



2025 – 2026  
Annual Report



# From Our Executive Director

We are cavers. Our collective enthusiasm for and dedication to the mission of the National Speleological Society (NSS) brought us together. The NSS is dedicated to the protection of caves and their natural contents, through science, conservation, stewardship, and public education. The NSS is also committed to the promotion of responsible cave exploration and fellowship. Meeting this mission, *our mission*, requires work. We are not only NSS members, but also volunteers, leaders, donors, and legends of our Society.

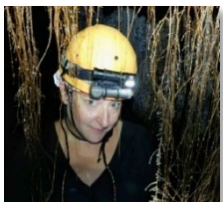
For the NSS to focus its work, the Board of Governors established a 5-Year Strategic Plan in 2023. The Plan centers around key tenets of Fellowship, Education, Conservation, Science, and Exploration. In the past, NSS officers each reported to the Board their “3-Ps”—Progress, Plans, and Problems. Few members engaged with these reports, and a compilation of the entire Society’s activities was never assembled into a single resource.

In 2026, the NSS turns 85 years old! What started out as a small group of individuals is now the world’s largest organization dedicated to caves, caving, and cavers. To celebrate and share our proud achievements with each other, this is the NSS’s **1<sup>st</sup> Annual Report**, compiled from divisions’ “3-Ps.” This new opportunity should not only inspire our members, but also other caving groups worldwide. And, now that we are past the halfway point to achieve our 2028 goals, we should be able to review the progress being made and understand, and overcome, any challenges we face.

After 85 years, it’s no wonder that the NSS is doing—and can do—so much important work. The Society has a solid, growing membership base of dedicated Regular and Life members. The NSS is also financially stable and healthy, which helps us accomplish our work more easily. The NSS is actively planning for its future, *your future*, by minimizing operating expenses, and strategically and responsibly investing income received. The NSS is focusing its attention on our core mission, on key training and educational programs, and expanding our reach for members and the public by improving partnership opportunities for exploration, science, conservation, education, and cave access.

Some members may think that the NSS is doing “too much.” Yet, I and others consider how the NSS could do more—more exploration, more research, more conservation, more education, more stewardship. The challenge of accomplishing more, however, is the need to grow our volunteer teams. NSS’s donors and volunteers have always been the backbone of our successes, but we need more help across the Society.

As we end the fiscal year, and prepare for the next, in amongst the broad Society achievements and future plans described in this report, volunteer opportunities are highlighted. There are many ways for you to give back to the Society, make a difference, and build a legacy for a stronger NSS for future generations.



Respectfully,  
Annette S. Engel  
*Executive Director*

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# MISSION

The National Speleological Society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection of caves and their natural contents through science, conservation, ownership, stewardship, and public education, and to the promotion of responsible cave exploration and fellowship among those interested in caves.

## 2023 – 2028 Strategic Plan

The National Speleological Society’s 2023 – 2028 Strategic Plan outlines a vision for the Society to be the home for cavers of all backgrounds and the voice for the understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of caves and karst.

The work of the Society centers on fostering Fellowship, advancing Education, investing in Access and Conservation opportunities, and promoting Scientific Study and Exploration.

### FELLOWSHIP PRIORITIES



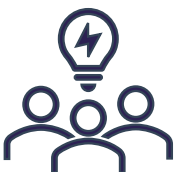
- Increase membership
- Improve member retention
- Promote a welcoming environment for all cave enthusiasts

### STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS



- Promote responsible and safe caving through education and training
- Educate the public and landowners about effective cave and karst protection practices
- Increase visibility and transparent communication
- Engage partners to advocate for responsible cave access, protection, acquisition, and management

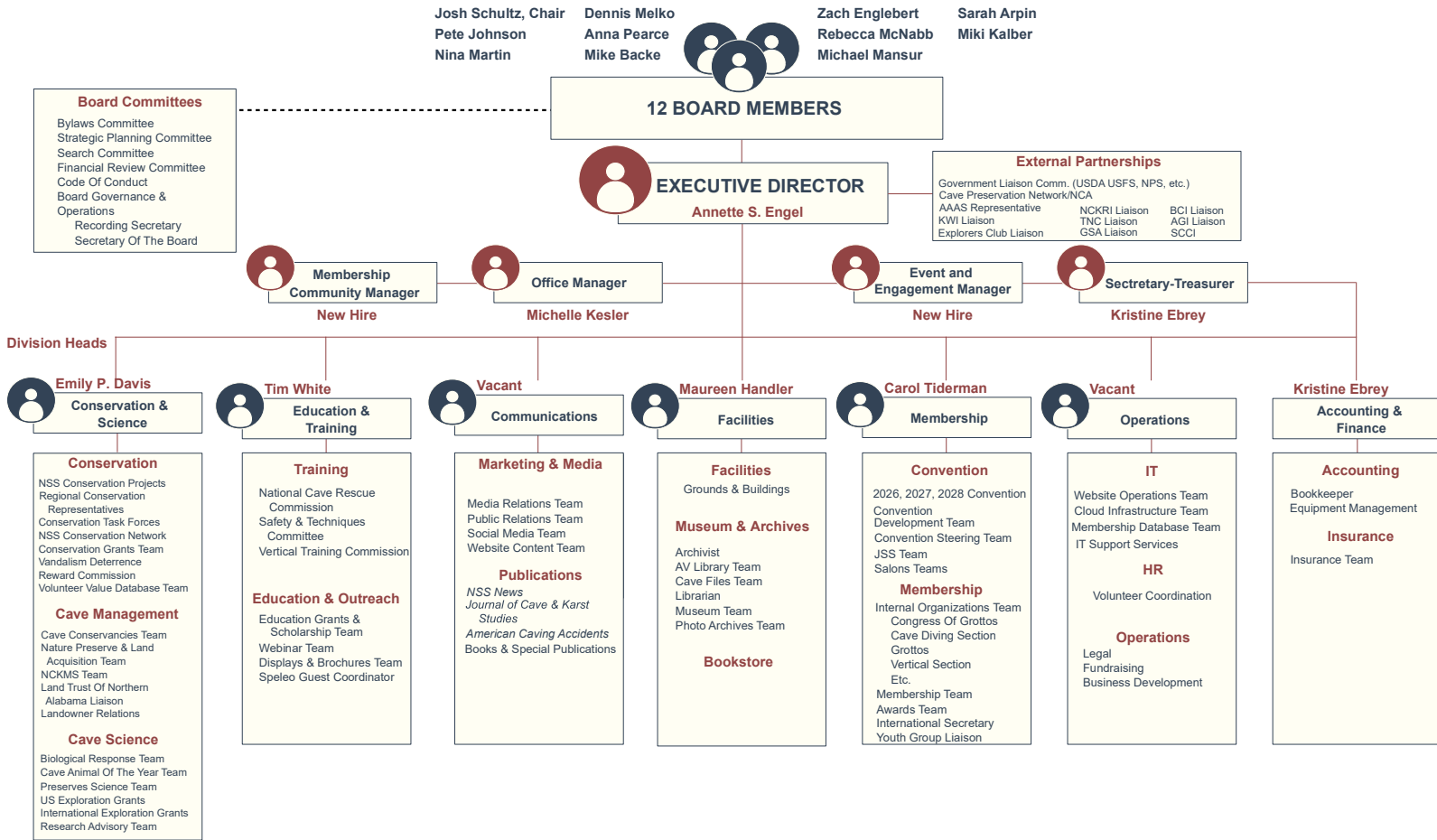
### PROMOTING OPPORTUNITIES



- Cultivate legacy giving and grow donor opportunities
- Expand funding for scientific research and exploration
- Optimize volunteerism

# NSS Organizational Structure

The NSS is a nonprofit membership organization that is governed and directed by the Board of Governors (BOG). In July 2024, the NSS reorganized its structure to stand up seven divisions, each led by a Division Head, to oversee the work of the NSS done within Departments. An Executive Director runs the organization day-to-day and reports to the BOG. The Division Heads report to the Executive Director, as do the NSS employees.



*This is the NSS's organizational chart at the end of the 2025–2026 fiscal year. Names of the Board of Governors and the names of others in key positions within the NSS are included. A heartfelt THANK YOU goes out to each and every volunteer serving on the Board, in the Divisions and Departments, and on Commissions, Committees, Task Forces, Preserve Management Teams, and other groups. Thank you!*



**Interested in Volunteering? Join us!**

ERIK NIEMAN

## NSS Employees and Strategic Hires

During the 2025–2026 fiscal year, the NSS had four full-time employees at the start of the year and three full-time employees and a part-time employee at year's end. Two new full-time hires are expected by the start of the 2026–2027 fiscal year, for a contingent of five NSS employees, the most the Society has ever had.

The new **Executive Director** started on August 4, 2025, and hired the full-time Secretary-Treasurer on October 27, 2025. Both positions are hybrid with travel, such as to the NSS Headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama.

The **Secretary-Treasurer** oversees all financial and account operations for the NSS, equivalent in roles and responsibilities to a Chief Financial Officer. This position is responsible for financial strategy, budgeting, forecasting, reporting, auditing, compliance, property management, record keeping, and insurance management for the NSS. This position also establishes and reconciles event and commission accounts. During part of the 2025–2026 year, the NSS had a full-time Bookstore & Membership Manager and a Facilities Manager. The Bookstore & Membership Manager position was modified in December 2025 to become the Membership Community Manager, and the Facilities Manager position was dissolved January 2026. A part-time Membership Services Associate was hired on February 4, 2026.

A new full-time **Office Manager** was hired February 2, 2026. The Office Manager oversees daily administrative, communication, and financial operations at the Headquarters. The position combines the responsibilities of office management with bookkeeping, including managing accounts, transactions, collections, and deposits.

The new **Membership Community Manager** will lead daily NSS membership operations (including the Bookstore), develop and implement recruitment and retention strategies to ensure membership satisfaction and engagement, and manage member services and volunteer programs. This position combines Member Relations and Services with Volunteer Coordination, a much needed role in the NSS. This is a strategic hire and will help the Society meet Strategic Goals centered around fellowship, membership, and volunteerism. The search for qualified candidates should conclude by April 1, 2026.

Lastly, a full-time **Event and Engagement Manager** will also be hired by April 1, 2026. This completely new position is another strategic, essential hire for the NSS. The BOG conceptually established the need for someone in this role for Conventions in 2023 – 2024. The thought was that this position would be temporary, associated with Conventions only, as the largest annual event that the Society has. But, work for Conventions extends throughout the year, plus there is more than one Convention being planned at any one time. As such, the Executive Director modified this position to be full-time. The position would also accomplish other strategic work for the NSS related to outreach. This person will organize and standardize public engagement and educational and outreach activities for the Society, including for events held at or regionally near the Headquarters. This position will also coordinate the NSS's presence at regional and national events where the NSS is a participant and/or sponsor, as well as at caver-centric events throughout the year. A third of the salary comes directly from each Convention's budget a year.



