

November

2025

In this Issue:

Activity Reports

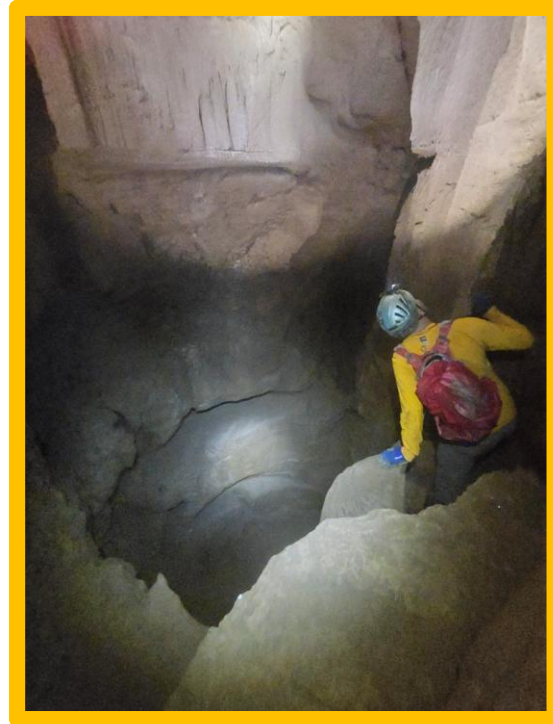
- *Breathing Cave Trip*
- *Front Royal Caverns*
- *Shenandoah Wild*
- *Skyline Caverns Long Lead*
- *Field trip to Ogden's Cave*
- *Cave Falls, SNP*
- *Pass Mountain Trail*
- *Boar Hole Cave, WV*

Bits & Breakdown

Upcoming Events

FRONT ROYAL COLUMN

News from the underground...



Colin in Boarhole Cave (Photo credit Caitlin Vittitow)



*Harley Quinn and Olivia Ondo surveying in Silers Cave
(Photo credit Chris Woodley)*

CONTACT US

Chair

Janet Tinkham

janete@shentel.net

Vice-Chair

Eric Zieg

eric@ziegstudios.com

Treasurer

Mike Armstrong

freestaterambler@gmail.com

[gmail.com](mailto:freestaterambler@gmail.com)

Secretary

Member at Large

Tom Tucker

threedogtom1@gmail.com

[gmail.com](mailto:threedogtom1@gmail.com)

Vertical

Greg McCoy

gamccoy@hotmail.com

Cave Rescue

Earl Suitor

wvcaver216@gmail.com

Conservation

Janet Tinkham

janete@shentel.net

Newsletter Submissions

Janet Tinkham

janete@shentel.net

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.

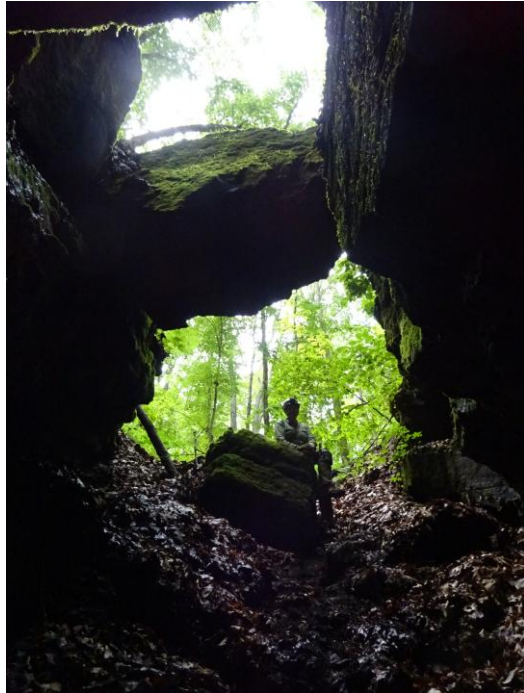
Membership dues are \$10/year.

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

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



ACTIVITY REPORTS



BREATHING CAVE 8/2/25

Above: Entrance Room

Above Right: Cora!

Right: Isaiah's boot soles peel off in mud
(Photo credits: Mark Boland)



Front Royal Caverns- Wednesday August 20

Plans fell into place for an enjoyable midweek caving adventure. Eleven wonderful volunteers gathered at Front Royal Caverns, 3PM with digging and gardening tools in tow, ready to work on a number of items.

After breaking into small groups, the following was addressed;

- Removing vegetation around the gate, including some poison ivy that had expanded in recent years.
- Replacing a board crossing that goes over a small fissure crack. This was in the cave a bit so it was necessary to have people available to shuttle materials with a communication set up so that new board materials could be cut to our needs and put in place.
- Work on digging into some passage that when opened up will create a small loop. This was near the entrance in an upper alcove so access was easy.

