned six years (March 2019 through February 2025) and involved 174 trips and 160 different surveyors, principally using DistoX2 instruments and taking backsights. The survey comprised 7885 survey shots, 5438 survey stations, and 2446 closed loops. Average shot length was 8.4 feet (2.6 m). The difference between the highest ceiling and lowest floor elevation was 21 feet (6.4 m). Survey data reduction, loop closures, and statistics were generated using COMPASS cave survey software v. 5.22.2.7.222 by Fountainware Software, and all statistics exclude duplicate and resurveyed data, splays, and surface surveys. The original survey data are archived by MAKC in Blairsville, Penna.

With 10.08 miles (16.22 km) of surveyed passage, Sarah Cave is currently the longest-known cave in the northeastern United States. And with only 6.5 acres (2.3 ha) of areal extent, she is currently the densest-known, two-dimensional maze cave in the world, with a passage network density (length of survey divided by land area underlain) of 615 km/km².

Declination
9° 35' W (2025)



Road

Sarah Furnace

See also Sheet 2 of 3 (Geologic Sections)
and Sheet 3 of 3 (Place Names and Features)

The Mid-Atlantic Karst Conservancy has permanently protected Sarah Furnace Cave as part of its Barbara Schomer Preserve. For more information or to visit the cave, go to <https://www.karst.org/index.php/category/preserves/barbara-schomer-preserve/>.



Cave Ballad Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Roland Vinyard

Honorable Mention Awards

Fixin' to Die by Andy McKinnon;
My Dig by Olivia McAllister & Paul Winter.

Merit Awards

Plastique Justrite (to the tune of Plastic Justrite by Barb Macleod) by Frank McDonough;
The Ship of Bones by Viktoria Petrenko

Cavers Choice

My Dig by Olivia McAllister & Paul Winter.

Best of Show

The Ship of Bones by Viktoria Petrenko

Judges: Gary Gibula, Steve Kovach, Fofu Gonzales, and :Paul Heinerth



Symbolic Emblem Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Patty Jördan

Honorable Mention Awards

Micronesian Cavers Patch by Steve Taylor;
Shawangunk Catskill Area Grotto Patch by Steve Taylor;

Merit Award

Psycho Survey Bitches Patch by Julie Schench-Brown, Teri Stephens, and Julie Uselton; Meadville Moles Grotto Patch by Steve Taylor; Saint Joseph Valley Grotto by Dreanna Deley;

Cavers Choice

Psycho Survey Bitches Patch by Julie Schench-Brown, Teri Stephens, and Julie Uselton.

Best of Show

Loyalhanna Grotto Patch by Steve Taylor.

Judges: Deanna Stever, Cady Soukup, and Ed Smith

T-Shirt Salon Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Patty Jördan

Honorable Mention Awards

Saint Joseph Valley Grotto by Deanna Deley;
Prater Memorial Huntsville Grotto Camp Out Float Trip, Huntsville Grotto, Artwork by Robby, James, and Emily.

Merit Awards

Cave Rays, VPI Cave Club, Artwork by Henry Prideaux;
How To Identify Bats, Speleobooks, Artwork by Earth Sun Moon; Huntsville Grotto, Artwork by Julie Schench-Brown;
Indiana Cave Capers 2025, Central Indiana Grotto, Artwork by Rich Lunseth; Lifetime Caver, Speleobooks, Artwork by Carolina Shrewsbury;
The Caving Carabao (Joint 2026 Vietnam-USA Expedition T-Shirt) (Ladies and Regular cut), NSS, Artwork by Shane Fryer.

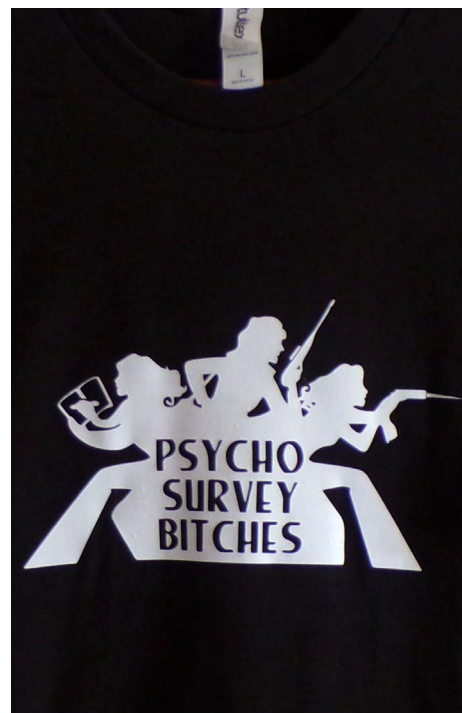
Cavers Choice

How To Identify Bats, Speleobooks, Artwork by Earth Sun Moon

Best of Show

Psycho Survey Bitches by Julie Schench-Brown, Teri Stephens, and Julie Uselton.

Judges: Deanna Stever, Cady Soukup, and Ed Smith



Video Salon Award Winners for 2026

Chair – David Socky

Honorable Mention Awards

"Phong Nha - Ke Bang : 20th Anniversary Video" Produced by PN-KB National Park;
"Tour of Padre Nuestro Cavern" Produced by Wyatt Fritz

Merit Awards

"Exploring Tumbling Rock" Produced by Alex Cantrell;
"The Cave Eaters" Produced by Philippe Axell;
"The Last of Keely's Volunteers" Produced by Bill Storage
"Cenotes of Mayakoba" Produced by Matt Scantland with videography by Eric Heiland, Henry Frawley-Fulcher, SJ Alice Bennett;
"The One that Got Away" Produced by Bill Storage.

Cavers Choice

"The Last of Keely's Volunteers" Produced by Bill Storage

Best of Show

"Deep-Very, Very, Very Deep-in the Heart of Texas" Produced by Alyssa Estrada and Owen Schwartzbard

Multimedia Salon Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Dave Socky

Merit Award

"The Crystal Cave – Expedition for the Bass Trombone" by Dave Socky

No Best of Show because only one entry

Judges: Marian McConnell, Nick Schmalenberger, and Brian Williams

Arts and Letters Salon Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Jo Schaer and Michael Taylor

Best Poetry:

"Cave Ethics Dyad" by Steve Beleu

Best Prose:

"Bad Caves" by Ergor Rubreck (not to be confused with Roger Brucker)

Best Graphic:

"Ergor's Price" by Carolina Shrewsbury

Fine Arts Salon Award Winners for 2026

Chair – Joel Haus

Runner Up

Textile: Salvage Flight Quilt by Emily Davis
 Digital Media: Florida Bat by Samantha Johnson
 Sketch: Rafinesque's Big-Eared Bat in Dixie Caverns by Marian McConnell
 Paint: Pottery, Nita Scooby Scoop (painted at PESH 2026) by Erika Jaeggli
 3D: Indiana's Longest Cave by George Bange and Gabby Zawacki

Winner Awards

Textile: Contemplation by Leanne Hughes
 Digital Media: Let's Meet at Publix by Samantha Johnson
 Sketch: Richard Schieber on Rope by Christine Gerace
 Paint: The Found Each Other by Viktoria Petrenko
 Mixed Media: Carbide Lamp by Chelsea Parada
 3D: Cave Salamander by Nick Smith

Cavers Choice

3D: "Gurnee Library Sign", by Michael Kehs.