*Stream passage in Tytoona Cave Nature Preserve.*

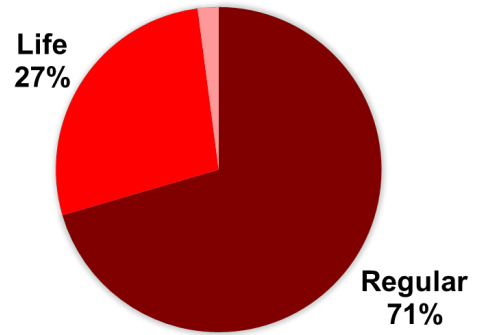
RYAN MAURER

# Fellowship

A small group of like-minded individuals founded the Society in January 1941, which means that in 2026, we are celebrating our **85<sup>th</sup> anniversary!** The NSS is the world’s largest organization dedicated to cave exploration, cave conservation, and cave science.

## Membership By the Numbers

The NSS’s Strategic Goals include increasing and retaining members. Overall, membership numbers are increasing. But, throughout the year, the absolute number of members fluctuates. In addition to renewals, about 1,000 new members join annually, which is balanced against those who do not renew, for whatever reason. As of February 2026, there were around 8,500 members in all categories, although this number changes daily by, on average, 20 to 100 members. Regular members make up two-thirds of the Society, with 73% of them choosing to pay \$10 more per year, above the \$40/year dues, to receive the printed *NSS News* at home. Retention has held steady for the past five years, which is a very good but leaves room for improvement.



*The distribution of members in the top categories in 2025 - 2026. Family members for Regular and Life categories are included.*

Life members represent a third of the Society. Life members’ dues support the Society because their \$1,000 (or \$2,000 for Conservation Life) are added to the Life Member Fund, an endowment fund managed by the National Speleological Foundation. Annually, the Foundation returns the Regular membership rate for each living Life member back to the NSS as a source of income. A portion of the Conservation Life membership also goes into the NSS-held “Save-the-Caves” Fund. These are important investments into the future of the NSS. We added at least 44 new Life members this year (as of February 1), which is up from past years.

Introductory members are a key demographic within the Society. These members are 26 years old or younger and signed up on their own, meaning that they are not added family members of another member. Introductory members pay \$20/year until they turn 27 years old, at which point they need to transition to another membership category. Retention among this membership group is critical for the future of the Society. This year, about 50% of the Introductory members who “aged out” moved into another category, which means that half did not renew yet. There is certainly room to improve retention among these members, understand why they may not renew their membership, and find ways to keep them engaged with the Society.



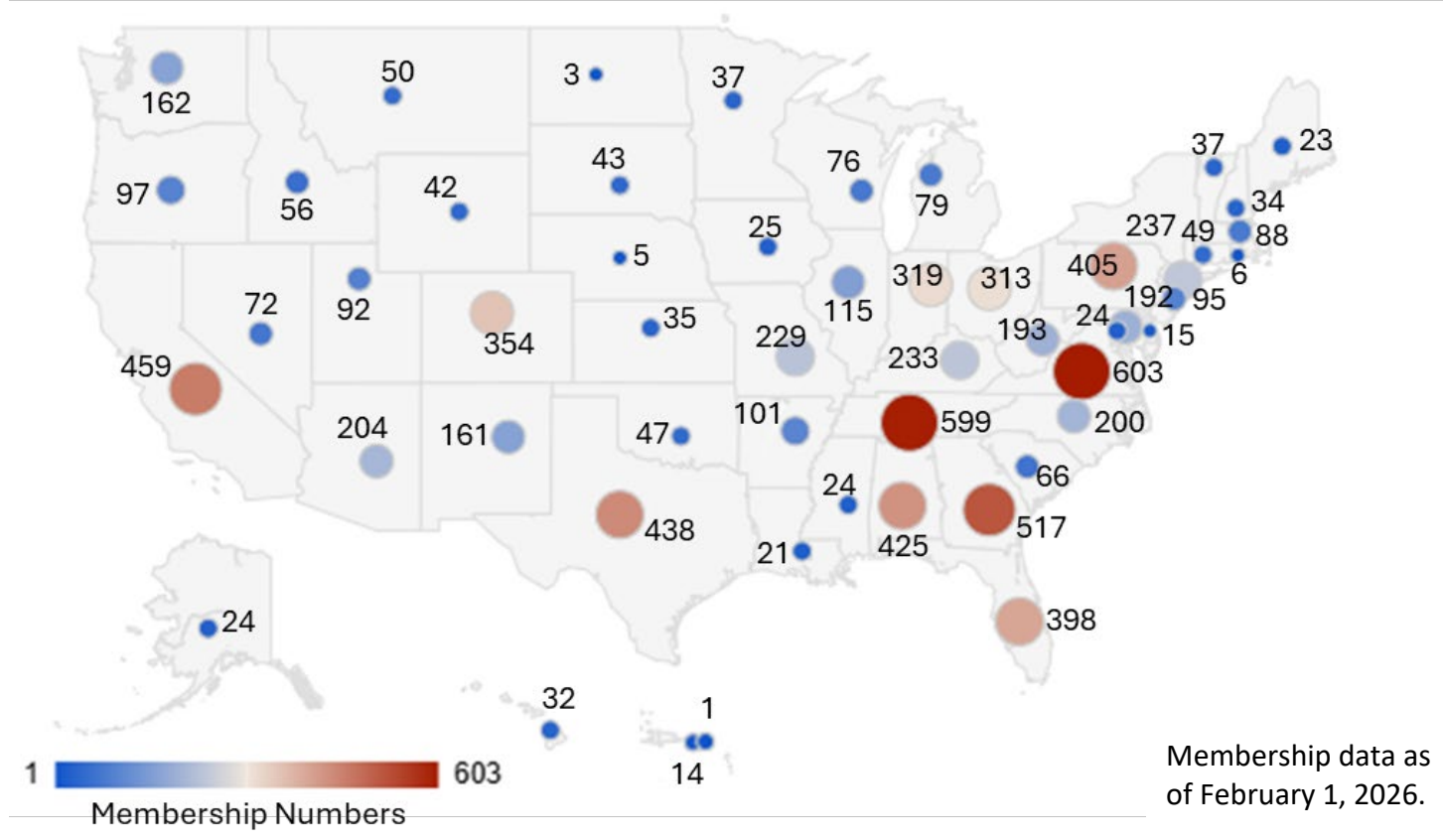
This year, the Membership Division developed a [video](#) with a cast of amazing volunteers who explain why they joined the NSS and what they get from continuing to be a member of the Society. Watch for yourself and share with a friend!

A new Facebook group started this year, [Cave Exploring for Youth Organizations](#), for youth to share and celebrate their caving experiences.

# Membership Distribution

NSS members live in over 55 countries and in all 50 U.S. States and two USA territories.

States with the highest numbers of members include (in order, from the top) Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, California, Texas, Alabama, and Pennsylvania, all with over 400 members each. Some states are close to hitting this mark. Maybe this is your year Florida? Colorado?



Membership data as of February 1, 2026.

**Join or Renew Today!**

Who could you encourage to join the NSS? Someone in your grotto? A family member? A neighbor? A landowner? A coworker?

## Code of Conduct Progress

One of NSS's Strategic Goals is to foster a welcoming environment for all cave enthusiasts. Many of us consider our fellow NSS members to be friends and family. Sometimes, just like in any circle of friends or family, there are unfortunate times when we face conflict with each other.

### Code of Conduct Incident Submission

*The NSS responds to potential Code of Conduct violations ONLY when an incident submission is received through [conduct.caves.org](https://conduct.caves.org).*

To do this, we have to understand what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. A Code of Conduct is foundational to explaining what the NSS values. It outlines the types of behavior that are unbecoming of NSS members and what to do when members (or our guests and visitors) do not conduct themselves in a respectful, kind, and courteous manner.

Board Acts have been adopted over the years that include policies for Anti-Harassment (29-944), Non-Discrimination in Membership (28-228), and Prohibition of Discrimination (40-544). But, for far too long, the NSS did not have clear guidance for its members, and especially for Internal Organizations (IOs) like grottos and regions, regarding what to do when there is a Code of Conduct violation. Understanding the policies and Code of Conduct process is critical for our Society to meet our long-term goals.

### Policy and Guidance Development

Over the past six months, the Board of Governors and new Executive Director worked on several documents that did not exist, including the NSS Code of Conduct Team Manual, Guidance for Grottos and Other Internal Organizations, Guidance for Complainants, and Guidance for Respondents.

The need to standardize procedures was evident, as was the need to impose deadlines for everyone, from the Code of Conduct Team and their review process to the Complainants and Respondents providing interviews. Although the complexity of some cases would change how long an incident review would take, the goal is for the Team to finish their reviews and make recommendations within 10 weeks. The Code of Conduct Team will consist of two sub-teams, Investigative and Education & Outreach, and at least two Investigative members should participate in interviews and incident reviews.

For continuity, trend analysis, and consideration of repeat behavior, the Team will maintain confidential, long-term records of incidents and NSS actions. Access is restricted to authorized individuals with a legitimate need-to-know basis. An anonymized log of actions taken by the NSS will be reported to the Board and membership periodically. This is a key, strategic outcome and will help the Society learn from incidents over time.

### NSS Jurisdiction over Incidents

As the Team worked this year on reviewing incident submissions, it became clear that there is a need to communicate to membership what the NSS can and cannot do regarding Code of Conduct incidents.

- The NSS can only respond to formal submissions, not emails, phone calls, or in-person. If an incident is relayed by email, phone call, or in-person, then the Complainant will be asked to [submit an online form](#).
- Grottos, regions, and other IOs need to maintain their own Code of Conduct or formally adopt the NSS Code of Conduct. However, the NSS does not, and will not, have authority over conduct outside of NSS's programs, events, and activities, even if the incident occurs within NSS grottos and other IOs.
- Incident reviews by the NSS only focus on how conduct impacts (or has impacted) the NSS membership. This means that if an incident happened locally, say at a grotto event, then the response belongs at the grotto level, especially if the impact would not or does not impact the larger NSS community.
- The NSS will not conduct its own investigation beyond information given to it or publicly available.
- The Code of Conduct process is not a mechanism for mediation or conflict resolution, not a legal or punitive process, and will not investigate cases that took place outside of and unrelated to the NSS.

## Potential Incident Responses & Sanctions

Responses to Code of Conduct violations are not limited to those listed below, but those listed have been the general and standard actions that the NSS has taken to date. Multiple responses may be applied where appropriate and based on severity.

