THE FLOWSTONE



Volume 32 | Issue 3 | Quarterly Newsletter of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

Upcoming Events 2026

- Dec 5, 2026: 2026 Southwestern Winter Technical Meeting in Carlsbad, New Mexico
- Dec 14, 2026: Special Meeting & Town Hall of the NSS Board of Governors
- Jan 22, 2027: 2027 South-Central Regional NCRC, Bend, Texas
- NSS 84th Annual Convention will take place from Jun 14–18, 2027, in Del Rio, Texas

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About our grotto

 Membership to the Grotto is $15 per year for individual or $20 per family. Dues are payable at the first meeting of the year (January) and includes subscription to the Flowstone.

 Grotto meetings are currently held on the first Tuesday of the month at 7:30 PM (2nd Tuesday when a holiday conflicts)

 Location of meetings: 920 St. Joseph Dr. NW Cullman, AL 35055 (Church basement, East side of the building, lower parking lot)

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Front Cover Photo

Jake Cianciotto – Great Arch, Zion National Park
Photo by Perry Clayton

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Bridge Day: 364 Days and Counting

By Harold Calvert

It's October again. There is a sharp chill in the air, and the leaves are beginning their annual fall. For the caving and technical rope community, that signifies only one thing: it's **Bridge Day** in West Virginia.

Once again, members of the Cullman Grotto, alongside dedicated team members from across the United States, embarked on a quest to the mecca of all autumn festivals. Bridge Day celebrates the opening anniversary of the massive bridge spanning the New River Gorge. For one day only, officials shut down the highway to vehicle traffic, allowing thousands of visitors to walk the expanse, visit local vendors, and watch daring BASE jumpers leap into the gorge.

But beneath the main deck, a hidden event takes place. Experienced rappellers gather on the steel catwalk directly under the bridge to drop approximately 860 feet into the canyon below. This year, our grotto fielded a team of nine members, joining forces with the VBATS crew who traveled from as far away as Arizona. We welcomed three new rappellers to the ranks this year—two from Alabama and one from Georgia. Every single one of them qualified and performed brilliantly.



Our weekend always kicks off with the mandatory safety meeting in downtown Fayetteville.



Hundreds of rappellers pack into the venue to sign waivers and claim their official event ID badges. When we walked into the meeting, the afternoon was a warm 80 degrees, but the autumn weather was about to take a drastic turn. A powerful cold front was tracking right toward us. Just as predicted, the front arrived with a sudden rain shower, a punishing wind, and a steep temperature drop. By the time we stepped out of the meeting, the thermometer had plummeted to 50 degrees, and it would continue to drop for the next 48 hours.

By Saturday morning, the rigging crew had layered every piece of clothing we brought, topping it all off with rain suits. It had rained all night—a biting, cold downpour driven by 20 mph winds. We made our way to the rig teams' assembly point on Highway 19 to line up our gear and rope bags for the security bomb dogs to examine. Thankfully, the rain finally tapered off just as the dogs were brought out, though the relentless wind remained a constant companion for the rest of the day.

Following inspection, we marched single file down to the catwalk, arranged by the exact station locations assigned by the Bridge Day personnel. Once we reached our designated spot, the rigging began. It went completely smoothly, save for the wind catching our main rope and blowing it into a tree at the bottom of the gorge. After a final pull test verified by safety officials, we were officially cleared to drop.

Every member of our team executed excellent rides, backed by a phenomenal belay team keeping us safe on the canyon floor. The wind tossed us around a bit on the long descent, but everyone managed a smooth ride. The only real trick with the wind happened right at the bottom; as you tried to unclip, the massive length of rope acted like a sail, catching the drafts and bouncing you around the landing zone, which made for a few highly entertaining touchdowns.

