

MARCH

2025

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FRONT ROYAL COLUMN

News from the underground...



Ready to go into Cleversburg Sink Cave (photo courtesy Caitlin Vittitow)



Bat count 1400 small browns in a VA Cave (photo courtesy Wil Orndorff)

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The Front Royal Column is a publication of the National Speleological Society's Front Royal Grotto. Articles may be reprinted by the NSS and its internal organizations if credit is given to the Column and the author.

Newsletter submissions may be submitted by email janete@shentel.net or snail mail, FRG Newsletter, c/o Tinkham, 360 Kings Dr., Fort Valley, VA 22652

Meetings are held every other month on the 2nd Thursday, 7PM. We are currently meeting at the Box Office Brewery in Strasburg, VA which accommodates both in person and zoom. Contact to confirm [janete@shentel](mailto:janete@shentel.net) or 540-550-3108.

Membership dues are \$10/year.

Front Royal Grotto Website <https://frontroyalgrotto.caves.org/>

We have openings for Secretary, Conservation Chair, and Newsletter Editor. Let us know if interested!



ACTIVITY REPORTS

Wilderness Adventure Weekend -2025

Submitted by Jeff Jahn

Carter Caves State Park, near Grayson, KY hosts an annual adventure weekend near the end of every January. Historically, the event was known as the Crawlathon, which catered to the caving community. But after white nose syndrome hit the area, the event morphed into including more above ground activities and became known as Winter Adventure Weekend.

I've attended numerous Crawlathon and Adventure weekends in past, and on a spur of moment decision, decided to head down once again for the 2025 event. This year the weather had been quite cold prior to the event, and unlike many years in past, this would make for a great opportunity to witness a cascade of ice flows and icicles that form over the numerous limestone cliffs that are scattered throughout the park.

Because of the late registration and lodging being filled locally, I decided to stay at another state park, Greenbo Lake, located about 30 miles away. It was a great stay as the accommodations were great and quite quiet and low key compared to the frenzy that occurs at Carter Caves.

My plan for Saturday morning was to hike the Box Canyon trail located near Cascade Caverns. It was funny as I pulled into the parking lot, there was a group of cavers waiting to begin the Cascade wild cave trip and were assuming I was joining them as they were waiting on one final participant. But once they realized I was not part of their group off they went to Cascade cave. And I headed off to the Box Canyon trail. The hike is not long but it is a scenic trail that winds up in a box canyon of tall limestone cliffs and forest. The icicles present and adorning the cliffs were better than I could imagine and to top it off, I had the place to myself! After hanging out a while, I headed back to the lodge.

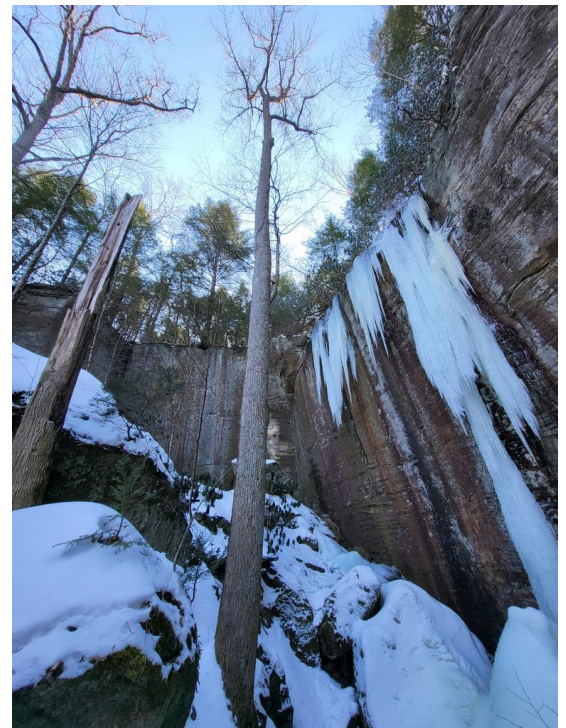
I signed up for a caving and hiking trip for the afternoon, called Caving on the lake. This trip involved hiking around the part of the lake located on the property, where over four different caves and a couple of above ground natural bridges would be encountered.