1. **No Action.**
2. **Referral to Internal Organization.** This would occur if an IO (like a grotto) has primary responsibility or relevant authority over an incident that is unrelated to the NSS.
3. **Explanation of expected behavior to primary parties.** The Investigative group may have a conversation with the Respondent to emphasize the need to promote a welcoming environment within the caving community, but as the incident did not clearly impact the NSS, otherwise no action is necessary.
4. **Suspension from attending NSS events or volunteering.** This sanction requires a vote from the Board of Governors. The suspension may be temporary or indefinite, and the NSS membership database will be updated to reflect this sanction and time period.
5. **Removal of an NSS member's "Good Standing," including revoking awards, honors, fellowship status, etc.** This sanction requires a Board of Governors' vote. This sanction may also impact a member's ability to vote in NSS elections, hold certain volunteer or paid positions, or run for the Board. This sanction may impact grotto-level membership if being an NSS member "in good standing" is referenced in a grotto's Bylaws. The membership database will be updated to reflect this action.
6. **Suspension or removal of an individual's NSS membership.** This sanction requires a Board vote and may be for an indefinite or fixed-term time period. The loss of all NSS membership privileges includes an inability to participate in NSS activities, no access to member benefits, and removal from NSS online activities and social media. The membership database will be updated to reflect this action and time frame.

## Next Steps

The NSS is dedicated to creating the most inclusive community in the world that focuses on caves, caving, and cavers. The Code of Conduct Team needs more members because of conflicts of interest and the need for geographic representation. At present, the team is comprised of the Executive Director, the NSS General Counsel, and a few vetted members appointed by the Executive Director. All complaints and investigations are under the direct control of the General Counsel for the Society and are attorney-client privileged.

In the coming weeks, an email to all NSS members will detail the entire policy and the guidance documents, which will also be posted in a prominent place on the NSS website. We know that some practices and incident reviews in the past extended far too long. Communication was spotty and inconsistent. The changes and updates done within the past six months will improve the NSS's ability to respond effectively in the future. And, with additional Education & Outreach Team members, the NSS will be better equipped to help members understand the process and, most importantly, to prevent future incidents. Team recruitment will start at the beginning of the fiscal year. If you are interested in joining the Team, then please fill out the [Volunteer Form](#).

## Code of Conduct Investigative Process Steps

1. Review Incident Submission, identify Complainant(s), Respondent(s), and witnesses.
2. Submission is forwarded to General Counsel.
3. Assign Primary Investigator.
4. Notify and interview Complainant(s).
5. Notify and interview Respondent(s).
6. Interview witnesses, as necessary.
7. Conduct follow-up interviews, as necessary.
8. Complete Code of Conduct Incident Final Report.
9. Notify Complainant(s) and Respondent(s) separately of the results.
10. Notify others, as needed. *Note: In nearly all cases, the NSS will not communicate its decisions or actions to anyone other than those directly involved in an incident, as the NSS does not have authority over conduct outside of the NSS's programs, events, and activities. However, internal NSS communication may be necessary to update event staff, office staff, volunteers, or others of sanctions made against individuals.*

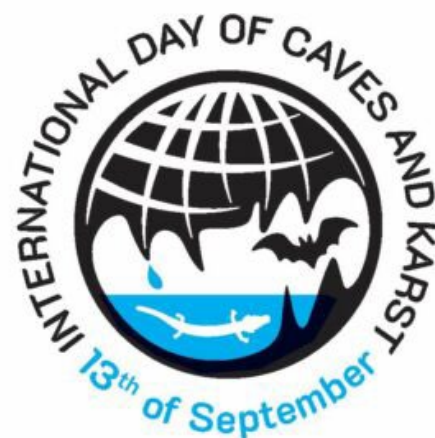
## NSS on the International Stage

The International Union of Speleology (Union Internationale de Spéléologie, UIS) meets every four years. This year, we met in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. This was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UIS and the 19<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Speleology. The USA had one of the largest contingents, at least 120, among the over 1,000 registrants from 51 countries. The NSS is the official organizational representative of the USA to the UIS. NSS members Hazel Barton and Paul W. Williams were featured speakers during the week, and one of NSS's own, Val Hildreth-Werker, was elected to be an Adjunct Secretary of the UIS.

The next International Congress will be in Romania in 2029 and NSS members Bogdan Onac and Gheorghe Ponta are some of the lead organizers. Best of luck! You can find more information at <https://speleo2029.org>.

One of the major UIS activities over the past few years (since 2021–2022) was to convince UNESCO to recognize an annual observance of the **International Day of Caves and Karst** on September 13. The UIS proposal, presented by UIS leadership from Slovenia, was endorsed by a sovereign indigenous government, and supported by 15 international organizations, eight regional organizations, 95 national organizations and institutions, and 39 UIS member countries in 43 supporting letters, including a strong letter of support from the NSS.

On November 12, 2025, UNESCO finally proclaimed that **September 13** will be a global day dedicated to education, conservation, and public awareness of Caves and Karst!



The first celebration will be on September 13, 2026, in Postojna, Slovenia. Mark your calendars and check out their official website, [Day of Caves and Karst](#). The NSS plans to attend and hopes many from the USA will come.



*Some "Lifetime Covers" at the 2025 NSS Convention Howdy Party (T-shirts courtesy of Speleobooks).*

## Partnerships

The NSS maintains many different types of partnerships with like-minded organizations and government agencies when there is a shared mission, such as concern about cave conservation and protection, advancement of cave science and exploration, and, most importantly, cave access. At current count, the NSS has at least 16 partners, some with formal agreements and some with looser, informal associations. Reporting on every active partnership would fill its own report. Below are two highlights.

Under the old NSS structure, partner liaisons reported to Society vice presidents. After restructuring, partnerships moved to the Communications Division, and in August 2025, the Executive Director moved partnerships to her oversight for more direct management, coordination, and signing authority with the Board for the NSS. The Executive Director has also been filling vacant positions with professional societies that have been lost over the years, such as with the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

### Master Participating Agreement with the U.S. Forest Service and the NSS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Forest Service is responsible, under the Federal Cave Resources Protection Act of 1988, for securing, protecting, and preserving significant caves on Federal lands for the perpetual use, enjoyment, and benefit of all people, as well as for fostering increased cooperation and information exchange between governmental authorities and those who use caves located on Federal lands for scientific, education, or recreational purposes. The Forest Service system has broad cave and karst resources in 100 National Forests and Grasslands, with 2,700+ significant caves of over 7,000 caves known. The Forest Service does not have the capacity to understand and effectively manage all of its resources.

Currently, the NSS and the USDA's Forest Service are operating under a [national Master Participating Agreement](#) (MPA) initiated in 2024. This is an umbrella agreement that formalizes how the two groups will work together and conduct mutually beneficial work on National Forest Service lands. In other words, cavers can access caves that may otherwise be closed if they perform work for the Forest Service, such as cave discovery, exploration, inventory, and management. In return, the Forest Service reimburses cavers for that work, through the NSS to, typically, a grotto or cave survey.

Under the MPA, there are currently five active USFS Supplemental Project Agreements (SPAs), with two being approved or modified in 2025–2026. The SPAs are for target areas and projects:

- White River National Forest (Colorado)
- Cibola National Forest (New Mexico)
- Multiple National Forests in North Carolina
- Tongass National Forest (Alaska)
- Daniel Boone National Forest (Kentucky) – completely new this year!



In the coming year, the NSS and Forest Service will update a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which expires in June 2026. Having both an active MPA and MOU is important to maintain access to caves on some Forest Service lands. Please reach out to the Executive Director if your grotto(s) and/or cave survey(s) would like to explore a SPA under the current MPA for work in a National Forest or Grassland near you!

### Explorers Club and Tales from Dark Places

In 2023, the NSS and the Explorers Club signed a Memorandum of Understanding to unite efforts in cave exploration, science, and conservation. The two groups, along with the National Speleological Foundation, co-host an event, "Tales from Dark Places," at the Explorers Club in Manhattan, New York City, annually, and there is also a session at Conventions featuring NSS members who have carried Explorers Club flags on caving expeditions. Speakers at the all-day "Tales from Dark Places" event in March 2026 include the Executive Director and other NSS members. Future partnership work between the Explorers Club and the NSS may include expanding award and grant opportunities to benefit cave exploration and conservation.

# Education and Training

## Responsible caving starts with education.

Two of the NSS's Strategic Goals are to promote responsible and safe caving through education and training, and to educate members and the general public about caves and karst resources through visible, transparent communication. Some of these educational activities have been going on for years, like training programs associated with the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC) and Vertical Training Commission (VTC). Moreover, the NSS has also been actively publishing its work for decades through the *NSS News* and *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies*, as well as books through the Special Publications program.

But, the NSS has needed to invest more time and effort into education, engagement, and outreach activities to fulfill our Strategic Goals. This year, to work towards increasing engagement and outreach, the NSS started attending more caver-centric events around the country and hosted an outreach event at the Headquarters in Huntsville for the first time. Momentum is high for more engagement in the coming year.

The NSS plans to jumpstart an education and outreach program with local partners at the Headquarters. This work will be done with the help of the new Education Department Head and a new full-time NSS employee, the Event and Engagement Manager. The Event and Engagement Manager will also coordinate and manage NSS attendance at caver-centric events to foster fellowship.

## Community Engagement

Over the past year, the NSS participated at more caver events, like Old Timers' Reunion (OTR) in West Virginia, Speleofest in Kentucky, and the National Cave and Karst Management Symposium (NCKMS) in Ely, Nevada. The NSS also attended and sponsored events in Texas, including the Hydro-Geo Workshop and Geological Society of America meeting. Adding new events allowed the NSS to reach a wider membership pool and provided an opportunity for members to acquire NSS merchandise and books, as well as to renew their membership.



*NSS outreach at the Headquarters in Alabama.*



*The NSS booth at Old Timers Reunion in 2025.*



NSS, other caving organizations, and volunteers, along with [CaveSim](#), joined the [Alabama Science Festival \(STEAMfest\)](#) in Huntsville, Alabama, for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in 2025.

**Interested in  
Volunteering? Join us!**

In October 2025, the NSS held an event before the [Alabama Science Festival](#) (STEAMfest) at the NSS Headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama, themed “From the Center of the Earth to the Stars.” This event was organized with partners from the Alabama Science Festival and geared towards children. Science-themed, interactive educational activities featured caving and exploration. Volunteers from the Huntsville Grotto, Huntsville Cave Rescue Unit, The Dirty Dangers, the NSS library and museum, and NSS Education & Training and Conservation & Science Divisions helped out and shared stories with the kids. Over four hours, a couple hundred local students and adults attended the event. This was the first time that the NSS hosted anything like this, and it won’t be the last! We hope you can join us for our next events in the coming year.



*Kids trying on caving gear and checking out what cavers carry in their cave packs.*



*Learning about ropes and climbing gear with Dave Jackson from [CaveSim](#). New cavers learning SRT!*



*NASA’s U.S. Space and Rocket Center installed their inflatable planetarium for an “other world” experience.*



*[Nutty Scientists’](#) hamster balls and hoverboards offered up fun exploration! Caving on hoverboards?? YES!*



*Checking out the informational tables at the NSS event. How do I join? Where can we go caving around here?*



*Gearing up with Dave Jackson to enter [CaveSim](#). Photos provided by Esther Crawford and Emily P. Davis.*

## Training Activities

The NSS has two premier Commissions who study, promote interest in, and work toward the advancement of their specific activity – National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC) and Vertical Training Commission (VTC).