After working for a while everyone regrouped at 5:30pm to do a sport trip into FRC. The county permit for caving indicated an ending time of 7:30pm which gave a good 2 hours in the cave to poke around all parts of the cave. It was a productive and fun time made even better with Jeff's delicious watermelon.

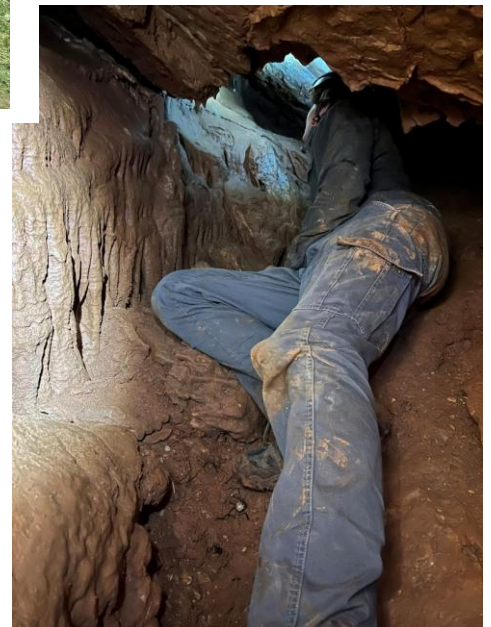


Above: Caitlin Vittitow bagging poison ivy and weeds.

(Photo credit: Janet Tinkham)

Right: Crawling in the dig passage.

(Photo credit: Harley Quinn)



**FRONT ROYAL
CAVERNS**

(Photo credits: Janet
Tinkham)

Right: John Lenox
pulling poison ivy.



Right: Wil Ponder
whacking the weeds.



Right: Awesome
volunteers!



Shenandoah Wild, September 15, 2025, Report by Greg McCoy

Back in 2023, Carol Tideman asked me to join the Shenandoah County Cave Survey at the Shenandoah Wild cave to take photos for the owner. After my first trip I joined the survey and made several more trips helping to complete the survey. In November 2023, while mopping up several small leads, I noticed a small hole going down into a tight crawl. I slid down the hole and proceeded across the crawl where I noticed some bones in the mud and on the flowstone. At the base of the flowstone was an array of bones so I took photos.



It turns out that the bones were from Peccaries that became extinct an estimated 12,000 years ago.

Over the next year we requested and received permission from the owner and state and local authorities to remove the bones. Working with the original survey team, David Hubbard from UVA and Blaine Schubert, Director of the Grey Fossil Site & Museum in TN, we began removing the bones.

To date, two skulls and various bones were removed and taken to the Grey Fossil site lab for cleaning and preservation. After preservation, the first skull was high-resolution scanned and a replica produced for display at Shenandoah Caverns.



The first skull replica is on display at Shenandoah Caverns.

On Subsequent trips into Shenandoah Wild a third skull was found.

On September 15, 2025, I participated in a bone recovery trip to Shenandoah Wild. Attending were David Hubbard, Blaine Schubert, Carl Amundson and I going underground, while Carol Tiderman coordinated from the surface. We planned to collect more bones and transport them out.

I rigged the entrance hand-line and led the others, while Carl came in afterwards to rig the hauling systems required to hoist the packs up the two drops between the fossil site and the entrance.

Blaine started collecting bones in the main crawl-way while David and I waited, occasionally passing materials down to Blaine as required. Blaine and David then moved to the secondary crawl-way to review the fossils there.



Nice working conditions!

Blaine returned to the original crawl-way site and collected more bones there, while David continued to work on the secondary crawl-way.

Three boxes of bones were collected, packaged and readied for transport. Carl and I moved several packs from the fossil site to the bottom of the lower drop. Carl planned to climb the lower pit, man the haul system and hoist the packs. My plan was to follow Carl and help with the packs. The large pack containing two boxes of bones became lodged about halfway up the drop. The contents being somewhat fragile, I climbed up to dislodge the pack to guide it as Carl hoisted it out of the pit. While climbing the lower pit, my Petzl ascenders were completely covered with the ultra sticky mud that required me to thumb the cams closed at almost every step.

Carl then climbed the upper pit to set up for hoisting the packs. Again, the mud required me to thumb both my Petzl ascenders closed to get them to grip the rope. I climbed the upper pit, moved past Carl and hauled the packs across the exposed traverse, ultimately staging them in the crawl-way above the pit. This hoisting operation went well and we moved all the packs. I then took my personal pack as well as the large pack containing bones and worked my way out the upper series of crawls and constrictions to just below the entrance. I connected the large pack to the entrance hand-line intending to hoist the pack out once I was clear of the entrance slot. After I arrived at the entrance, I realized if I hoisted the pack out I could not get

the rope back through the restriction, so I waited until everyone was through the restriction. All the packs were hoisted out the entrance and everyone exited safely.