The caves tend to occur at base of the limestone cliffs and are off a couple of hundred feet from the lake edge. Before too long we came to the first two caves which were great mazy crawl and stoop caves. Not too long but fun and then back to the surface for more hiking. Eventually we came to a point where we had the option to simply walk on the ice that covered the lake and which would save us considerable time rather than scrambling along the cliff face. At one point, we went to check out another cave, but it was so encrusted with ice that we decided it was too difficult to access. But just seeing the entrance was reward enough!

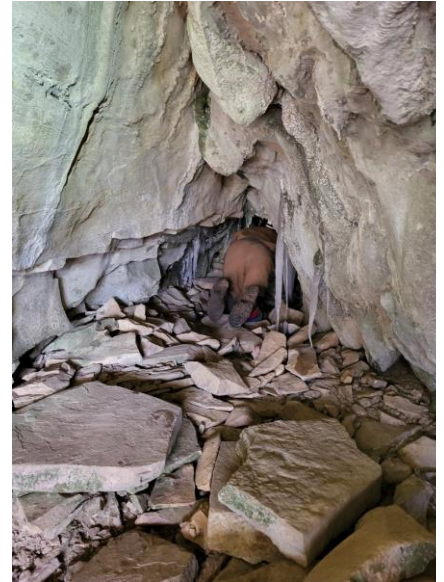
As we made our way along the lake we came to the spot where the organizers were doing a polar plunge. Turns out the ice was 5 inch thick, and they had to cut an area in for the plunge. A few of our group decided to bail on our trip and do the plunge which was scheduled to start 30 minutes from our arrival. So off they went to change while we headed to another cave, Owl cave. Nice hand and knees opening that eventually opened up and then one point in back becomes a water passage. I ended up being the only one that continued in the water passage, and I went another 100 feet or so before turning around. The passage does come up out of water in the back but since I was on my own thought it better to get back to the group once I realized no one was following me. I got a round of applause as I came up out of the water passage.

Eventually, we checked out some other sites and then ended up back at lodge. Was a good way to spend the afternoon. I hung around the lodge for a while but decided to head back to Greenbo after dinner and relax.

Sunday morning, I did a short hike at Greenbo and then headed home. It was good to get reacquainted with Carter Caves and for those looking to do something in the dead of winter that's a bit different, I recommend looking into this annual event. In the past, we have also made this a grotto event and something we can consider again if enough interest.



Wilderness Adventure Weekend
(photos courtesy of Jeff Jahn)



Groundhog Day at SF
Submitted by Jeff Jahn

There was still a window of time to get back to Sarah before reclamation was set to begin so after some coordination with the tiny team members, 9 participants arrived at Sarah's parking area on a brisk February 2nd morning, Groundhog day, no less. And it turns out, the tiny team was running a bit late because they were driving over from Punxsutawney having just witnessed Phil predicting there will be 6 more weeks of winter! Hmmm, wonder if that also means reclamation will also be delayed another 6 weeks?

Not sure about Phil but the roads to the site were quite challenging with large sections being ice sheets. We weren't too concerned about this though as the temperature was forecasted to go up throughout the day with expectations things would improve by departure time. More on this later!

Three teams were formed...GAA to tackle the far east maze tiny passages (Noah, Nick, and Coedee), GAB to head to south end to knock off some of the previously identified sketched but un-surveyed passages (Chris and Frank), and GAC to head to slut maze, root room, and central portion of cave to also pick up some sketched but un-surveyed passages (Jeff, Lars, and Talia). That left one other person that decided to just stay above ground for the day. The teams headed in and agreed to return to surface at 4pm.

Things proceeded well for GAC throughout the day. Talia was a first timer for Sarah and while initially not sure what to expect based on Sarah's reputation, she found it to be both fun and exciting. At one point, she slithered through a tight gap (after some modification from Lars) to get to a survey station we needed to shoot from. Lars has a knack for navigating and we were able to locate all target areas without too much effort with exception of having to search for alternative stations as some of the obvious ones were rubbed ineligible from cavers passing through over the years of the survey. Time passed quickly and after knocking off about 4 panels targeted for surveying, we headed out to the surface. The other two teams came shortly out after we exited.