The **National Cave Rescue Commission** is a volunteer group that provides specialized cave rescue training and shares essential knowledge, skills, and resources for effective cave rescue. It is not a functional rescue team but tries to help those in need. Their courses include:

- Orientation to Cave Rescue
- Level 1 – Task Force Member
- Level 2 – Task Force Leader
- Level 3 – Cave Rescue Specialist
- Team Operations and Field Exercises (TOFE)
- Small Party Assisted Rescue (SPAR)



The **Vertical Training Commission** is a group of volunteers who created a training curriculum to help cavers learn safe vertical caving by emphasizing competency, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. They use a “train the trainer” model for students and instructors. Their courses include:

- Level 1 – Basic Vertical Techniques
- Level 2 – Rigging and Intermediate Techniques
- Advanced courses on special topics (vertical survey, bolting, expedition rigging, aid or lead climbing in caves)



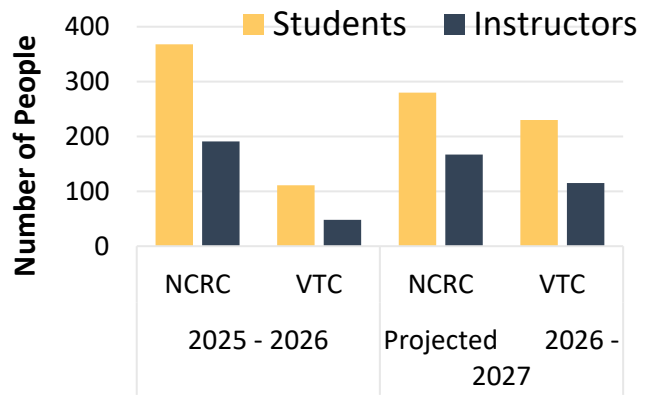
*Cavers-in-training waiting to enter CaveSim at the NSS Headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama, during an outreach event prior to STEAMFest 2025 in partnership with the Alabama Science Festival.*

In 2025–2026, NCRC updated its curriculum and prepared week-long classes from scratch. The new program was piloted in Texas in January 2026.

Over the year, collectively, 479 students took part in courses hosted by the NCRC and VTC, which were led by 239 instructors and specialists. The NCRC awarded \$10,765 in student scholarships this year.

The demand for all courses is high, hence the need to train more instructors in both Commissions.

In 2026–2027, better NCRC student-instructor ratios are planned, and the numbers of VTC students should double, which will put a demand on developing more trainers. We hope you can join us!



Training numbers per Commission for the past year and projected for next year.

**NCRC Courses**

**12**

**VTC Courses**

**20**



Photographs from NCRC training (left) and VTC training (right).

# Communications

## Society Publications

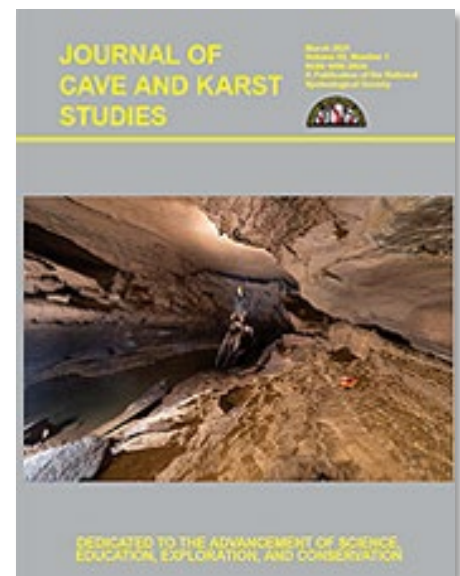
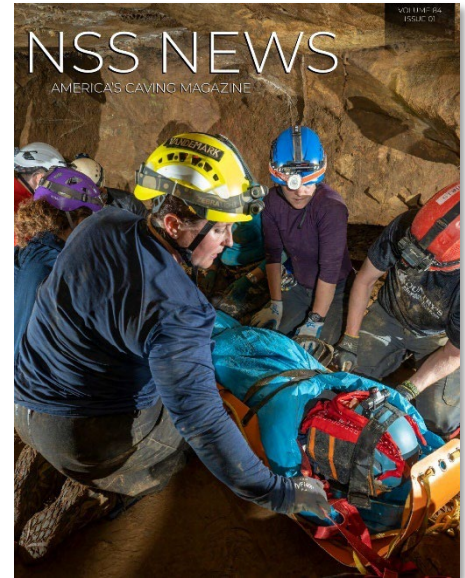
Practically since the beginning of the NSS, members have been sharing information with each other in print. Volume 1 of the *Bulletin of the National Speleological Society* was published in June 1941, and was later renamed the *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* in 1997. Volume 1 of the *NSS Newsletter* was published in 1943.

Today, the NSS still uses these two publications to communicate with members and the world, with the *News* focusing its content at all NSS members and the *Journal* being for like-minded enthusiasts interested in cave and karst science. Today, the NSS also communicates with members using digital media, from online monthly newsletter via email, to social media posts, and through its website and other print publications, specifically books.

The monthly online newsletter started prior to this fiscal year (in February 2025), and appears to be an effective channel for member engagement. There are currently over 11,000 subscribers, but only about 27% of them actively engage every month. This leaves room for growth in the coming year.

Although the *NSS News* is technically a “members only” publication, the *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* is “open access.” This means that the scientific work is available for free digitally, immediately, and has unrestricted use. Issues are listed on the [NSS’s website](#). Being “open access” achieves an important Strategic Goal because the scientific work of our NSS members and collaborators is available to anyone in the world, which increases the impact of cave and karst science.

In January 2026, the *Journal* moved to a new editorial structure with production being done by a subcontractor, KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd (KGL). This will reduce volunteer overload, as well as improve costs and efficiency. KGL will also screen manuscripts for plagiarism and AI-generated content, which strengthens the scientific integrity and accountability of the *Journal*. Anyone interested in receiving the *Journal* in print can [subscribe online](#) or by calling the NSS Office (256-852-1300). Subscriptions are \$45/year for three issues.



**Monthly Newsletter**

**41,000**

Total “opens” in 1<sup>st</sup> year



**NSS News Pages**

**398**

With 1 more month to go!



**Journal Pages**

**297**

Published as 16 articles

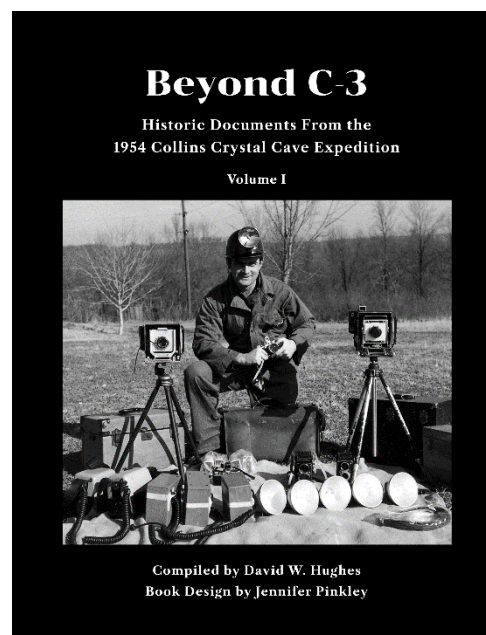


## Special Publications

The NSS also publishes books about caves, caving, and cavers. Books can be purchased through the [NSS Bookstore online](#), by calling the NSS Office, or at events that the NSS attends.

Book projects can extend over years, which builds a lot of anticipation. This past year, one new book was published, Volume 1 of [Beyond C-3: Historic Documents from the 1954 Collins Crystal Cave Expedition](#), authored by Dave Hughes and Thomas A. Brucker, and designed by Jennifer Pinkley. The NSS also renewed a NSS-VTC publishing agreement for the VTC [Basic Vertical Techniques](#) books.

Several other special projects should be completed in 2026–2027, including the latest, and much anticipated, edition of [On Rope!](#) Also, the next printing of *Gone Caving!*, the card game, will be done by the NSS. Proceeds from game sales already benefited the NSS, and now designer Jared Embree is in the process of transferring the rights to the NSS entirely. Thank you!



## Educational Resources

The NSS has a Webinar Series with educational videos available online at [NSS Webinar Series - National Speleological Society](#). This past year, several webinars were given, including one about cave formation repair, another about the Vertical Training Commission, and an upcoming one about paperless cave surveying.

The NSS offers a range of digital and print brochures:

- About the NSS
- A Responsible Guide to Caving
- Discovering Bats
- Fragile Underground
- Lava Tube Caves
- Landowner Relations Network
- Cave Preservation Network

To download for free, go to: <https://caves.org/education/>

If interested in receiving hard copies, email: [nss@caves.org](mailto:nss@caves.org)



Land Trust of North Alabama preparing to go into Shelta Cave in Huntsville, Alabama, during Members Day in November.

# Conservation and Science

In addition to the NSS's Strategic Goal of educating the public about effective cave and karst protection practices, the NSS also engages with partners to advocate for responsible cave access, protection, acquisition, and management. The NSS currently owns 19 Nature Preserves and manages four others. Increased funding for and promotion of NSS's conservation work will improve resource access, acquisition, stewardship, and advocacy into the future.

## Cave Conservation

Each year, the Conservation Committee develops an entire issue of the April *NSS News*. The [April 2025 issue](#) cover featured the Cave Shrimp, honored as the 2025 USA Cave Animal of the Year. The picture is of the Alabama Cave Shrimp, first identified in 1958 in what is now the Shelta Cave Nature Preserve.

Other Conservation Committee activities this past year included leading a Cave Conservation and Restoration webinar for the National Caves Association.



*The April 2025 cover of the NSS News, featuring the cave shrimp, the 2025 Cave Animal of the Year.*

## National Cave and Karst Management Symposium



The NSS has a long history with the National Cave and Karst Management Symposium (NCKMS). Biennial symposia started in 1975, and their purpose is to provide an opportunity for practical synergy among cave and karst management professionals who work in various professions with interests spanning a range of cave and karst management topics.

The NCKMS steering committee is made up of representatives from major federal land management agencies, and the chair should be someone from the NSS. NCKMS celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Ely, Nevada, in October 2025. The Western Cave Conservancy was the hosting organization, and the NSS was one of the sponsors.

The location was amazing, being near Great Basin National Park. Unfortunately, the government shutdown meant that many federal employees were unable to attend and attendees could not visit Lehman Caves inside the National Park.