Best of Show

3D: "Gurnee Library Sign", by Michael Kehs.

Judges: Andrew Hardin, David Black, and Daphne Mitchell.

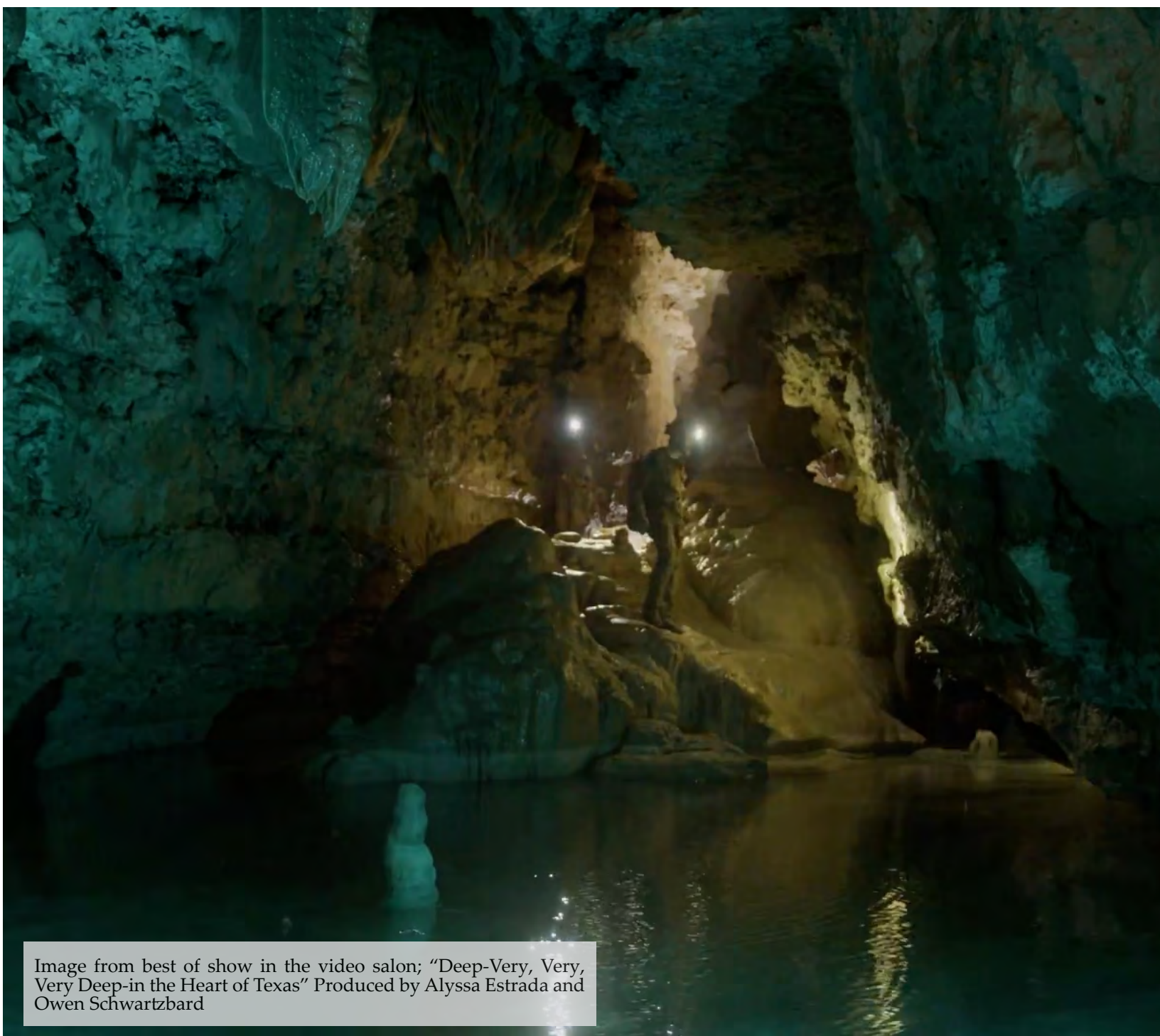


Image from best of show in the video salon; "Deep-Very, Very Deep-in the Heart of Texas" Produced by Alyssa Estrada and Owen Schwartzbard



SOCIETY NEWS

The International Day of Karst!

Celebrate the first International Day of Caves and Karst, September 13, 2026. The Day of Celebration was established by UNESCO in 2025 on an initiative from the International Union of Speleology.

The success of the International Day will depend on local activities taking place around the globe. Join this worldwide opportunity to raise public awareness!

Register an event—use your format, your media, your outreach. Plug into info at <https://www.caveskarstday.org/>. Tell your world about the exploration, study, and protection of caves and karst!

The UNESCO International Day of Caves and Karst (IDCK) is an annual observance on 13 September, dedicated to raising global awareness of caves and karst landscapes. Caves are naturally formed underground voids found worldwide, while karst landscapes form through the dissolution of soluble rocks, shaping distinctive surface and subsurface features. These environments provide vital resources, including drinking water for over a billion people, preserve unique biodiversity, and hold invaluable geological and cultural records.

Join this worldwide opportunity to raise public awareness!

Sincerely,

The NSS Board of Governors



The NSS recognizes the following members for long-term NSS membership.