My first drop of the day ended up taking much longer than planned. The rig next to ours was occupied by a very young college group tracking through their very first Bridge Day, and they weren't entirely prepared for the sheer scale of the drop. A young lady had just descended past the catwalk into the free fall when I stepped onto my rope. The moment she hit the open air, she froze. I could hear

panic rising in her voice as she gripped her rope and rack with white knuckles.

I leaned over and asked if she was okay. *"Not really,"* she replied.

"Do you want to continue down?" I asked.

"I would like to, but I am terrified."

I offered to descend alongside her and talk her through the steps. It was an incredibly slow, deliberate rappel, but she kept her composure and made it all the way down. By the time her boots touched the canyon floor, the terror had faded into adrenaline—she was already radiating excitement and ready to head back up for another turn. Later, I happened to be back at the top framework when she was clipping in for her next ride. Our teammate Cade rigged into our line, caught up to her, and passed her. When I swung onto the rope shortly after, I got to say a quick hello as I zipped past her, moving much faster this time around. As a whole,



our group logged a total of 40 successful rappels—a phenomenal day on the lines, made even better when the afternoon sun finally broke through the clouds.

As I rigged in for my final rappel of the afternoon, a low rumble echoed through the gorge: a train was heading down the canyon, right where our belayers were stationed on the tracks. Everyone scrambled clear of the rails to let the train pass. I locked off my rack and came to a stop on the rope about 100 feet directly above the moving train. Hanging completely suspended in mid-air while a locomotive thunders right beneath your feet is a wild, surreal feeling.

Once the tracks cleared, I touched down, unclipped, and hurried back to the top for the de-rig. The organizers shut Bridge Day down at 3:00 PM on the dot. We quickly hauled up our lines, packaged our gear, and began the hike back to the vehicles parked on the north end of the bridge. With all the gear cleared away, the highway reopened to regular traffic at 4:20 PM, and Bridge Day was over just as fast as it had started.

It was wonderful to reconnect with old friends and swap stories with new ones along the way, many of whom we only get to see once a year at this festival. After packing up the rigs, we headed out to town to warm up over a big group dinner of Mexican food.

Back at the campsite later that evening, we built a massive bonfire that everyone thoroughly appreciated as the temperatures continued to slide. The cold front left its final mark on Sunday morning, leaving a glittering layer of ice over our tents. It made for a very chilly, brisk breakdown and pack-up before we began the long drive back home to Alabama.

Driving south, my mind kept drifting back to the weekend's highlights—the adrenaline of the long ropes, the great company, and the deep camaraderie of friends who will be missed over the coming months.

The countdown is officially on: only 364 days until the next Bridge Day.













See you on a long rope soon!



Assault on Limrock Blowing Cave: The Ultimate End-of-Summer Splash

By Kuenn Drake

It all started with a random text out of the blue from Isabel up in Madison. She had a wild proposition: would I be down to lead a group of older young women from her church on an authentic caving expedition right before school fired back up in early August?

Naturally, I asked the golden question: *"What's their athletic ability?"*

Her response? *"Well, probably mid-range. Not Olympic athletes, but not in terrible shape either."*

Challenge accepted. We went back and forth on destinations before locking in the perfect target: **Limrock Blowing Cave**. Anytime you throw an uninitiated crew into a wild cave, the pre-trip logistics are an absolute whirlwind of gear talk. Helmets and lights? *Check.* Adjustable chin straps? *Check.* Knee pads or no knee pads? And most importantly: *"Bring a complete change of clothes, because you are absolutely going to need it."*

With permits secured, parental signatures inked for the minors, and Isabel's dad, Jonathan, joining the ranks as co-captain, we were officially cleared for launch.



Phase 1: Into the Deep

Monday morning arrived, offering us the ultimate caver's luxury—an empty cave all to ourselves. We rendezvoused at the local Dollar General, geared up, and hiked out to the yawning mouth of the cave.

This was a high-voltage, lively group right from the jump. The camaraderie was instant, the laughing was non-stop, and the first water passages were met with a chorus of echoey, excited screams!