*Scenes from the 2025 National Cave and Karst Management Symposium, Ely, Nevada. Photographs by AS Engel.*

## Cave Management

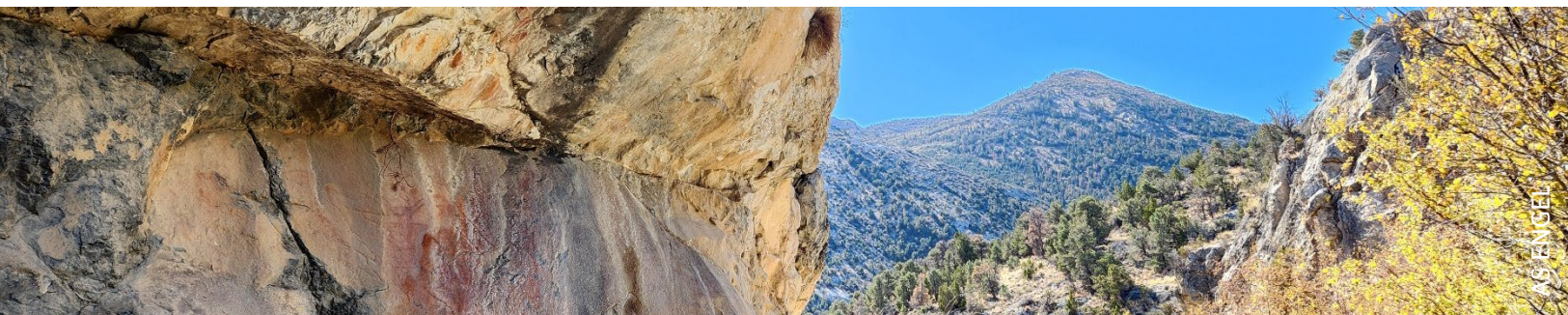
In May 2024, the NSS adopted the permit system established by the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc., <https://permits.scci.org>. All of the Preserves were using the permit system by summer 2025. The system tracks Nature Preserve use, helps the NSS manage liability, and ensures conservation goals are being met.

Over the past year, over 600 permits have been issued to over 4,000 visitors. Most visitors were NSS members or the general public, with school groups being the third most frequent visitors to the Preserves.

Tytoona Cave Nature Preserve (Pennsylvania) was the most visited, followed by the New River Cave Nature Preserve (Virginia), and then the Richard Blenz Nature Preserve (Indiana). This coming year, with the 2026 NSS Convention in Corydon, Indiana, the Blenz Preserve will likely take the top spot.

Each Nature Preserve has its own management plan, and the NSS Preserve Managers, which are teams of volunteers, have a challenging job reviewing permit requests year-round and balancing these requests against group size limits and other preserve management restrictions. To build the Manager Community, as well as emphasize their authority and management role at the Preserves, managers received NSS-branded T-shirts and NSS business cards. Signs were also updated and standardized.

Over the past year, some of the Nature Preserves also built kiosks to provide necessary information about the Preserve and management plan. Information about each of the preserves and their management plans can be found at <https://caves.org/preserves/>.



*Outside Pictograph Cave, Great Basin National Park, Nevada.*

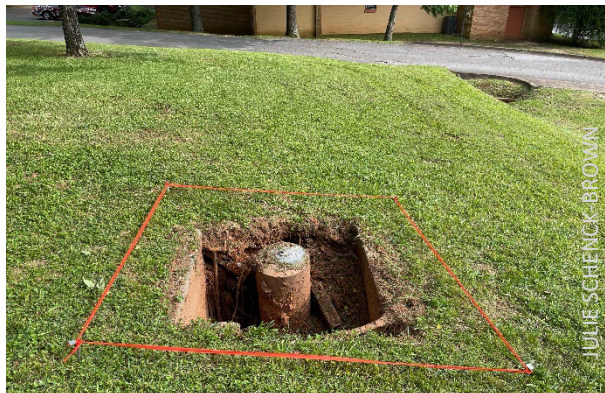
## Nature Preserves Activites

Several Nature Preserves have experienced change over the past year. ATV trespassing issues at the James Gage Nature Preserve (New York) have stopped due to the diligence of the Preserve managers and many community partners. A new “Surface Only” permit was developed for the William J. Stephenson Nature Preserve in Huntsville, Alabama, adjacent to the NSS Headquarters, to accommodate hikers, birders, and others. Also, managing liability resulted in the introduction of a new outdoor-only camping permit for the grounds at the NSS Headquarters, not the Stephenson Preserve, for visitors who want or need to camp.

The Shelta Cave Nature Preserve in Huntsville, Alabama, had a busy year. Fencing around the cave entrance was repaired after vandals bent bars the previous year, and an abandoned well was removed from one of the lots in January 2026. The area around the well was collapsing.

In September 2025, the Shelta Preserve hosted 9th-graders from a science class at Mae C. Jemison High School. The Title I school is located within a few miles of the Preserve, thus providing an important opportunity for students to learn about caves and karst in their backyard. Dedicated Shelta Preserve managers and volunteers helped with the events, and school bus transportation was funded by the NSS’s Education and Training Division. Another positive was that the Preserve waiver was professionally translated into Spanish for improved communication with the local students and their families in the future.

Lastly, two “Members Day” events for the Land Trust of North Alabama were held at Shelta Cave, in April and November 2025. For both events, 51 Land Trust members went into the cave. For some, it was their first time underground. The NSS signed up a family of 3 that day!



*Prior to well abandonment at Shelta Cave Nature Preserve. The well penetrated the cave.*



*Jemison High School students at Shelta Cave.*



*The NSS Mill Creek Sink Nature Preserve.*

## Big Management News

In January 2026, the NSS defeated approval of a Special Exception Permit for a stormwater management utility adjacent to the Mill Creek Sink Nature Preserve (Alachua Sinks) in Florida. The defeat came with help from Sunshine Law, NSS Cave Diving Section members, and volunteers. Mill Creek Sink is one of the most significant hydrological and geological features in Alachua County.

Funding to review applications for zoning variances and building permits, as well for research, consultation, and sustained legal defense, was used from the Litigation to Protect Caves Fund. A [fundraising campaign](#) to replenish the Fund raised over \$6,653 (from over 70 donors). The NSS is deeply appreciative for the generosity of our donors!

The NSS will continue to monitor whether the decision of the Planning & Zoning Board will be appealed. Additional work in the coming year will include discussion about placing a potential Conservation Easement on the property with the County.

# Cave Science

Pursuing knowledge and promoting the responsible study and exploration of caves, their contents, and past uses are foundational tenets of our Society. One of the NSS's Strategic Goals is to expand funding for scientific research and exploration.

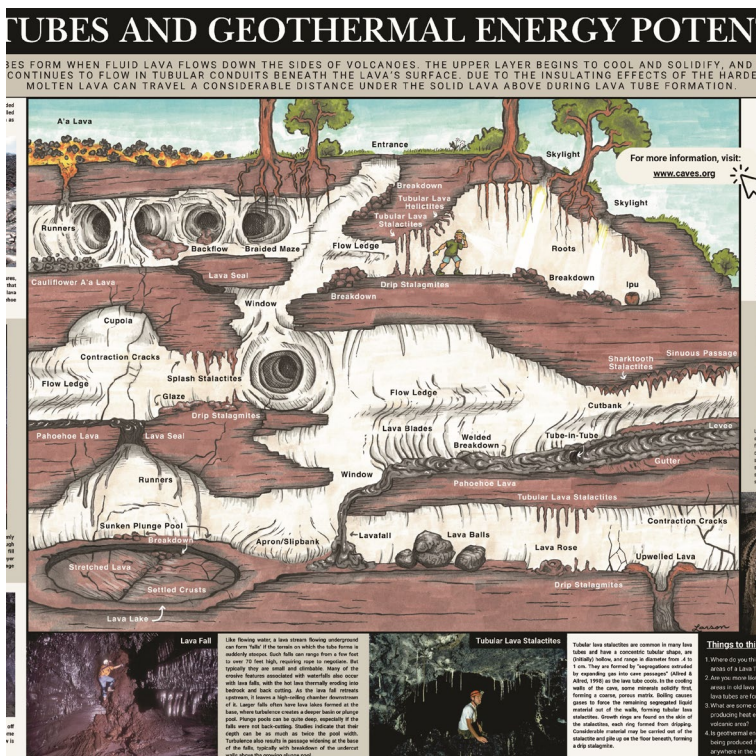
Along with more funding, the NSS needs more volunteers in the Conservation and Science Division. Hopefully by the beginning of the new fiscal year, the Cave Science Department Head position will be filled. But, the [Research Advisory Committee](#) is still looking for applications for a new Chair and more members. The Research Advisory Committee reviews and approves grants, as well as NSS Projects, which is a very fulfilling role to play for the Society. Some of the committees within the Department also need volunteers with strong science backgrounds across multidisciplinary fields because cave and karst science is so diverse.

NSS Projects further the NSS's mission but are not funded or managed directly by the NSS. They are led by NSS members and involve teams of collaborators. Formal approval as an NSS Project means that the group can use the NSS name and logo in reference to their affiliation with the Society. This can be helpful for expeditions and scientific research done outside the US. The very exciting and ambitious [Philippine-American Joint Speleological Project](#) was approved this past year, and we wish them the best of luck!

An active group within the Cave Science Department is the Cave Animal of the Year Team. Last year, they selected the Cave Shrimp as the 2025 Cave Animal of the Year. There are only nine described cave shrimp species in the USA, all small, translucent, and eyeless. More than half of these species are listed as threatened and endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, as well.



The soon-to-be-revealed, 2026 Cave Animal of the Year is... the Slimy Salamander! The formal announcement and rationale for their selection will be in the upcoming April 2026 NSS News, the "Conservation Issue." Cave Preservation Network \$1 bracelets feature the salamander this year, and are already available through the [NSS Bookstore online](#). Other merchandise will be rolled out later in the year.



A portion of the 2025 NSS–American Geoscience Institute poster about lava tubes.

In 2025, the NSS partnered with the [American Geoscience Institute](#) (AGI) during Earth Science Week (October 2025), which was themed "Energy Resources for our Future." The NSS Geology Section developed a poster featuring lava tubes, as an engaging way to highlight the way geothermal energy sources, specifically tied to volcanism, also connect to caves. The poster shows lava tube speleothems and describes their formation mechanisms. Dave Bunnell allowed the use of imagery and Adam Weaver designed the poster.

The poster was shared on Instagram, X, LinkedIn, BlueSky, and Facebook, and was reposted by AGI during Hawai'i's Cave Week in January 2026. The Instagram post received >2,100 views, 39 clicks, and 103 likes so far.

You can [download the poster for free](#).

## Science & Exploration Funding

The NSS offers a range of funding opportunities for members to advance knowledge in the name of Science and Exploration. In return, the publications, products, and resources generated from the work are used to educate our members, landowners, and the public about caves and karst resources.

The money for the grants comes from endowments held by the National Speleological Foundation. The NSS only draws up to 5.5% of the funds to protect them into perpetuity. This past year, the NSS also received a generous grant from the Cave Conservancy Foundation to help support international grant requests.