Surprise, surprise though, it was snowing and sleeting. Everything was covered with a good half inch of ice pellets and snow. So much for the forecast of rising temperatures which instead basically hovered around 32 degrees!

A quick comparison of notes from the teams indicated that we probably added another couple of hundred feet of passage to Sarah including 50 feet of so of hard fought passage from the tiny team as they pushed the southern east maze leads to the east. Unfortunately no breakout passage was encountered making any further trips to the east maze in doubt.

Now the challenge was getting home. We quickly changed and slowly navigated the icy and snow covered hills and roads. At one point, Noah's car could not make the crest of one of the hills up from the bridge near the river and only made it after a push from some of the other members in his car. Roads into, around, and out of East Brady were treacherous. Was Sarah sending a message? Not sure, but it did occur to me more than once that we will never make it off the site. But in the end we all made it back despite numerous accidents and some roads being closed along the way.

Bean Cave *Submitted by Jeff Jahn*

Bean Cave is located in Frederick County VA, west/southwest of Winchester. It is located on a hunt club property. About 8 years ago, Page County surveyors and FRG helped gate and survey the cave.

Unfortunately, the cartographer did not come through and the map was never completed and relations with the hunt club soured. But recently, with the help of Scott Wahlquist, who reviewed the notes, began to complete the map. He concluded another trip was necessary to finish a tight passage and check some areas of the cave for accuracy. Wil Orndorf was able to get permission from the hunt club and on

Sunday February 8th, seven team members showed up to finish getting the data.



Some errors were corrected, and the team of Casey and Aiden were able to add about 200 feet of passage in a low-level tight area.

All in all, a good day. We will be waiting anxiously to see the finished product and hopefully after we present it to the hunt club, maybe access for other trips in the future can be arranged. *(photo credits Jeff Jahn)*



Bat Count February 22nd
Submitted by Olivia Ondo

The drive to our spot was beautiful. I was in New Trout Cave, and it was pretty dusty. I'll say it was definitely my favorite caving trip thus far, though that's probably because I saw so many bats! We mostly saw little browns. There were also some big browns, tri colored, and small footed bats. Unfortunately, I didn't get to see any Virginia big eared bats.

We saw 4 Indiana bats though! 3 of which were banded! After we got done with New Trout, me and three others from the group hiked up to Hamilton Cave and did a small loop (about 15-20 mins).

John Guilday Cave Preserve Bat Counts 2025

By: Earl Suitor (NSS Preserve Manager)

On Saturday February 22nd, 2025, the annual bat counts took place for Hamilton, Trout & New Trout Caves on the John Guilday Cave / Nature Preserve of the N.S.S. in Pendleton County, West Virginia. Please note that Trout Cave is only counted every other year on odd years since COVID-19.

The NSS wishes to thank all those who took their day to help with this count on a cold yet sunny February day.

191 Total (all 3 caves) live bats were counted.

Trout Cave was counted by Earl Suitor, Erin Brook, Barbara Douglass, William Ponder, Gretchen Uhrinek, and Allie Shellhammer.

Hamilton Cave was counted by Amber Nolder (Pennsylvania Game Commission), Ashley Likourgos, Chris Coates, Tyler Giblin, and Tom Griffin.

New Trout Cave was counted by Dave West, Karen Willmes, Kevin Hughes, Blake Bremer (Virginia Tech), Olivia Ondo, and Sage Levy.

(Complete historical data for all three Preserve caves is available at <https://dgc.caves.org/bat-count>)

Water Levels and Along came a Spider *Submitted by Jeff Jahn*

The trip to Cleversburg Sink was on for March 8th but I still had some doubts about what to expect as the water level rose after being dry for months due to a rain event that came through on March 5th. Would the water level be high enough to alter cave plans? Have to wait and see.

I met Eric, Jeannie, Will, Brigit, Caitlin, and Isaiah at the park and ride in Strasburg Saturday morning to head up to Shippensburg where we were going to meet Colin, his son Luke, and Brian W. Nice to see Colin and his son on the trip as we haven't seen them in ages since they moved from VA.