50 Years of Membership

Bruce L. Baker - NSS 17336
Douglas Scott Baker - NSS 17586
Joseph A. Berkel - NSS 17429
Jane C. Biggers - NSS 17612
Judd Bittis - NSS 17157
Thomas F. Boehler - NSS 17734
David Bolton - NSS 17253
Guy E. Bryant - NSS 17115
Joel L. Buckner - NSS 17337
William Bush - NSS 17697
Paul R. Cannaley - NSS 17656
Lawrence Cohen - NSS 17135
Ann K. Cordero - NSS 17416
David I. Cordero - NSS 17417
Daniel L. Crawford - NSS 17750
Paul Damon - NSS 17557
Dixie Deem - NSS 17564
Kevin Downey - NSS 17042
Audrey Duncan-Young - NSS 17036
William R. Eddleman - NSS 17593
Anthony Fernandez - NSS 17132
Ward L. Foeller - NSS 17016
Ethan Adam Frantz - NSS 17447
Raymond Hardcastle - NSS 17182
Jonathan Hiser - NSS 17616
Bruce R. Horncastle - NSS 17123
David A. Hubbard - NSS 17705
Ronald H. Jones - NSS 17309
Jeanice C. Kaiser - NSS 17629
Patricia Kambesis - NSS 17304
Michael R. Kistler - NSS 17050
John Lahr - NSS 17020
Doranne M. Lane - NSS 17389
Mark L. Lassiter - NSS 17031
Michael B. List - NSS 17046
Morris R. Matlock - NSS 17331
William Z. McCarthy - NSS 17127
Gregory A. McGill - NSS 17272
David B. Morrow - NSS 16997
David Mould - NSS 17238
Phillip O'dell - NSS 17000
Wade H. Pence - NSS 17005
DavidLee Persha - NSS 17665
John T. Rice - NSS 17667
Randy Rose - NSS 17043
William Thomas Roswit - NSS 17242
Randall W. Rumer - NSS 17627
Robert P. Sergesketter - NSS 17602
Douglas Soroka - NSS 17692
Lee Stevens - NSS 16985
Michael Sutton - NSS 17237
Bernard W. Szukalski - NSS 17780
Nancy L. Taylor - NSS 17197
Scott Byron Taylor - NSS 17217
George Veni - NSS 17322
Marion Carrol Vittetoe - NSS 17051

Mark M. Wilson - NSS 17191
Jody Wood - NSS 17676

60 Years of Membership

Ronald E. Aycock - NSS 9380
Robert D. Barlow - NSS 9401
Roger V. Bartholomew - NSS 9349
Carol L. Belski - NSS 9249
Charles S. Bishop - NSS 9355
Garland C. (Gary) Black - NSS 9091
Richard L. Breisch - NSS 9352
Warren Campbell - NSS 9513
Diane Cousineau - NSS 9284
David C. Culver - NSS 9581
William P. Eidson - NSS 9612
Don Erickson - NSS 9373
William G. Fieg - NSS 8913
James H. Glock - NSS 9565
William B. Greenwald - NSS 9146
Susan Gurnee - NSS 9297
Elaine Hackerman - NSS 9048
Eugene C. Hargrove - NSS 9572
Kenneth E. Harrington - NSS 9231
Gene Harrison - NSS 9268
Galen "Spider" Hekhuis - NSS 9294
Lloyd M. Hekhuis - NSS 9453
Susan G. Holler - NSS 9168
Albert J. Howcroft - NSS 9685
Howard A. Hurtt - NSS 9271
Robert J. Lenz - NSS 9482
Janet L. McClurg - NSS 9301
Roger L. McMillan - NSS 9659
Peter Megaw - NSS 9363
Edward M. Miller - NSS 9378
Carl F. Pattison - NSS 9544
Gladys Reece - NSS 9633
Jason M. Richards - NSS 9528
Gary T. Roberson - NSS 9364
William T. Scarborough - NSS 9639
Carl E. Sherman - NSS 9550
Thomas R. Strong - NSS 9110
William J. Sydor - NSS 9269
Robert D. Vocke - NSS 9262
Norman Volk - NSS 9465
Norbert M. Welch - NSS 9035
James L. (Jim) Wilbanks - NSS 8967
Kenneth E. Williams - NSS 9131
S D Wilson - NSS 9393
James R. Wilson - NSS 9325
Joe Wolf - NSS 9615

70 Years of Membership

Jonathan B. Leavitt - NSS 3557
Eugene H. Polleys - NSS 3601
Roland C. Kleinfeld - NSS 3632
Thomas B. Cochran - NSS 3494
Russell D. Rhoads - NSS 3738
James Van Gundy - NSS 3473
Roger C. Williams - NSS 3691

THE SINKHOLE CONFERENCE 2026

BY DEVRA WILLINGHAM

The 18th Multidisciplinary Conference on Sinkholes and the Engineering and Environmental Impacts of Karst is an interdisciplinary meeting on the practical application of karst science. This year it will take place October 5-9, 2026 in Albany, New York. Albany is close to major karst areas of the Northeastern United States and provides a broad backdrop to discuss karst problems. Through field trips, workshops, and lectures, interact with a diverse group of experts who study or manage karst and work to apply this knowledge to mitigate impacts to society's infrastructure while protecting our natural environment.

The conference includes technical sessions, short courses, opportunities for collaboration and professional development hours. There are still slots available to present a Karst Clip. Karst Clips are short (5-minute) presentations that are perfect for sharing recent projects or works in progress. Registration is just \$675 and \$100 for students for more information about the event you can go to sinkholeconference.com.

Monday, October 5, 2026

Optional Field Trip: Knox-Gallupville Plateau

Led by: Paul Rubin PG, George Shaw, and Bob Simmons PG

This field trip will highlight an upland area boasting Skull, Knox, and Thunder Hole caves, three of New York State's longest. Visit cave entrances, sinkholes, a farm spring, and world-renowned

John Boyd Thacher Park - the key to the geology of North America. Grasp the fascinating geomorphic history of the region; learn of multiple glaciations, new cave discoveries, and researchers' paleoclimatic findings.

Tuesday, October 6, 2026

Short Courses

Attendees are able to choose an included morning and afternoon short course. The four courses to choose from are: "Contaminant Hydrogeology of Karst", "Karst Database Development," "When Sinkholes Become Legal Pitfalls," and "Modern Techniques in Sinkhole Data Collection."

Wednesday, October 7, 2026

Presentations and Karst Clips

All presentations will be held in one room so that participants can learn about multiple disciplines and techniques related to solving karst problems. Karst Clips are shorter talks that do not have a full paper.

Thursday, October 8, 2026

Banquet, Presentations, Karst Clips and Poster Session

In addition to presentations and karst clips there will be a banquet lunch and a presentation given by Dr. Michael Sukop. The day will conclude with a poster session.

Friday, October 9, 2026

Morning Presentations

Optional Afternoon Field Trip: Howe Caverns



THE SINKHOLE CONFERENCE

Led by Sara Cadieux, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

With a tour length of 7,920 feet, Howe Caverns is the largest show cave in the Northeastern United States and is the second most visited natural attraction in the state of New York. The cave was discovered in 1842, and tours began shortly thereafter. The caverns are formed in thickly bedded Lower Devonian aged Coeymans Limestone and thinly bedded Upper Silurian aged Manlius Limestone, both part of the Helderberg Group. Sediments preserved in the caverns, isolated from terrestrial erosive processes, provide a window into New York State's Cenozoic history. Several glacial deposits, including a pebble-rich melt-out till, are well preserved. The deeply weathered condition of insoluble pebbles in the till indicates an age exceeding one million years.