This was a very successful trip, with the possibility of there being a fourth Peccary skeleton.



It looks like I will need a red caving helmet.

Firewood Feelings

By Jeff Jahn

It's been way too long, not since 2017, that we had a grotto trip to the Long Lead in Skyline Caverns. But that streak came to an end when we arranged a trip there on Sunday September 21st.

And in the days leading up to this trip, I was also contacted by Mary Anne Martins, a Rogers Belmont neighbor, who we had previously taken into the Swallet. She was looking for a half cord of locust or oak firewood and remembered some of the members might have some available. She was willing to pay for it too. After checking around, Greg graciously agreed to sell her some seasoned red oak and donate proceeds to the grotto. As we drove up her driveway, Mary Anne was waiting for us, gloves in hand, to help us unload the wood.

We had a good old time unloading Greg's pickup and stacked the wood on a rack Mary Anne had available. What struck me most about this experience was the honest and heartfelt appreciativeness that Mary Anne exhibited and was absolutely giddy

and over the moon, just for our willingness to deliver a half cord of wood. What a good vibe to start the day!

And that vibe carried over onto Skyline as well where Jeff and Brooks greeted us warmly and made us feel as if we actually part of the Skyline family and excited to allow us to venture down to the Long Lead of the caverns.

The interest in this trip was great and we had 16 in total ready to go. We were all lined up and you could almost feel the energy in the air in anticipation for what was to unfold. And what a diverse group where we had families, couples, old and young, first time cavers and other cavers we were meeting for the first time.

It was about 9:45 am when we headed on in. Always a rush being decked out in cave gear and walking through the lobby of the caverns. What a creepy looking iron gate one passes to enter the cave, a large gate with narrow bars, spiked on top; just a Transylvania type feel. Then going down steps where the dampness comes in and I'm thinking more dungeon than cave and then down, down, down, some more where the passage narrowed and the steps getting even more damp and steep. Will we ever survive?

The steps finally ended and a cave passage path starts, relatively flat and winding back and forth. And then on the left we come to the Long Lead passage, identified by the stream which in wet weather will be running down the passage. It was low but flowing and that is exciting as often in drought periods, the stream dries up. One of the interesting aspects of the Long Lead is electrical wires and lights still wind down and through the passage, where evidently many years ago some part of the tour actually went down part of the passage. I've asked Brooks numerous times about allowing our grotto to remove the wires, debris, and broken bulbs as a conservation project and I think before too long this might actually happen. I sure hope so and it would be a fun project to take on.

The Long Lead starts as a flat walking passage along the stream and then begins to meander and go up and down. At times, the stream disappears and comes back in later down the passage. There are some side passages and undercuts along the way. Eventually we reach a good place to explore various passages off the main passage. This worked out great as the group could break into smaller groups and each pick a different route. Some nice rim stone pools are in this area.

Once everyone got their fill, we continued on again with walking, stooping, and some crawling and soon we reached a steep upward mud slope body size borehole that when entered narrows down to a body tight squeeze known as the rabbit hole. Fun time here as it is quite the challenge to navigate through the hole when gravity is trying to pull you back and there is little or no place to gain purchase with your feet. Some found it too tight, some found it fairly straightforward if slim in body and then others had to get creative. Breathing out and inching forward worked for some and Brian found he could only do it by going through on his back.

While people were taking turns going up the rabbit hole, Brian and I opened up a small room at the base of the climb by shoving dirt out of the way with our feet. Too bad it didn't go but it did provide a nice diversion. Those that finished the rabbit hole then came back down the passage to explore another side passage that had a lot of

variety. This worked out well again where small groups could explore while others were finishing up other areas. There were some really nice anthodites and white pillars in cracks along the ceiling here too.

After a bit the main group of cavers came together for a break while waiting for the final group to come out of the side passage. Suggestion was made for about half the group to start heading out to the entrance and Lorenzo took up the challenge to lead us out. We could barely keep up with him! As we were coming up the steps we had to stop to avoid interrupting a cavern tour and without having to say anything, all quit talking and turned their lights off until the cavern tour walked by. I wanted so bad to start moaning like a long lost ghost to give the cavern tour their money's worth but just wasn't sure how the staff would take it. Maybe next time!