I threw my stuff in Jeannie's truck (Eric was driving) and so our caravan of three vehicles headed up I-81 about 8:45am. I was in the front passenger seat just chit chatting about things when at one point I noticed a small spider crawling across the dashboard. No problem, I took my handy dandy smart phone turned it on edge and whack, one swipe and no more spider. But almost simultaneously I heard Jeannie gasp and say noooooo!!!! What??? Turns out Jeannie has a soft spot for spiders and her truck is like a sanctuary city for spiders. Wow, I really felt bad about what happened and didn't know what to say but Jeannie seemed to forgive me or at least she didn't throw me out of her truck!

So on we continued up I-81 and arrived at Shippensburg about 10:30 am where we met Colin and Brian and then headed to the cave parking area. Bill Geller (From Franklin County Grotto) was waiting for us and gave us the key to the cave gate. We suited up and took the short hike over to the cave entrance. I let Eric lead the way in and I came in last closing the gate behind us.

In no time at all we made our way down the series of ropes and ladders to the bottom of the main gorge in the cave. I was anxious to see the level of water and excited to see that the water had receded about one foot from where Bill Geller had placed a stick on Friday when he went to check on the water level. There was still a lingering pool of water at the low point of the passage but for all intents and purposes, the water level was low enough to allow us to go wherever we wanted in the cave! Yahoo!

The plan was to start doing a reverse loop down the fissure crack to the drapery formation and then connect to the long gorge. It was a fun way to start as the fissure crack is accessed by climbing up to a 4 inch ledge that one traverses along a wall and then to continue must step on a couple of iron rungs where there is a gap in the ledge. There was some laughing and gnashing of teeth but everyone navigated the obstacles and continued on the next set of challenges in the long gorge.

The long gorge is like walking in an amusement park fun house where the angle of the passage requires one to walk off center and just feels weird. The passage is narrow with high ceilings and the limestone is colorful and contorted. Add in a couple of pools of water and a steep climb up to reach a dome pit at the end makes this passage a must do and especially when the water is low.

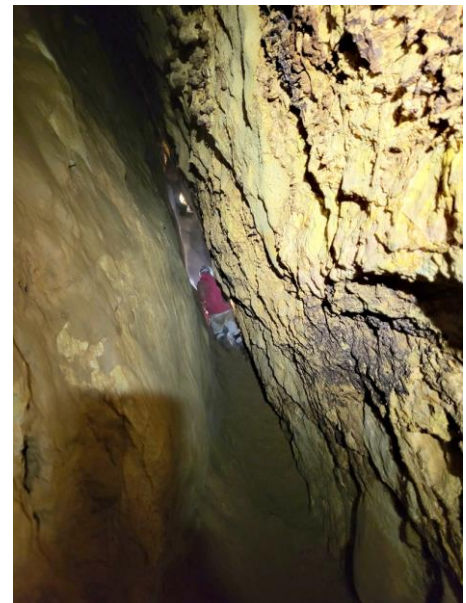
We continued on backtracking out the gorge and with assist of a hand line continued on a new section of a fissure passage that connects to the main passage of cave.

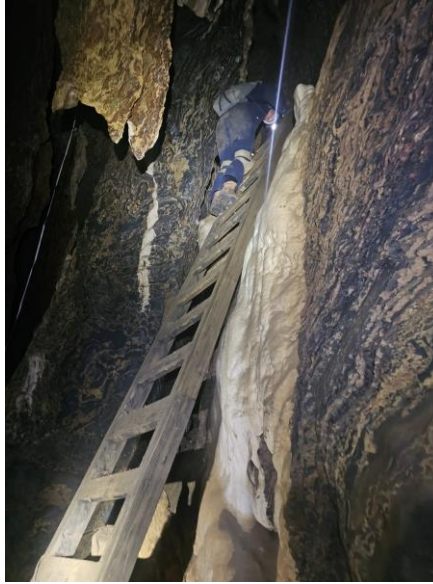
There are various ways to maneuver along this section as there are low and high paths to take but all along a narrow mix of cracks and ledges. But watch out as one false move and gravity will take you for a ride. Just ask Brigit, who at one point had a foot slip off a ledge and down she went like on a water slide and dropped for about four feet or so until the passage narrowed up enough to stop her descent. I did not see this happen but Eric, who observed it happen, was probably more shook up than Brigit. Fortunately, Brigit was OK and no worse for wear and Eric was able to grab Brigit's arms and pull her out of the crack pretty straightforward.