	Monday, October 5, 2026	Tuesday, October 6, 2026	Wednesday, October 7, 2026	Thursday, October 8, 2026	Friday, October 9, 2026
8:00-9:00 am	Field Trip	AM Short Courses	Coffee Discussions	Coffee Discussions	Coffee Discussions
9:00-10:00 am			Presentations	Presentations	Presentations
10:00-11:00 am					
11:00-12:00pm					
12:00-1:00pm		Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Banquet & Speaker	Lunch Break
1:00-2:00 pm		PM Short Courses	Presentations	Karst Clips	Field Trip
2:00-3:00 pm				Presentations	
3:00-4:00 pm				Posters	
4:00-5:00 pm			Karst Clips		
5:00-6:00 pm		Welcome Reception			
6:00-7:00 pm					
7:00-8:00 pm					

TEX-MEX: CAVING, CAMARADERIE, CUISINE AND CHARM

BY JAY JORDEN



A Tex-Mex Convention

For 2027, the eyes of Texas are upon you - to come caving with us! Our fifth NSS convention in the Lone Star State is happening June 14-18 in Del Rio, along the Rio Grande and across from Ciudad Acuña in Mexico.

We'll celebrate shared karst across the US-Mexico border, collaborating with Mexican cavers and featuring our Tex-Mex culture. Along with traditional Tex-Mex (more red salsa than green) cuisine on both sides of the border, we're also offering pre- and post-convention caving trips in both countries. Don't be a victim of FOMO: Check out our early registration deals here! Also, watch our NSSCON '27 video sizzle reel and share it with your grotto.

Caves will include some of Texas' classic deep pits and bat caves, both on state parkland and private property, with special access arranged just for the convention.

Cavers will practically be taking over Del Rio, a city of almost 35,000 people and home to historic Laughlin Air Force Base - the largest pilot training base in the Air Force - and, nearby, the Law West of the Pecos (where Judge Roy Bean dispensed Texas justice from a saloon).

Your destination for registration is Southwest Texas College, where we'll host sessions, salons, and vendors. Also:

- Del Rio Civic Center will be the focus

of major sessions, the photo salon, and banquet.

- Del Rio High School will hold Vertical Section activities and showers.
- Val Verde County Fairgrounds is our social and camping hub, featuring more showers, cooling tents, water trucks, and 24/7 ice.

Did I mention the heat? Come prepared, but we've got you covered.

The 2027 forecast for convention week shows daily highs mostly at 91°F, ranging from 90°F to 93°F, and overnight lows at 81°F to 82°F. During June, the fraction of time spent overcast or mostly cloudy decreases from 24% to 12%. Humidity: a projected 43% to 51%. So ... not bad for summertime!

But with this in mind, Del Rio has special ways to stay cool - and up to your neck in cold water. The famous San Felipe Springs flowing from a flooded cave in town (under a golf course!) will beckon swimmers, and nearby Amistad Reservoir is also available.

Five conventions under Texas

Everyone knows there have been six flags over Texas - but come down to help us celebrate five conventions under Texas! For cavers, there's a reason to return to the Lone Star State for the fifth time: Our biggest and best convention yet! Sunshine and wide open spaces abound along the Rio Grande, only about 30 miles west of Brackettville and Fort Clark Springs, site of Texas' third NSS convention in 1994. It's been 18 years since the 2009 NSS Convention held at Kerrville in Central Texas, which also simultaneously hosted the International Congress of Speleology (only the second time for an ICS in the United States).

Texas' first two NSS conventions were at New Braunfels in 1964 and 1978.

Planning your staycation

Plenty of campsites await at the Val Verde County Fairgrounds - also our Howdy Party site, which is less than a mile from sessions at Southwest Texas College. Staying indoors instead? Start your search soon because rooms are filling up. A number are blocked at national hotel chains along with many local motels, inns, and lodges. Online lodging guides and other options are available. Del Rio has more than 200 AirBnB listings online.

Borderlands Fun: underground and above!

Be sure to bring your passport to enjoy all the fun! Del Rio lies along the Rio Grande and across from her sister city, Ciudad Acuña, with restaurants, shopping, springs, mountain vistas, and other destinations. You'll need your passport to return from Mexico, so make sure it's up-to-date.

Hundreds of caves beckon on both sides of the border, including the famous Devil's Sinkhole, large bat caves like Kickapoo Cavern and Green Cave, along with highly decorated caves in Mexico like Gruta del Palmito and Grutas de Garcia. Some caves and shelters contain world-class rock art, dating back thousands of years and offering clues to early hunters and gatherers.

From archeology to wineries, Southwest Texas offers a variety of activities. Besides swimming holes in lakes, creeks, and along the Rio Grande, hiking trails and birdwatching await at Amistad National Recreational Area, a 65,000-acre reservoir and Texas' deepest lake; Devils River State Natural Area; and Kickapoo Cavern State Park. Go deep for the culture! Local caves in and near Del Rio contain pictographs dating back 4,200 years, when the people of precontact cultures went underground in the Lower Pecos Canyonlands Archaeological District, a proposed National Historic Land-

mark. The pictographs are preserved in part by the Shumla Archaeological Research and Education Center, a local group that documents the pictographs and creates educational material about them.

The Whitehead Memorial Museum in Del Rio amplifies the region's cultural history, including mementos of Judge Roy Bean, who held court at the Jersey Lilly Saloon in nearby Langtry, along the Rio Grande. The infamous "hanging judge" is buried at the Del Rio mu-

seum.

If that's not enough, Del Rio is home to Texas' oldest continuously running vintners, operating the Val Verde Winery. Italian immigrant Frank Qualia established the winery in 1883, bringing his family tradition of winemaking to Southwest Texas. Today, the winery is operated by third-generation vintner Thomas Qualia.

Along the border, there's always plenty of cerveza and tequila - along with

mineral water, Topo Chico ... so stay thirsty, my friends!

The caves, our friendly culture, and cuisine are awaiting - so don't waste time: Register early! And don't just take our word for it as native Texans and convention organizers. A now-popular, classic bumper sticker proclaims, "I wasn't born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could!"

Come to Texas for the convention, and stay for the caves!