### Sara Corrie U.S. Exploration Awards

# \$4,971

### International Exploration Awards

# \$14,850

Congratulations to the following researchers who received Scientific Research grants this year -

#### Small Research Grant

- Kathleen Wendt, \$1000 for “Isotopic Evolution of Dripwaters at Oregon Caves”

#### Ralph Stone Graduate Fellowships

- Emma Hughes, \$2000 for “Reconstructing Past Sea Level in the Caribbean Sea using Cave Deposits”
- Karen Vanderwolf, \$1000 for “Environmental reservoirs of *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*”
- Paul Broughton, \$1000 for “Mineralogy of moonmilk in Rats Nest Cave, Alberta”

The NSS awarded these Exploration grants this year. We can't wait to hear about your work!

#### Sara Corrie Memorial Fund (U.S. Exploration)

- Alex Cantrell, \$1000 for Keystone River Cave, Tennessee
- Lee Florea, \$1000 for the Mount Baker glaciovolcanic cave expedition, Washington
- Teancum Hadden, \$975 for Nielsons Well, Utah
- Paul Slayback, \$1000 for Project Alliance, Colorado
- VPI Cave Club, \$996 for Williams Cave, Virginia

#### International Exploration

- Laura Demarest, \$1000 for Agusan del Sur Expedition, Philippines
- Dustin Kisner, \$1000 for the Sternes Project, Crete
- Abigail Mack, \$1575 for a Cueva Sin Fin Project, & \$1600 for a Chiapas & Oaxaca expedition, Mexico
- Katarina Kosic Ficco, \$3000 for exploration in Kučka Korita, Montenegro
- Mikko Cuevas, \$900 for the 8<sup>th</sup> Sultan Kudarat Expedition, Philippines
- Sara Fleetwood, \$2375 for Project Nimbus, Canada
- Kyle Voyles, \$1050 for Monkey Bay National Park Expedition, Belize
- Shane Fryer, \$2350 for Lang Son Geopark mapping project, Vietnam



## NSS Funding Opportunities

Information about the grants offered by the NSS can be found at: [Grants - National Speleological Society](#). Click the links below for more information:

### Education & Training Funding Opportunities

- **Commission Scholarships** Used to defray [NCRC Course](#) and [VTC Course](#) costs. Currently, NCRC offers over \$10,000 annually in scholarships for training. The VTC also offers Bill Cuddington Memorial Scholarships, although amounts are small because this is one of the NSS's newest funds.
- [Education Grants](#) Supports cave and karst-related educational programs.
- [Secondary and Post-Secondary Educator Grants](#)

### Conservation & Cave Acquisition Grants

- [Conservation Grants](#) Supports cave and karst conservation research and education projects
- [Cave Acquisition Grants](#) Supports the purchase of lease of caves or to obtain easements on cave properties

### Scientific Research

- [Ralph Stone Graduate Fellowship Grants](#) Supports cave-related thesis research
- [Research Grants](#) Supports research in cave-related branches of study

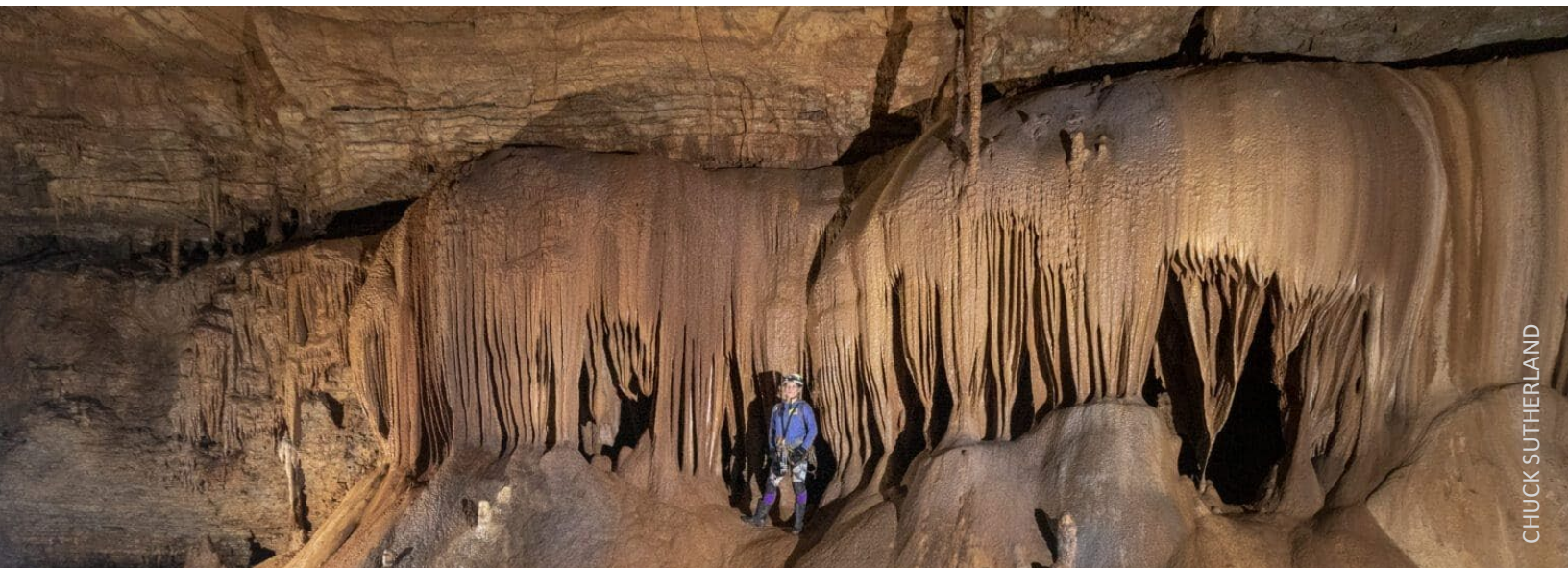
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## New Endowment Fund

This year, thanks to a generous donation from Dr. Albert and Ethel Ogden, the NSS was proud to open a new National Speleological Foundation endowment fund in their honor, the **Dr. Albert & Ethel Ogden Geosciences Research Fellowship**. Thank you so much, Albert and Ethel!

The fellowship is intended to support the scientific research career of an undergraduate or graduate student each year. The student should be studying cave or karst related geosciences or be from the earth science field, which is meant to help promote growth of earth science researchers in the USA.

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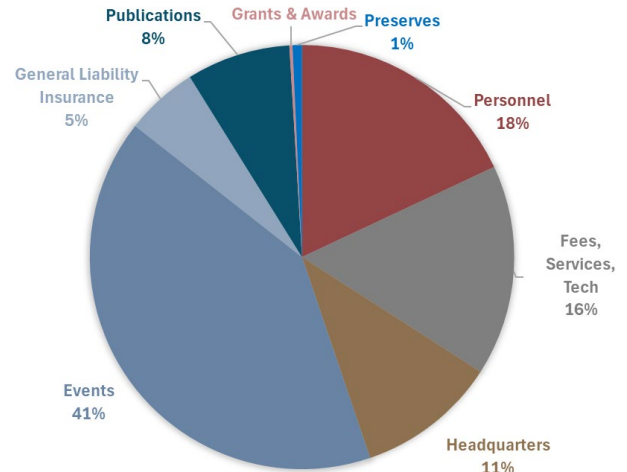
*Secret Cave in the Albert and Ethel Ogden Nature Preserve, Tennessee.*

# Financial Summary

## Expenses

Expenses are divided into Operating (salaries, technology, Headquarters) and Programmatic (NCRC, VTC, grants, etc.) categories. From April 1 until February 2026, total expenses totaled over \$1,300,000 (unaudited). Some expenses are reimbursed from invested NSS-held accounts and endowments at the end of the fiscal year, including salaries, grants, and some Preserve costs.

Collectively, operating expenses totaled roughly 40% of the Society’s overall expenses, which is typical for nonprofits with real estate. This means that most of the NSS’s expenses go to Programs, like NCRC and VTC, as well as the publications and Preserves. The NSS will continue to seek ways to reduce its operating expenses and put more funds into existing programs and seek ways to expand opportunities.

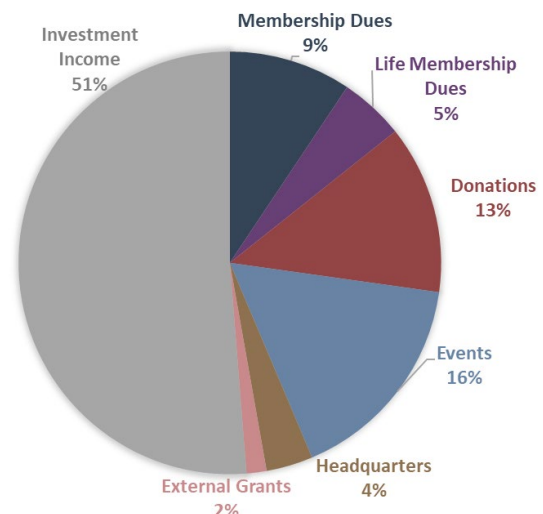


2025-2026 expenses (unaudited) for the Society.

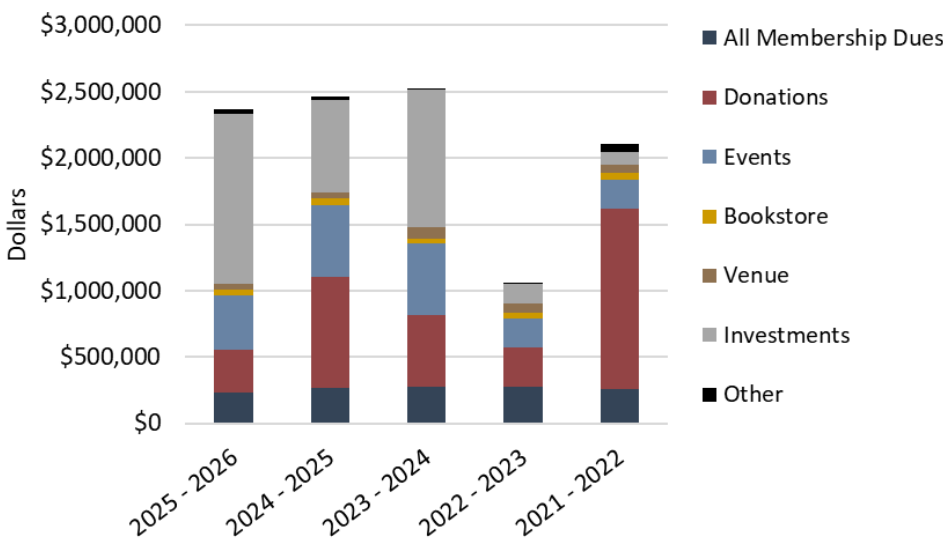
## Income

The NSS relies on diverse income streams to meet our Strategic Goals. Income includes membership dues, donations, events (Conventions and NCRC/VTC courses), and investments. These diversified income streams, totaling over \$2,300,000 this year, place the Society in an excellent position for a responsible, positive, and prosperous financial future.

Membership dues have always provided the Society with a steady income stream but are generally less than donations received annually and are not enough to pay the expenses of the Society.



2025-2026 income streams (unaudited) for the Society.