We finally made it to the main passage and took a well-deserved break. From here the cave trip takes on a different feel as it has more belly and hands and knee crawl passages between rooms rather than high fissure crack passages where stemming is required. This is also where we need to pass the sump, which is dry at low water, but full of water when the water level is rising.

Given the large size of the group, I often found myself in the middle of the pack and I just told whoever was in the lead position to lead us on in. Was a nice change of pace for me as I am used to leading but in this cave the passages are pretty linear so it was fun letting multiple people lead us on in. As expected, the sump was dry and eventually we got to the back where the Pipe Organ and Ribbon rooms are located. It gets a little complicated back here as the passages are mazy and it is not obvious which way to go. Colin headed off one way and others went a different way, but we all ended up in same place. It is always a surprise where after crawling and squirming through non-descript earthy passages one enters the Pipe Organ room where there are beautiful white concentrations of formations that adorn the entire room.

After another break we headed out for the return to entrance. We popped out after 4.5 hours underground and based on the amount of chatting and high fives, I think everyone felt good about the excursion we did for the day. Colin, Luke and Brian headed off home in a different direction while the rest of our group headed back to Strasburg for a Mexican dinner. The margarita's always taste better after a cave trip! Was a good day and always a fun time at Cleversburg. *(photo credits Jeff Jahn)*





Cleversburg Sink Cave (*photos courtesy of Caitlin Vittow*)

Top Right: Eric & Jeannie

Midde Left: Caitlin

Bottom Left: Wil

Bottom Right: Wil & Brigit



Shenandoah County Survey Update March 15 *Submitted by Jeff Jahn*

Had a good turnout of 11 participants. Three of us headed over to a property owned by Lee, one of the maintenance managers, to survey an undocumented cave near the border of Rockingham and Shenandoah counties. Cave is located at top of a ridge that was accessed with a Kubota and tractor pulling a wagon. Unfortunately, when we reached the outcrop and headwall where the entrance was located, turns out there were a couple of gopher hole type passages but not really a cave entrance. So we dug for a couple of hours to see if we could break through but we did not have any success despite moving a good bit of dirt.

So, we packed up and headed back to the battlefield dig. We arrived around noon and found things progressing rapidly. With the help of micro-blasting, numerous rocks and dirt were removed and by end of day, the pit was now 13 feet deep. There is an obvious passage at the bottom now going sideways and continuing down. It is getting larger but still not large enough to allow body entry. We are hoping rain and runoff will clean the passageway so we can get a better sense of what is happening. Some of the large overhanging boulders in entrance will also need to be removed or shored up if the project continues. Next month will be a make or break on the dig. It does have air movement but the effort to adequately open up the passage and safely secure the entrance may be deemed too much of a challenge to continue.

DIGS AND CAVES NOT OPEN TO PUBLIC AND ONLY ACCESSED WITH SPECIAL PERMISSION FROM NEW MARKET BATTLEFIELD



BITS & BREAKDOWN

What is one of your favorite caving related moments?

Taking my kids into a cave for the first time with my Dad and seeing how amazed they were. Sharing those moments with my dad makes it even more special.

– **Sharon Ritenour**

Hi Janet,

One of my favorite caving memories is when you and Twila crawled into the L shaped entrance tunnel when we all went to Benedicts Cave. That was a fun trip and cool sink hole.

– **Cheryl Suitor**



Favorite - that's tough to select. Maybe, the stream and pool in Warm River Cave, about 65 years ago. One of my favorites has to be Fort Staunton, in New Mexico, fabulous cave, for miles apparently; Cox Cave, in Missouri - a largely virgin cave, we mapped it to its end - with Raccoon tracks at the impossible tight wet, end, and some very old bear bones. Butler was impressive in my early trip there, also about 60 years ago; Laurel Creek and related caves in Monroe County, big and not real well explored. Too many good days caving, to pick just a few

I almost forgot that afternoon that Charlie Schwab and I with Lew Blcking, came across the first entrance to Friars Hole. At the time, it was like "more regular cave"
Thanks, those were the days,

- **Tom Tucker**

My favorite cave trip began in the 1960s and has not ended yet.