BOOK REVIEW: MUD WATER AND GUTS; HOOSIER CAVERS AND THEIR CAVES

Book by Gary T. Roberson, 509 pages, paperback, ISBN 978-1495104251

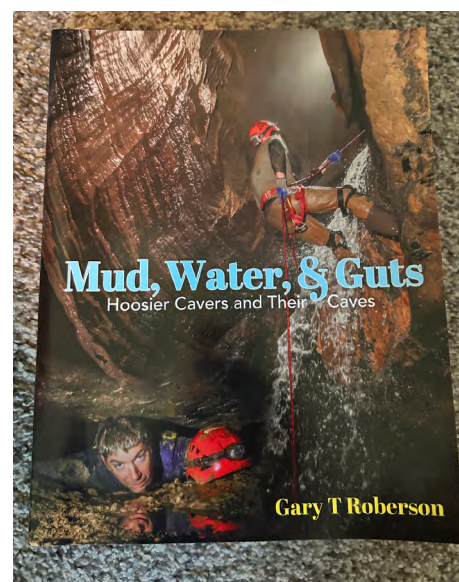
With a culmination of over 2-1/2 years of research and six decades of caving, Gary Roberson has given us a cave book, unlike any other cave book containing the history of Indiana caves, its explorers and documentors. The book is and will be a fantastic reference resource. Listing over 360 individual cavers, both men and women with accomplishments, biographies, stories, discoveries, adventures, and tragedies. Additionally, over 350 cavers are mentioned in the caving story of Indiana. Over nine pages of names are indexed. A minor picking point, it would have been nice to include an index of caves by name, but already at 500 plus pages, and to hold down printing costs, the author was limited.

Down through the portal of time, the author starts with a discussion of pre-historic Native Americans who explored and mined Wyandotte Cave, some 3,000 years ago, those nameless people we have no written/recorded record, but who left clues in torch remains, tools, artifacts, cave art, etc. Then a narrative of early Indiana cave pioneers and scientists, such as Hovey, Blatchley, Cox, Collett, Eigenmann and Mallott. Roberson continues with the roots of modern caving, telling us how Wyandotte Cave involved a lot of early Indiana early cavers such as George F. Jackson, Corydon's Lewis Denbo Lamon, Milltown's Leo Schotter in the 1950's and 1960's and intro-

duced cavers to Indiana's over 4,000 known caves.

Roberson relied heavily on the Indiana Cave Survey e-Library, various grotto (caving clubs) combing over thousands of old newsletters, individual histories/stories, caving event guidebooks, pictures, and personal contacts for his content. Well known Indiana cavers such as "Bugs" Armstrong, Richard Powell, Art/Peg Palmer, Dick Blenz, Norm Pace, and numerous others have their stories told. Famous project caves are featured such as Sullivan Cave, Lost River Cave, Blue Springs Cave, and Binkleys Cave (at over 46 miles currently surveyed, Indiana's longest). Well known (to cavers) grottos such as Central Indiana Grotto, Bloomington Indiana Grotto are featured as well as the more obscure and now defunct grottos such as Edinburg and Tell City grottos.

Many scientists, such as Lewis, Hobbs, and others have left a lasting legacy on the Indiana karst. There is a tribute to out of state cavers who have made an impact in Indiana caves. Also an account of Indiana's show caves. The eastern Indiana karst (lesser known in the state) is talked about as well as a section on Indiana's cave divers. And also tragedies, such as the unexpected death of Tim McLain in an Indiana cave and the Show Farm cave drownings in 1961. Roberson ends the book



with a chapter "The Future Is Now" and emphasizes there is still many more miles of Indiana cave to be discovered and adventure/excitement await those interested.

Never before has the story of Indiana caving and cavers been told so well, this will be a treasure for future generations of cavers, and historians.

Reviewed by John Benton

List price, \$25.95, available from Speleobooks, Amazon, Indiana Caverns Visitor Center/Gift Shop, and direct from author: gary@indianacaverns.com

2027 NSS AWARD NOMINATIONS

BY BILL STEELE, NSS AWARDS DEPARTMENT CHAIR

It is time to nominate deserving cavers for NSS awards to be presented at the 2027 NSS Convention in Del Rio, Texas, at the Awards Banquet on Friday, June 18, 2027. Please submit nominations to the appropriate award sub-committee chair by the firm deadline of November 15, 2026. Award information, including the selection process and what a well-written nomination should contain, is published on the NSS Awards web page (<https://caves.org/nss-awards/>). You may submit your nominations for the following awards.

William J. Stephenson Outstanding Service Award

The Outstanding Service Award is given annually to a member of the NSS for outstanding service to the Society and its goals. The recipient of this award is selected by the Board of Governors from nominations received and reviewed by the Awards Department. This and the Honorary Membership (below) constitute the Society's highest awards. Candidates must be NSS members in good standing for at least the past two years (at close of nominations, November 15, 2026). Send nominations to: award-stephenson@caves.org.

Honorary Member Award

The Honorary Member Award is given annually to one person, not necessarily an NSS member, for outstanding contributions to the field of speleology. The recipient of this award is selected by the Board of Governors from nominations received and reviewed by the Awards Department. The award confers life membership to the Society. Send nominations to: award-honorarymember@caves.org

Lew Bicking Award*

The Lew Bicking Award recognizes dedication to the thorough exploration and mapping of a cave or a group of caves. The award is given annually to an individual NSS member or a pair

of members who, through specific joint actions, qualify equally for the award based on the exploration they have done together. Candidates must be NSS members in good standing for at least the past two years (at close of nominations, November 15, 2026). A cash award accompanies this recognition. Send nominations to: award-bicking@caves.org

Alvin McDonald Award

The Alvin McDonald Award recognizes a young cave explorer 30 years of age or younger by the November 15, 2026 nomination deadline whose achievements demonstrate exceptional promise and skill in the pursuit of cave discovery and documentation, with noteworthy accomplishments that establish them as an emerging leader in cave exploration.

The recipient must have been an NSS member in good standing of the Society for at least two years immediately before their name is submitted as a candidate. The nomination must include the candidate's month and year of birth. The recipient shall be announced at the annual convention. Send nominations to: award-bicking@caves.org

Science Award*

The Science Award is given annually to recognize an individual NSS member or a pair of members who, through specific joint actions, qualify equally for the award based on outstanding dedication to the scientific study of caves. Candidates must be NSS members in good standing for at least the past two years (at close of nominations, November 15, 2026). Send nominations to: award-science@caves.org

Victor A. Schmidt Conservation Award*

The Victor A. Schmidt Conservation Award is given annually to recognize an individual NSS member who, through significant action over time,

has demonstrated outstanding dedication to the cause of cave conservation. The award may recognize a pair of members who qualify equally based on work they have done together. Candidates must be NSS members in good standing for at least the past two years (at close of nominations, November 15, 2026). Send nominations to: award-schmidtconservation@caves.org