Income through the years. The 2025-2026 unaudited data are through February 2026; the fiscal year ends March 31.

Since late 2022, the NSS began investing some income from donations, independent of the Foundation. Investment yields are now generating an income stream that exceeds all others.

The investment income is being used to pay for operational expenses that do not necessarily benefit membership. In other words, the NSS can apply membership dues and donations to the Society’s Programs, like NCRC and VTC, and not use them to pay bills, fees, or salaries.

Thanks to the revenue, and after subtracting expenses, the NSS is ending the 2025–2026 fiscal year with a net (unaudited) income of over \$1,000,000. This money is already earmarked for strategic goals for the 2026–2027 fiscal year. The full financial report can be found among the [NSS Business Documents online](#).

Many of the NSS-invested funds originally came from generous, large, charitable donations and bequests from our members. By using the funds to generate more funds responsibly, and by only allocating a portion of the funds for use any year, the NSS is an effective steward of their legacy gifts. We sincerely thank each of them for their loyalty and dedication to the Society. Even after they are no longer with us, their generosity reminds us of their spirit and thoughtfulness, which keeps memories of them alive.

## Assets, Liabilities, & Equity Summary

### The Society is financially healthy.

The 2025–2026 (unaudited) statement of activities thus far shows the financial snapshot of the NSS (note that fiscal year closes March 31, 2026, after which time a final financial statement will be distributed).

The assets (what the NSS owns) include a variety of accounts, inventories (books and merchandise), equipment, book and museum collections, and real estate.

Real Estate, Collections & Equipment (net of depreciation)	\$2,631,644
Endowment & Investment Accounts	\$11,886,377
Other Assets	\$318,055
Total Liabilities & Equity	\$53,393
<b>Total Assets - (Liabilities + Equity) =</b>	<b>\$14,836,076</b>

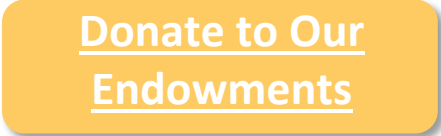
## Endowments

Over 60 years ago, Bill Stephenson established the National Speleological Foundation to manage NSS’s endowments. At the time, there were three: the Life Member Fund, the Headquarter Fund, and the Ralph W. Stone Research Fund. Today, the Foundation is a supporting 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation for the NSS. The Foundation manages 19 funds for the NSS and also maintains the NSS Permanent Endowment Fund, which returns 4% of a three-year-average back to the NSS annually.

The Life Member Fund holds the dues of Life Members and the Foundation gives the NSS the equivalent of a Regular Member’s dues from the fund annually. The remainder of the money stays invested. Presently, the Foundation returns over \$120,000 to the NSS annually for Life Member dues. This amount returned to the NSS will continue to grow as the number of Life Members of the Society grows.

The Foundation-held funds are conservatively invested, and the NSS can use up to 5.5% of most of the funds each year. These funds support NSS programs (e.g., VTC), annual awards given at Convention, and grants for exploration, research, conservation, and preserve acquisition. For funds that the NSS can request any amount voted on and set by the Board (e.g., Litigation to Protect Caves Fund and Vandalism Deterrence Fund), fundraising should replenish the money, as was done this year to replenish funds used in the protection of [Mill Creek Sink Nature Preserve](#) in Florida.

Members need to continue to donate to these funds. The limitations on how much money can be used by the NSS each year means that the total fund size (the “principal”) must increase if the NSS wants to award more or larger grants. Donations allow the funds to grow.



The following is a list of Foundation-held funds in 2025–2026, the amounts available to use this year, and the fund totals at the beginning of the 2025–2026 fiscal year. The total amount held by the Foundation for these funds sums to over \$2,100,000.

<b>Foundation-Held Fund</b>	<b>Amount Available</b>	<b>Fund Total</b>
NSS Perpetuity Fund	\$ 5,460	\$ 99,325.75
Bicking Fund	\$ 550	\$ 10,053.01
Bill Cuddington Scholarship Fund (VTC)	\$ 130	\$ 2,450.00
Hauer Fund	\$ 195	\$ 3,583.17
Mitchell Fund	\$ 545	\$ 9,979.98
Cave Acquisition Fund	\$ 12,500	\$ 227,570.62
Convention Surplus Fund	\$ 11,750	\$ 213,692.94
International Cooperation Fund	\$ 2,035	\$ 37,050.71
International Exploration Fund	\$ 8,750	\$ 159,239.00
Litigation to Protect Caves Fund	(NSS requests amount)	\$ 137,087.77
Nature Preserve Fund	\$ 11,300	\$ 205,801.70
Ogden Geoscience Research Fund	\$2,200	\$ 40,000.00
Publication Fund	\$ 825	\$ 15,000.00
Rescue Training Fund	\$ 10,765	\$ 195,803.03
Sara Corrie Fund	\$ 12,680	\$ 230,587.18
Special Features Fund	\$ 10,420	\$ 189,495.91
Stephenson 50 Fund	(not accessible until 2035)	\$ 59,897.80
Stone Research Fund	\$ 12,690	\$ 230,805.33
Vandalism Deterrence Fund	(NSS requests amount)	\$ 33,381.35

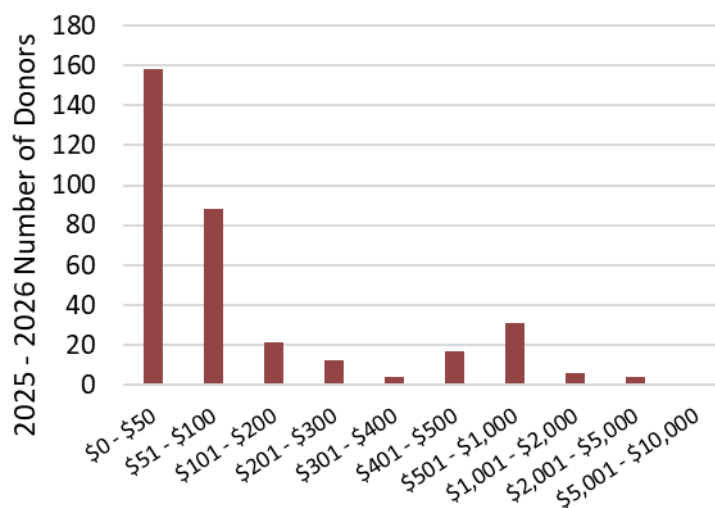
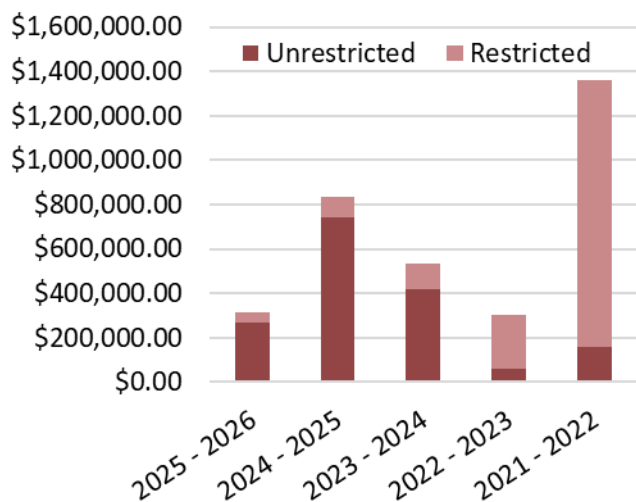


*Peeking into Pueo Cave, a lava tube on the Island of Hawai'i.*

## Generous Donors and Benefactors

Two of the NSS’s Strategic Goals have centered on growing donor opportunities and cultivating legacy giving. In 2025–2026 (through February 2026), there were 340 restricted and unrestricted donations received by the NSS, ranging from \$0.65 to \$10,000. These amounts do not include bequests from the estates of our deceased members or start-up funds for new endowments.


Most donations this year were unsolicited and unrestricted, which means that the NSS can apply the gift to areas of most need. Restricted donations were given predominately in response to fundraising campaigns, like for Mill Creek Sink litigation or the Sara Corrie Memorial Fund on “Giving Tuesday” in December 2025.



*Changes in the distribution of unrestricted and restricted donations over time. 2025–2026\* unaudited data through February 2026; the fiscal year ends March 31, 2026.*

*Numbers of donations at different amounts in 2025–2026. Most gifts do not exceed \$50, with the median donation being \$75 for the year.*

**Median Donation Amount**



\$75

**Stephenson Group Members**



107



*Indiana bat in New Trout Cave, NSS John Guilday Caves Nature Preserve, West Virginia.*

NIKKI FOX

## Stephenson Group

For many of us, caving brings some of the greatest joys of our life. We care deeply about cave exploration, cave science, cave conservation, and caving culture. We share a vision for what American caving should be. We want cavers who come after us to enjoy the same, if not more, opportunities that we have had to discover, explore, study, and protect caves.

Much of the success of the NSS over its 85 years, and especially recently, has been because benefactors gave large, charitable gifts from their estates, insurance policies, or IRAs to the NSS. These funds have been invested to grow and develop the Society's future.

In 1999, the NSS started the Stephenson Group to recognize Society benefactors, following the legacy of generosity created by our founders, Bill and Merle Stephenson and their family.

It had been years since the NSS reviewed donation records for eligible Stephenson Group members. The new Executive Director, with the Fundraising Committee, reviewed wills and other donation documents at the NSS Headquarters, as well as spoke with several members about their giving plans. In total, 17 new Stephenson Group members were added to the list. We are grateful for each of their gifts.

Planned giving strengthens the NSS's work today, but is also critical for growing the Society in the future. If you or someone you know qualifies for membership in the Stephenson Group, or if you would like further information, then please reach out to the Executive Director.

## Create your Legacy with the NSS

[Start Today!](#)

Any members of the Society, as well as Internal Organizations, can become members of the Stephenson Group by:

- Making lifetime charitable gifts to the Society that aggregate to \$10,000 or more, or
- Leaving \$10,000 or more to the NSS upon your death, such as through a will, trust, living testament, IRA, retirement plan, etc., or
- Designating the Society to receive 25% or more of a charitable remainder trust, or
- Donating \$10,000 or more to the NSS Permanent Endowment Fund with the National Speleological Foundation.