After about 2.5 hours, everyone made it out. Mood was upbeat and I know I was surprised by how many side passages there were along the way. And having the intermittent stream with a gravel floor was a bonus. Such a fun satisfying trip topped off by Lauren providing a white coconut icing vanilla cake! Kind of like how you feel when throwing a couple of more logs on the fire on a cold winter night and basking in the warmth and glow it provides! (Photo credit: Jeff Jahn)



Left: Greg McCoy and Mary Anne Martins stacking a load of wood. Mary Anne paid Greg \$80 which he donated to the grotto! Thank you Greg!

Below: Some of the group pausing for a picture opportunity.



Below: Harley Quinn and his kids in a side passage of Long Lead in Skyline Caverns.



Field Trip to Ogdens Cave

Janet Tinkham

On October 2, Greg & Lauren McCoy, Eric Zieg and I guided 14 Skyline High School Geology Students and their teacher Jim Kenney into Ogden's Cave. We've been doing this field trip for many years now, usually one trip in the spring and one in fall. We split the group and Greg and Eric took half into the main room of the cave and offered an option to explore the water passage behind the main room. Lauren and I took the other half of the group beyond the gate and to the sump. On the way back from the sump, we offered an option to pop into a little side hole that gave the students an opportunity to get a feel for certain skills that are used when wild caving. It's always fun to watch the students encourage each other as they slither down the hole into a little room that offers some pretty formations. Lauren positions herself at the bottom of the drop into the room and offers guidance and gives them a boost up as they exit the room. The challenge is crawling back out of the hole and is always followed by a feeling of accomplishment. We always enjoy these field trips as it offers an opportunity for the students to connect what is being learned in the classroom with what is found in a true karst landscape. Nothing compares with experiencing the real cave environment to reinforce learning of its fragile ecosystem and unique geology.



OGDENS CAVE
NATURAL AREA
PRESERVE

Geology teacher Jim
Kenney with his students.

(Photo credits: Greg McCoy
and Jim Kenney)



Cave Falls, Shenandoah National Park *Submitted by John Lenox*

Fall is the time of year you can really appreciate being a Virginian, especially here in the mountains. On Monday October 6th Greg, Lauren, Karl and I met up in Sperryville. The plan was to hike to Cave Falls, sometimes called Hazel River Falls, in Shenandoah National Park. You can get to Cave Falls by parking at the Meadow Spring Parking area along the parkway and hiking down or parking at a little pull off on Woodward Way, just outside of the park, and hiking up. We decided to take the shorter route starting from the parkway, it also avoids the creek crossings that require you to get your feet wet. Since the government shutdown the park was not requiring an entrance fee, but they still stationed a grumpy attendant at the gate for posterity's sake, or something.

The small parking area was almost full, so it was a good thing we decided to carpool. Once on the trail we were immediately greeted with large showy asters in flower. I wanted to schedule the hike around the fall foliage but ended up being a little before peak, however all the fall flowers along the trail made up for it. The hike down to the cave spur trail was gradual, mostly being along old roadbeds. This changes as you take a long stone staircase down into the canyon to see the falls. These falls are not visited as much as other noteworthy falls in the park but the steep rock faces forming the canyon walls and small shelter cave make it nice destination and chances are you will have it all to yourself like we did. The shelter cave is maybe 30 feet long and has a spring in the back of it making it quite damp. There is another little cave, maybe 10 feet deep, where you can poke out next to the waterfall. We took a break at the falls, eating our lunch, dipping our feet in the cold water, and enjoying the peace before ascending back up the trail.

It was warmer than expected for a fall day hitting 80, so we were all nice and sweaty by the time we got back to the car. It was only a 5.7-mile hike, but I was ready for another meal. We made our way back to the Black Twig where we carpooled from and Greg, Lauren and I went in for some grub and played pool and cards before calling it a day. (Photo credit: John Lenox)



FRG Hike on Pass Mountain Trail, Sperryville to SNP Shelter
Tuesday, November 11
Lauren McCoy

Mike, John, Karl, Rick, Ashley, Lenora, and I met at the Black Twig parking area at 10:30. Greg found out the day before that he was to drive a Rapp @ Home client to Front Royal. Somehow, we missed getting that on the calendar.

When we started out it was 34-degrees and parts of the trail were snow-dusted. The wind was a roaring lion at times and sometimes a gentle lamb. Hiking steadily uphill we were all warm enough. Thank goodness for the bright sunshine.

Along the way John, Rick and Karl shared info on woodland plants. We sniffed the minty bark of black birch trees and, from a distance, what looked like white flowering bushes (odd to see in November) were fuzzy vines called virgin's bower.