Spelean Arts and Letters Award*

The Spelean Arts and Letters Award is given annually to recognize an individual NSS member or a pair of members who, through specific joint actions qualify equally for the award, over time has advanced spelean arts and letters by significant artistic expression, management, or criticism. Candidates must be NSS members in good standing for at least the past two years (at close of nominations, November 15, 2026). Send nominations to: award-art-sletters@caves.org

Certificate of Merit

The Certificate of Merit Award recognizes a specific recent accomplishment in cave exploration, study, and/or conservation; or that furthers the goals of the Society. Up to three Certificates of Merit may be awarded annually. Each Certificate of Merit may be given individually, jointly (up to three individuals), or organizations. NSS membership is not required. Send nominations to: award-certificateofmerit@caves.org

Fellow of the Society

Fellowships are awarded annually to NSS members who, over time, have exemplified by their actions their dedication to the mission of the NSS or to the Society itself. Candidates must be NSS members for at least five years and be in good standing for at least two years (at close of nominations, November 15, 2026). Send nominations to: award-fellow@caves.org

James G. Mitchell Award

The James G. Mitchell Award is given annually for the best scientific paper presented at the NSS Convention by a member of the Society who is a student. Eligible papers shall be judged by an interdisciplinary panel appointed by the Mitchell Award sub-chair. A cash award accompanies this recognition. For consideration, contact: award-mitchell@caves.org

Peter M. Hauer Spelean History Award

The Peter M. Hauer Spelean History Award is given annually to an individual or group of individuals engaged in an outstanding spelean history research project. The recipient of this award is selected by the NSS American Spelean History Association. A cash award accompanies this recognition. Send nominations to: award-hauerhistory@caves.org

Steve Hudson Award

This award is presented for service to cave rescue. The annual award is to recognize a person or persons who have made contributions to cave res-

cue and/or the National Cave Rescue Commission. The recipient of this award is selected by the commission. Send nominations to: award-hudson@caves.org

Outstanding Landowner Award

This award is presented to a cave landowner or land manager whose efforts have been exemplary in supporting cavers and the mission of the NSS; and who have demonstrated a long-term commitment to cave access, conservation, education, and exploration. This annual award consists of a plaque and an invitation to attend the annual NSS Convention. The recipient of this award shall be selected by the NSS Landowner Relations Network Committee. Send nominations to: award-landowner@caves.org

Group Conservation Award

This conservation award recognizes the conservation efforts of an NSS Group or Internal Organization. The recipient of this annual award is selected by the Conservation Division. Send nominations to: award-groupconservation@caves.org

**Preference for these awards is given to candidates who have not received the Outstanding Service Award or an honorary membership.*

The Awards Committee requests that nominations be submitted in an editable file (Text or Word processing format). Comments and suggestions on the nomination process and operation of the Awards Department are always welcome.

Please contact Bill Steele, Awards Department Chair:

awards@caves.org or 500 Kingston Drive, Irving, TX 75061



IF NOT, WHY NOT

BY ALLEN MADDOX

A few months ago the NSS Youth Group Liaison asked, in an *NSS News* article, if you or your Grotto guided any youth organizations on a caving trip. I received a few replies, but not as many as I thought I would get. The Youth Group Liaison Committee is tasked with helping cavers and grottos lead groups like Scouts, church groups, summer camps, etc. safely and responsibly on caving trips.

We are also asking each NSS Region to have a YGLC Regional Coordinator to help youth groups and organizations find appropriate cavers and programs. There are a few openings if you prefer a more administrative position.

I know there may be some concerns and objections. That's OK. But we would like to hear and understand "Why Not?" Please feel free to email me, Allen Maddox, at trailssitter@yahoo.com. Check out our Facebook group, "Cave Exploring for Youth Organizations" at <https://www.facebook.com/>

[share/g/1DNrpfKyUy/](https://www.facebook.com/share/g/1DNrpfKyUy/).

Cave Safely, Cave Softly, Cave Often,
Allen Maddox - Chair, Youth Group
Liaison Committee



Troop 95. Photo provided by Allen Maddox

SPELEAN SPOTLIGHT

OF RAY KEELER

BY APRIL GOCHA



How did you first get interested in caving?

Ray: I was born in a little town called Hobbs, NM, ~70 miles east of Carlsbad. When I was five, my mom took us to Carlsbad Caverns, and that was my first time underground. I remember the big room, the ranger with a flat hat, everything—it left a lasting impression. When we went back home, I got a shovel and went out behind the house and started digging holes to look for caves. We moved to Phoenix when I was six, and the dad of one of my friends had been in Onyx Cave southeast of Tucson, AZ. My dad was a Scout leader and took our troop down there, and we learned how to rappel outside the cave. Notice that I didn't say we learned how to ascend. There is a loop in Onyx that you can get all the way around and come back out. Then in college at ASU I was interested in outdoor recreation, doing cross-country skiing, backpacking, climbing, hang-gliding, skydiving, stuff like that. But I was really interested in caving because of its science side. After seven years of showing up on cave registers, the local grotto tracked me down and my life was changed.

You've been on 13 international expeditions—can you share some highlights?

Ray: I've done five caving expeditions in Jamaica. I spent my career working in software on aircraft guidance systems, and while I was in Washington DC on assignment, the DC Grotto invited me on an expedition over Christmas/New Years. Those first two expeditions were in the cockpits in the central part of the island, where it rains 300 inches per year and all the water goes underground. We were rappelling down pits, trying to find underground rivers to know where to drill wells. That way they wouldn't need cisterns on their home roofs to capture water during the dry season. That went on for a couple of years.

Another trip to Jamaica was for a National Geographic project looking for an extinct monkey. One of the professors on the project, Don McFarlane, a paleontologist at Claremont College in

California, knew me from caving and reached out since I had already been to Jamaica. On that trip we ended up finding the first primate that would become extinct in the new world since the white man arrived in 1492. We found the monkey's skull in a layer of bones of *Rattus rattus*, or rats, which came over on ships and were fruitful and multiplied. The monkey had become extinct in the last 500 years.

I have been on four trips in northeastern Mexico to Cueva del Tecolote with Peter Sprouse. We spent 36 days underground on the expeditions, plus rig and de-rig trips. We ended up getting just over 40 kilometers or ~25 miles of passage, and last year I finished drafting that map. We left a couple of big gaping leads in the back beyond Camp 2 on the last trip, so the next generations have some big leads to work on. I also helped with two expeditions with Peter in Quintana Roo in the Yucatan peninsula.

I went on an expedition in southern Belize to map Cueva del Tigre. Former NSS President Geary Schindel and his wife Sue were on that expedition. We found out that you don't want to be in the jungle in the middle at night because that's when bad things happen. We were coming out of the cave after dark on our last trip, and suddenly the line just started backing up all over each other. There was a poisonous snake called a Fer-de-Lance on the trail. They stay about waist to chest high, looking for bats and birds that fly down into the open area. We had to find another way around.