## Consider Planned Giving



caves.org  
fundraising@caves.org  
256-852-1300



RYAN MAURER

## Sending a sincere *thank you* to all our donors this year!

David Ader	Christopher Freeman	Adam Mathis	Noel E. Sloan
Bert Ashbrook	David Fricke	David Matteson	Thomas L. Smith
Ginger Baker	William G. Fritz	Larry E. Matthews	Lawrence Spangler
George Bange	Carol S. Fritz	Ryan R. Maurer	Reece Spencer
Steven Beckley	David W. Garton	Gail McCoy	Michael Spiess
Mitchell Berger	Lee Gilman	Jeff McDonald	Bryan E. Staib
Franklin Bogle	Kieffer Gilman-Strickland	David K. McFarlane	Aaron Stavens
Valeria Bogle	Steven Goryl	Michael L. McKee	Rosa Stephens
Richard Bohman	Bernice Gottschalk	Bryn Michelson-Ziegler	William C. Stephens
Cathy Borer	Thomas J. Grant	Susan Michniewski	Albert W. Stewart
Stephanie Bouchey	Janet Griswold	Ron Miller	Lisa Storey
Corrina	Venu Gupta	William Moran	Gary Storrick
Bruce Bowman	Donny Guy	Marc Morrow	Roy Strong
James Braswell	Matyas Gyimesi	John Lee Moses	Connor Swanke
Alvin R. Breisch	Elizabeth Ann Hall	Jozef Mravik	Bernard Szukalski
Stephen R. Brewer	Thomas Hallinan	Jose R. Beaza Muniz	Sandy Szukalski
Christina Brewer	Nancy Hallinan	David Nicholas	John C. Tinsley
Derek Bristol	Maureen Handler	Carol Nicholson	Jack A. Touseull
Kaitlin Britton	Ginger Harbison	Kristen Nielsen	Kevin Triplett
Bryan K. Buescher	Robert P. Harris	Albert Ogden	H. Douglas Van Demark III
Carolina Bull	Paul Hauck	Ethel Ogden	Daniel Viglione
Thomas Butterworth	Dee Hauck	Stephen Ormeroid	Philip S. Walker
Bradley Calcote	Edith A. Haughton	Jeff McDonald	Betsey Walker
Paul Cannaley	J Francis Heidlage	John H. Overholt	Joan Walsh
Amber Carmichael	John F. Hoffelt	Sandra Jo Packman	Michael L. Warner
Gary S. Cendrowski	George Holland	David Paquette	Randy M. Waslien
Gail Chadwick	David W. Hughes	Don Paquette	Helge Weissig
Shinen Ethen Chew	Sharon Ireton	Aquene Payne	Joshua White
Cathy Clodfelter	William N. Jackson	Andrew James Peacock	Charles T. Williams
Bryan Clogg	Peter Johnson	Terri Lee Peck	Mark M. Wilson
David W. Coles	James D. Johnston	Michael R. Perez	Patricia Witt
William B. Combs	Mark K. Jones	Walter R. Pirie	Tim Wiwel
Theresa Corrie	Christine Jones	Matthew Pitts	Owen Zacharias
Diane Cousineau	Jeanice C. Kaiser	John Robert Powers	<b>Organizations</b>
Nathan Damen	Eric Kampman	Proctor Press	Northeastern Cave
Emily Davis	Vince Kappler	Suezy Proctor	Conservancy
Arthur Doak	Ernst H. Kastning	Michael W. Quearry	Cumberland Caverns Inc.
Joseph Doles	Joe Kearns	Ava Quearry	Glenwood Caverns Adventure
Kevin Downey	Dwight Kempf	Bill Ranards	Park
Dennis Drum	Kenneth Laidlaw	Bruce Randall	Lincoln Caverns
Keith Dunlap	Audrey Lambert	Jessica Ratcliffe	Lake Shasta Caverns
Patricia Ann Dunlavy	Ed LaRock	Michael A. Raymond	Sewanee Mountain Grotto
Kristine Ebrey	Arthur Latterner	Annette F. Reynolds	Augusta Cave Masters Grotto
William R. Elliott	Kenneth G. Lawson Jr.	Robert Rich	Birmingham Grotto
Eanna Elsea	Deborah Ann Layton	Ellsworth Richter	Blue Ridge Grotto
Scott Engel	Les Lazar	Alice Rolfes-Curl	Greater Cincinnati Grotto
Karl Fendelander	Henry Little	Eileen Rudert	Huntsville Grotto
James M. Ferguson	Thomas E. Liupp	Kevin Rumanak	Lost River Caverns
Malcolm S. Field	Yunnhon Lo	Carol W. Russell	Lincoln Center
Matthew F. Finstrom	John Lovaas	Marianne Russo	Vivian Beaumont Theater
Holly Finstrom	Jason Luckett	Nick Schmalenberger	
Barbara Fite	Thomas Lupp	Caleb Scott	
Preston L. Forsythe	Jeff MacDonald	Mark A. Sherman	
Louden Family Foundation	Bruce Marshall	Andrew H. Shoun	
Erin Frederick	Mark Maslyn	Robert Simmons	

# Looking Ahead

Compiling a year’s worth of activities and products in one place is a mighty accomplishment. Certainly, not everything could be highlighted, and we apologize if something important to you was left out. But, seeing the work of the NSS in this way emphasizes how important our volunteers, partners, and donors are.

Volunteers are the backbone of the NSS, but we need more passionate members to step up into positions, whether at the grotto-level, for Conventions, or at the national-level. Also, building and maintaining more partnerships with other like-minded organizations will help the NSS to reach a wider community of outdoor sports enthusiasts and explorers, land conservationists, scientists, students, and educators. We end this Annual Report with a look at two exciting opportunities in the coming year, our training facility and a museum at the NSS Headquarters. Both fulfill Strategic Goals for the NSS.

**Interested in  
Volunteering? Join us!**

## “Vertical Bill” Training Facility Update



In 2022, the Board of Governors began fundraising for a “vertical training tower” at the NSS Headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama. The “tower” honors Bill Cuddington and will be available for use by grottos, rescue units and agencies, and support the NSS’s mission of educating members and the public on safe caving practices. This would also become a permanent regional home for the Vertical Training Commission.

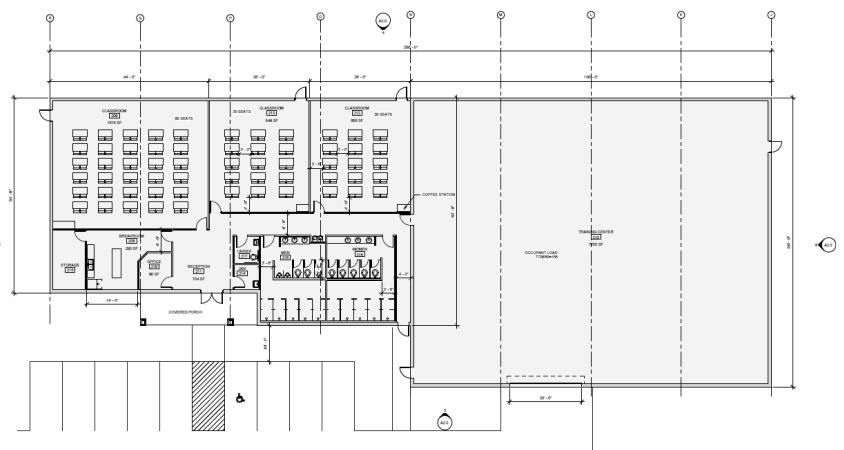
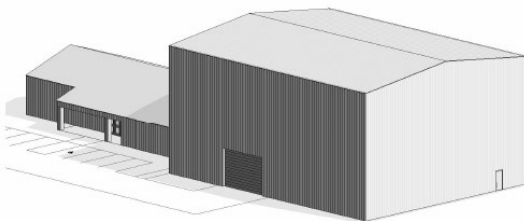
**Donate to “Vertical”  
Tower” Fund**

The goal was to raise \$150,000 in a couple of years. The NSS would match up to \$75,000 from unrestricted funds. As of February 2026, we have **\$72,405.73!**

The Board also authorized up to \$10,000 for design, construction quotes, insurance needs research, and overall planning. Once funds are reached, construction can begin.

This past year, after discussion about the “vertical training tower,” thoughts among NCRC, VTC, and NSS leadership evolved from a “tower” to a “facility” with an educational center and resources, in addition to a vertical training space. Classrooms would provide opportunities for NCRC and VTC classes, among other uses.

The Board approved using grant funding to obtain architectural renderings, which will be presented to the Board in March 2026 at their spring meeting at the NSS Headquarters in Huntsville. Discussions about next steps will undoubtedly focus on obtaining construction drawings and estimates to understand the full financial commitment to the NSS, and how best to use your generous Vertical Tower donations.



*Renderings of the potential vertical training facility, to be built at the NSS Headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama.*

## NSS Headquarters Refocusing on the Core Mission

The Board established the NSS Museum of Speleology in 1974, to be dedicated to the collection, preservation, interpretation, and exhibition of artifacts relating to the cave environment and ecology, past use of caves, and techniques of speleology. With enough space for inventory, storage, staging, and display, the museum would be a center for fellowship and learning for members and the general public. The museum would also be used for training and presentations. But, the NSS never had a physical place for a museum.

The NSS purchased the Shriners' property in Huntsville, Alabama, on December 15, 2011, after years of members wanting to see the NSS office, operations, library, and museum housed together. Once the NSS Headquarters was occupied in 2012, the NSS started renovating the facilities with the intent to rent the largest spaces, a 10,000 square-foot auditorium, foyer, a prep kitchen, and commercial restrooms. The NSS also created a new position, Facilities Manager, to focus on rental operations. Conceptually, rentals were supposed to provide the NSS with steady income. In the first year (2012–2013), the NSS made \$5,000 in profit. The Shriners reported generating ~\$30,000 annually from rentals, and the NSS predicted that rentals could yield up to \$50,000 per year in net income within a decade.

Unfortunately, financial records revealed that net profits did not exceed budgetary expectations due to venue expenses (e.g., insurance, cleaning, repairs and remodeling, etc.) and Facilities Managers' salaries. Moreover, rentals for weddings, dances, trade shows, and roller derby events were on weekends, so the spaces sat vacant and unused most days. Chronic underperformance had placed the NSS on a financially unsustainable path. After 14 years, the NSS was not thriving as a rental venue, and it was unclear how being a rental venue fit the mission.

The new Executive Director presented the venue finances and situation to the Board within her first months of employment. Operationally, the NSS will cease rentals and refocus on the mission. Strategically, an alternative use for the space was offered and is being considered. The founder and director of the [Alabama Science Festival](#), as well as director of [Innovation for Education Foundation](#) (IfEF), who also has museum experience (including with Universal Pictures for the [Jurassic Park exhibit](#) and the [Dinosaur Mummy CSI exhibit](#)), suggested that the NSS could build a museum. For the Executive Director and the Board, dedicating the space for a museum would finally satisfy the NSS's long history of wanting a permanent museum place and directly meet Strategic Goals centered on fellowship, education, and training.

Museums enrich communities by offering unique experiences. Museums honor past accomplishments and preserve culture that can inspire future generations. Museums "edu-tain." In developing a partnership with IfEF in the coming year, discussions can focus on exhibits that showcase "Caves as Archives," feature NSS's history and famous cavers, and bring immersive experiences, such as with a permanent CaveSim installation and VR space. Flexible, rotating "pop ups" about natural history and science would attract a wide range of visitors. At last, the largest spaces at the NSS Headquarters will be used for the NSS's core mission. Future discussions will define the museum's structure and governance, exhibit designs and costs, and timeline. As the situation develops, more information will be shared with members.



*Images of the current museum display cases at the Headquarters.*