PS: Along the way this trip included a through-trip into Ellison's cave in Georgia, Harwoods Hole with Lauren in New Zealand and Shovel Eater in West Virginia.

– **Greg McCoy**

A favorite caving moment for me was reaching the bottom of the entrance pit of Harwoods Hole, while honeymooning with Greg in New Zealand

- **Lauren McCoy**

In the late 60's some Baltimore Grotto members took an early spring trip to Cave Hollow/Arbogast. There were three of us doing a through trip. We were in a connection passage when we saw a huge cluster of bats on the wall. None of us could identify what kind of bats they were, but it stopped us in our tracks. WOW WOW WOW. We continued down the passage and saw several more clusters. Given we were using carbide lamps, we did not linger as long as we would have liked.

– **Carol Tiderman**

Working on opening up Middle of Somewhere cave and having a large rock release and drop into open space. And then rigging the entrance pit and rappelling into virgin cave where limestone walls are fluted with delicate sharp edges and then realizing the cave is more than a pit and ends up having over 1,700 feet of passage.

– **Jeff Jahn**

The very first wild cave I went into left a lasting impression of aww. The glittering of the walls and ceiling while being incased in stone made me feel like I was in another world. Getting to explore this world with a friend who also didn't know what was around the next corner touched my curious nerve and created the draw that brings me caving today.

– **John Lenox**

Going into Floyd Collins house & Sand Cave with Roger Brucker in Kentucky....and archeological sites in Salts Cave.

– **Earl Suitor**

On Feb 27, 2025, in Mexico, we were able to do some excellent landowner relations to get into two seldom visited vertical caves. We removed several armloads of trash. After showing the owners the trash we removed, they were so happy and invited us back to sometime show us some more beautiful caves on their property.

– Carl Pierce

Once, I was in a cave known to be a Virginia big-eared bat habitat. We were in a small room and then noticed a big-eared bat on the ceiling, mere feet from our faces. We watched silently as it woke up, slowly turning its big ears one way and another like a dish telescope. I felt bad that we had disturbed it, but that is one experience I will treasure all my life!

– Meredith Weberg

My first vertical cave trip was Newberry-Bane Cave on 7-28-06 which will be forever a most memorable caving moment.

- Janet Tinkham

UPCOMING EVENTS

- **March 29- (tentative)** Page Co cave surveying & digs. Contact Jeff Jahn gsci75@gmail.com if interested.
- **April 12-** Cave Hill Natural Area Preserve Work Day (see flyer)
- **April 26-** Silers Cave Survey begins. Contact Jeff Jahn gsci75@gmail.com if interested.
- **April 27-** Earth Day Celebration in Front Royal, will set up Cave/Karst Education display.
- **May 1-** Next newsletter deadline email submissions janete@shentel.net
- **May 9-11-** Spring VAR, Spruce Knob, WV
<https://var.caves.org/index.php/events/spring-var>
- **June 23-27-** NSS Convention, Cobleskill, NY
<https://caves.org/convention/2025-nss-convention>



CAVE HILL NATURAL AREA PRESERVE VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

APRIL 12 | 9AM

GROTTOES, VA

Friday, April 11—Afternoon only, a few people to haul steel

Saturday, April 12—Primary workday to re-stake a large number of recently planted trees and repair protective tubes. Also, some trail repair work could be done if time/people permit.

Volunteers should dress to be outside working in the woods and on slopes. Long pants, boots, gloves, hats, sunscreen, bug spray etc.

Lunch and snacks will be provided on Saturday. Bring a water bottle (can be refilled onsite).

****Please RSVP to janete@shentel.net for food headcount (need NLT 4/8) and to email any additional information or changes.**

THANK YOU!

*Sponsored by VA Dept of Conservation and Recreation,
Cave Conservancy of the Virginias, and the Virginia Region*