I also represented the NSS in northeastern South Korea, just below the demilitarized zone. They had a tourist cave with a high carbon dioxide problem, and the local mayor was looking for ways to lower the carbon dioxide levels to build up their tourism. I was an NSS Officer at the time and helped represent the US, along with David Foster from the American Cave Conservation Association, and they had several other representatives from other countries as well.

Can you recall a time you made a surprising discovery while caving?

Ray: I can think of three. I was lucky enough to be in the Chandelier Ballroom on discovery day. There were week-long expeditions at Lechuguilla Cave in New Mexico in the early years. We were doing 24-hour trips; one day on, one day off. The Labarge Borehole had been discovered the day before, and both Pat Kambesis's team and my team were sent in to continue the breakout. Our team went right at a split in walking passage, and a few hundred feet later we mapped an up-trending passage to more 100-foot shots. Pat's team went left and started surveying the Chandelier Ballroom. Our team came out of a ceiling lead in the 600-foot-long Prickly Ice Cube room beyond the Chandelier Ballroom to find Pat's team mapping below. Terry Bolger (on Pat's team) joined our team and showed us the Ballroom on our way out. Wow!

Another was in Cueva del Tecolote in northeast Mexico. We were coming out of Camp 1 and following the air, getting into slimy muddy stuff. It got quiet in front of me at a dip in the passage. We came out of the floor of borehole that led to something like 20 kilometers of cave.

Another time, we were doing conservation work in Grand Canyon Caverns for the Havasupai in Arizona, mapping, training the guides, etcetera. I had been digging in a passage, and when it got too small for me, Graham Schindel wiggled up into this tight thing. Once he got in, I asked Graham if it went, and he goes "Ohh yeah." The leader who had been working on this project, Rich Bowman, also got up there and they took off. They found purples and yellows on the ceiling and walls, and suddenly we've discovered microbe land in this cave. They took amazing high-resolution photos, and we used mass spectroscopy to come up with ~2200 species, 800 of which were only knocked down to the genus level in 51 phyla. All of this is now public data, and we're not done yet.

As far as overall discovery goes, I think USGS LiDAR has just changed our world. We are finding all sorts of things depending on how dense the dataset is. But we're behind on maps now, because a lot of things have been surveyed but we need to train more cartographers.

What roles have you held in NSS?

Ray: I served as an NSS Director for 3 years, and then straight into 3 years as Executive Vice President. I was the editor for American caving accidents from 2006–2010. I also spent three years as the Administrative Vice President. Then in 2020 I became the NSS Government Liaison and served in that role for 3 years. There are some things accomplished during that time that I'm pretty proud of. For example, in the 2021 NSS-US Forest Service memorandum of understanding the Forest Service allowed sharing cave/karst data with local grottos/regions when a local agreement is signed. We had excellent relations with the Tonto National Forest, and they had written into our 5-year agreement to share data with us. Since I was the Government Liaison at the time, we extended that model by talking with the Forest Service's Southern Region, which is 13 states including TAG, and bumped it up to the national office. That has worked out really well and is now going in other national forests, so I'm proud that we developed the entire structure for that. I also wrote recommendations for cave and karst management for five national forests in Arizona.

You're currently working on a conservation project and were just running for Congress—can you tell us about that?

Ray: Yes, I was just running for US Congress in Arizona. I lost the primary election in July but am still actively working my biggest issue: water. Gaining water stability in Arizona and the southwest is extremely important, and caves/karst are a large part of this. I am still being contacted to discuss water issues. It is amazing how awareness is growing for the need to get rain/snow into the ground (caves and karst) to avoid evaporation if it stays on the surface.

The southwest is in a drought. Some are trying to sell off our public lands, and if this is done, especially in Arizona and other southwestern states, we lose our water rights. Much of our lands are public lands. Here is the example—in the late 1870s–1880s, there was a big mining boom north of Phoenix in Jerome. The first thing the entrepreneurs back east did at that time was buy up and patent all the springs, which come out of caves, to support their mining operations. The mining is now finished,

but the owners of those springs still own the water rights almost 150 years later. At least in Jerome, which is now a tourist town, these patent holders are still gifting the water back to the city. Now Phoenix is booming, and we're already short on water. This is a major issue. I'm trying to save the public lands, and caves are part of the conservation. In Arizona we have almost 12 million acres of National Forest lands, 12.1 million acres of surface (17.5 million acres subsurface) Bureau of Land Management lands under management, plus National Park Service and state trust lands. There also are huge areas of Native American lands. We have many tribes, and all of us need water and representation.

So there's a water relation problem. Here in Arizona, there's a huge chip factory being built, several data centers have been approved, and an ICE facility is being proposed. All of these will be major water users. We're already in a drought; we're already digging additional wells. It's personal for me because my sister boards horses on five acres. Two and a half years ago, the pump on her 800-foot-deep well broke. It would cost her \$50,000 to drill another well, but now she's spending \$1000 per week (yes, per week) to haul water instead. That comes out to \$50,000 per year. If you're paying that much to access water, it is a problem.

What does caving mean to you personally?

Ray: Caving has been absolutely won-

derful for my life, for my health, and for my soul. I've done caving project work in 20 different states and four other countries, and I've met people from all over the world. My takeaway: people are people. It's also amazing to have the science side of caving, to be able to talk with all sorts of experts within a couple of phone calls or emails. And in 1999 I met my current wife Stephanie, and we were married in cave country. We're still living happily after 27 years, hanging out with cavers, and she puts up with me.

If you had a superpower to help you explore caves, what would it be?

Ray: The ability to measure micro-wind, -temperature, and -humidity changes to figure out where the air is going. Having those at the micro level would allow you to tell how much the air moves and how long it goes in the same direction to determine the size of the passage.

Do you have a favorite place to cave?

Ray: I've been on 26 trips in Lechuguilla, several of which were one-week camp trips.

Do you have a favorite piece of caving gear?

Ray: I have a non-locking carabiner that's my favorite. I was on a high altitude, non-caving trip more than 40 years ago when somebody died. At that time what you did was split their gear, so we did. This carabiner keeps me safe on caving trips because it reminds me not to screw up. It goes on every trip.



TERRY BOLGER (LEFT) AND NEIL BACKSTROM IN THE CHANDELIER BALLROOM ON THE DAY IT WAS DISCOVERED IN LECHUGUILLA, NM. CREDIT: RAY KEELER

REMEMBERING — LOGAN DALE MCNATT

BY ERIC MCNATT AND BILL ELLIOTT

Logan Dale McNatt, NSS 11274F, was a renowned caver, archaeologist, author, collector, storyteller, and proud Texan whose lifelong passion for exploration, discovery, and environmental preservation left an enduring legacy across Texas archeology, speleology, and Maya cave archaeology.