Ashley carried 35-lb Lenora on her back plus a 10-lb pack in front. Lenora was wearing an adorable acorn hat Ashley had knitted after watching Lenora collect acorns. It was not an easy hike for Ashley though she never grumbled. I was regretting saying the hike would be 2 miles one way when it may have been closer to 3. At 12:30, after a snack break, the family turned back. The rest of us continued on toward the shelter and got very close but didn't know it. Mike took a break. When we rejoined him he was lying prone on the trail. All good; it seems Mike can nap anywhere, anytime.

Great views of the mountains, still some color, and no one else was on the trail or at the shelter. It only took an hour and 40 minutes to reach the cars. Maybe that was too quick; I fell and my thumb hit a rock. Soon it was swollen and purple.

Greg, who met us at the trailhead parking area, had talked to Rick and family before they headed out. In Flint Hill we gathered at the Dark Horse with John and Mike for lunch and a few card games of Kings in the Corner. Shuffling was a new challenge for me.

John agreed to plan next month's hike. Thank you, John, for providing the photos.

Boar Hole Cave, WV

Saturday, November 15

Lauren McCoy

Greg and I arrived at the Buckhorne Campground Friday evening, we heated lunch's leftover beef and broccoli, then read until about 10 pm. It was warm under our pile of covers. Trouble was I did not want to venture forth in the morning until the annoying roosters, apparently right behind us, forced me up. Out from under the covers, in the camper, it was nose-numbing cold, since the propane heater did not work.

So, before meeting with the group Saturday morning, we bought a small electric heater at Walmart.

Greg nailed it. The plan was to meet at the Shell station at 10:21 (8:15 at the Park & Ride plus 2 hrs, 6 minutes drive time). Everyone arrived exactly at 10:21.

A cloudy, 64-degree day, we followed Jeff, Janet, Mark, Mike, Samantha, Colin, Luke, Caitlin and Isaiah to the land-owner's property and parked alongside the road. The permanent hand-line served us well as we climbed the steep hill to the cave. We lifted the cap on the wide culvert pipe, peered in and felt the welcoming breeze. And better yet: there were NO SPIDERS between the ladder's rungs like we found at Owl Cave.



We were in the cave at about 11:30. Highlights include: Big trunk passage and a large stream passage with clear pools and a few cascades. The parts of the cave we visited did not have much in the way of typical formations, but it was special in other ways. The chunky roof pendants, like huge dinosaur teeth, were incredible.



On the way back downstream, Greg attempted to skirt a deeper pool by walking along the small, sloping ledge decorated with large scallops. At the end of the pool he slipped and fell about 8 feet landing on his feet then pitching backwards

into the pool hitting his helmet. With wet coveralls and severely damaged pride, he jumped up and continued out the stream. Sometimes wet feet are better than risking a fall, even a short fall. Greg had no *physical* injuries from the fall.

Wildlife included several pigmented crayfish from 3 to 6 inches long and an orange-spotted salamander with eggs along the edge of a pool. All critters were first spotted by Samantha.



We all used the pre-set webbing to move easily down a steep slope to the first major intersection. On the way back up that slick slope I very much appreciated the help from those below me, spotting my feet, as I moved awkwardly on my knees while holding tight to the webbing.



We were out of the cave at about 3:50. As some of you know, Greg and I enjoy treating fellow cavers to goodies. This time we set out chocolate fudge cookies, gingersnap rum balls and grapes on the tailgate of Greg's truck.

Everyone fit around the long table at San Juan's restaurant in Covington, Va. The campground was only 10 minutes from there. At 6:30 the store was still open so we had ice-cream...tough choosing from about 20 flavors. We plugged in the new heater and were asleep by 8:30. New to camper-glamping, we may never go back to tent-camping or long drives in one day.

Thank you, Jeff, for planning this great trip! (Photo credit: Greg McCoy)

BITS & BREAKDOWN



**\$40 donation to FRG from Jim Kenneys Geology Students!

**\$80 donation to FRG from Greg McCoy which he received when delivering firewood to Mary Anne Martin

"My father gave me a bat for Christmas. The first time I tried to play with it, it flew away". *Rodney Dangerfield*

UPCOMING EVENTS

- **December 20, 2025**- Shenandoah County Cave Survey contact Carol Tideman if interested ctider@ymail.com
- **January 8, 2026**- FRG Meeting at Box Office Brewery in Strasburg, 7P.
- **January 22-25, 2026** – Winter Adventure Weekend at Carter Caves State Resort Park <https://winteradventureweekend.com/>
- **Sunday, April 26, 2026**- Lone Pine Day, Earth Day Event in Front Royal. FRG will set up display.