Over a career spanning more than five decades, Logan explored hundreds of caves, contributed to groundbreaking archaeological research, participated in scientific expeditions and documentary films, and helped preserve some of the most significant cultural and natural resources in Texas and Belize.

Born in Abilene, Texas, on August 5, 1950, Logan was the younger son of Ernie Glen McNatt and Helen Hartwig Kothmann McNatt. He grew up in a close-knit family alongside his older brother, Randy, who was seven years his senior. One of Logan's earliest memories was a family vacation to New Mexico in 1953, when a loose chimpanzee at a roadside zoo bit his hand before his father rescued him—a story he delighted in retelling throughout his life. In 1957, the family moved to Brownwood, Texas, where his father opened a new Social Security office. As a boy, Logan developed a fascination with dinosaurs and dreamed of becoming a paleontologist. He eagerly devoured every issue of *National Geographic* and spent countless hours in Brownwood's Carnegie Library. Following in his brother's footsteps, he excelled academically, played saxophone in the school band, and competed on the tennis team. In 1967, he won the Texas AAA State Tennis Championship and graduated third in his class from Brownwood High School in 1968.

Childhood summers and family reunions exposed Logan to the rich traditions of both the McNatt and Kothmann families. Visits to ranches along the Llano River and throughout Central Texas instilled in him a deep appreciation for Texas history, wildlife, and the outdoors. These experiences helped shape

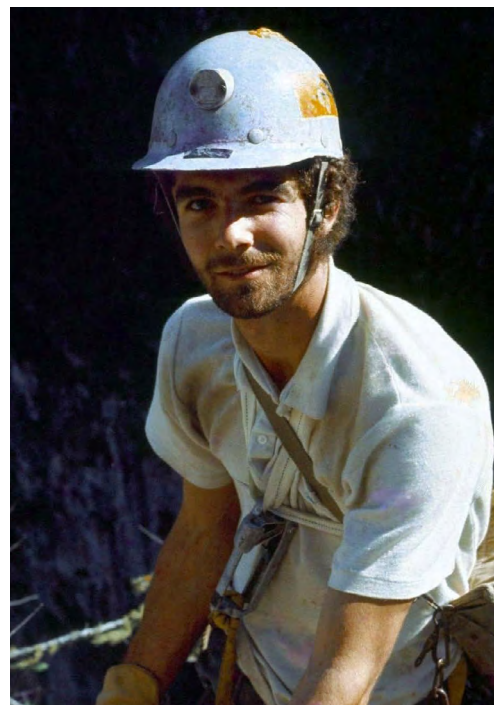
the curiosity and adventurous spirit that would define the rest of his life.

Logan attended Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) in San Marcos beginning in 1968. There, he joined the student caving organization that his brother had helped establish (Southwest Texas University Student Grotto) and quickly discovered a lifelong passion. His first venture into the bat-filled, water-soaked depths of River Styx Cave sparked a lifelong devotion to speleology. He soon began exploring caves throughout Texas and Mexico, participating in expeditions to map and investigate previously unexplored cave systems.

In January 1972, Logan and fellow caver Craig Bittinger were part of the original group of cavers to discover and descend into El Sótano del Barro in Mexico. At the time, its 1,345-foot (410-m) vertical drop made it the deepest known pit on Earth. The achievement became one of the defining accomplishments of his caving career.

That same year, Logan began his first archaeological work with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department at Hueco Tanks near El Paso. Although he had originally dreamed of becoming a paleontologist, archaeology proved to be a natural fit. He worked on excavations and preservation projects at historic Texas sites, including Fort Lancaster, Fort McKavett, and Misión Rosario. He later earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1976.

Logan first traveled to Belize in 1973, then known as British Honduras. The country's extensive cave systems, Maya archaeological sites, and natural beauty captivated him immediately. Over the next two decades, Belize became his second home. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer and later worked with Belize's Department of Archaeology, contributing significantly to the exploration, documentation, and preservation of Maya cave sites.



Throughout his career, Logan explored at least 338 caves: 74 in Texas, one in New Mexico, 1 in Alabama, 30 in Mexico, and 232 in Belize. His work advanced the understanding of Maya ritual cave use and helped document previously unexplored cave systems. He participated in numerous archaeological expeditions, collaborated on wildlife and documentary film productions for organizations including the BBC and ABC, and worked alongside researchers conducting pioneering studies of karst landscapes and cave environments. Several projects received support from *National Geographic*, a fitting achievement for someone who had spent his childhood inspired by its pages.

In Belize, Logan also worked as a guide, educator, and ambassador for the region's cultural and natural heritage. Known affectionately there as "Logan Mon!," he shared his knowledge generously with visitors, researchers, and local communities alike. His enthusiasm, expertise, and sense of humor made him a beloved figure throughout the country.

In 1996, after two decades of research, Logan wrote what would become the defining academic comprehensive paper of his career, "Cave Archaeology of Belize," which stands as an important paper in Mesoamerican speleoarchaeology, detailing the ceremonial, ritual, and functional uses of the region's subterranean ecosystems.

In 1993, Logan returned to Texas to be closer to his parents. He later joined the Archaeological Survey Team of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, where he spent more than 15 years documenting and protecting archaeological resources throughout the state. His work took him across Texas, including extensive projects at Hueco Tanks, Big Bend Ranch State Park, Devils River State Natural Area, and many other significant sites. He retired in 2012 after a distinguished career dedicated to preserving Texas history.

Known to family and friends as "Low-Gun," Logan cultivated deep and lasting friendships wherever he traveled. He remained active in the caving community throughout his life and was respected by generations of explorers, archaeologists, and conservationists. His lifelong dedication to caves, archaeology, and environmental stewardship helped preserve important cultural and natural resources for future generations. Logan's legacy lives on through the caves he explored, the archaeological papers he authored, the research he

advanced, the stories he shared, and the many lives he touched. His brother, Randy McNatt, preceded him in death in February 2024. He is survived by his nephew, Eric McNatt; his cousins, Beverly Bormuth, Dawn Manzo, and Crystal Kothmann Kinney; and by a wide circle of friends, colleagues, and fellow explorers who will cherish his memory for years to come.

We are diminished.

The Cave Conservancy Foundation is accepting grant applications to support cave and karst-related research, conservation, and education projects. Apply for large grants before the October 1 or March 1 deadlines. Submit grant requests for up to \$1,000 at any time.



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