Heading in, we took the standard path, executing a tactical game of "stay dry as long as possible" while working our way deeper into the system. Along the way, we paused to study and discuss cave formations, talking about how these delicate subterranean ecosystems are sculpted over millennia and why protecting them matters. The underground world pulled out all the stops for us—including a couple of massive, ghost-white cave crawfish hanging out in the shallow pools!





Phase 2: Total Blackout & The Ultimate Connection

After a couple of hours of navigating the darkness by headlamp, we made it to the Register Room. It was time for the caving rite of passage ritual: **Lights out.**

Off with every headlamp and stash those annoying glow-sticks, plunging into the pitch-black void… and try to get as quiet as possible. (Spoiler alert: total silence is an engineering impossibility for this group!)

To ground everyone, we used our roll-call numbers and tried a bonding exercise. Each person looked to the person one number ahead of them, and

shared something they'd learned about them in-cave or known from before. It was a cool impromptu moment, filled with shared stories, inside jokes, and laughs.

After signing the register, we pushed even deeper, splashing right into the main stream passage. From here on out, it was mainly water-hiking, featuring a gauntlet of ankle-deep wet crossings. We pushed the boundary right up to the limit of what the girls wanted to conquer before calling an official turnaround.

Phase 3: The 50-Foot Swim Choice

We trekked back to the major junction just below the register room, and that's when I dropped the ultimate fork-in-the-road question.

"There are two ways out of here," I told them. *"Option one is the dry route, we came in that way. Option two..."* I pointed directly down a dark, wall-to-wall water passage ahead.

"How wet?" someone asked.

I leveled my hand right at mid-chest height. *"At least this wet."* (Which, for a few of the shorter girls in the group, translated roughly to: *up to their chins*). Oh, and did I mention the mandatory, free-floating **50-foot swim**?



The group immediately split into two camps: half the crew was fired up and ready to plunge, while the other half decided they'd had a sufficient amount of water log for one day. We divided and conquered—six taking the dry track, and six brave souls following me straight into the deep water passage.



It was an absolute blast! We got completely soaked, crushed the swim, and met up with the dry group right at the exit junction exactly on schedule.

We emerged into the warm daylight and posed for an epic exit photo. The frame was filled with massive smiles—though a couple of faces definitely had that classic, *"I'm glad I did it, but I am officially a one-and-done caver"* look!

Before packing up, I threw out my signature post-trip evaluation question: *"How much money would I have to pay you "right now" to march right back in there and redo the last 4.5 hours all over again?"*

The bids were all over the map—$100, $500, and a few true adventurers who shouted, *"Zero dollars, let's go right now!"*

It was an unforgettable day underground spent with a truly fascinating, high-spirited group of amazing young women!



Vertical Upskilling for a Bridge Day Adventure By Harold Calvert

Interested in Bridge Day – as a participant?

Bridge Day is an annual festival held on the third Saturday in October in West Virginia, celebrating the opening of the New River Gorge Bridge. Up to 200,000 visitors walk across the bridge, and specialized vertical cavers are permitted to rappel a spectacular **860 feet** from the bridge's maintenance walkway. Due to strict limits—only 23 teams of up to 18 people—and extreme environments, participants must undergo a multi-stage qualification process.

Qualification Requirements

- **Gear Proficiency:** Members must be vertically proficient, possess personal rappelling/climbing gear, and demonstrate proper usage.
- **Technical Skills:** Candidates must successfully rappel weighted ropes (simulating the bridge's depth) and perform two-way safely executed **changeovers** (switching between rappelling and climbing) while on rope.
- **Exposure Management:** Rappelers must prove they can handle the psychological impact of extreme heights and expansive visibility (exposure).

The Prep Trips

Weavers Point Fort Payne, AL

Weaver's Point is a **183-foot drop** used as a starting point. While shorter than the bridge rappel, the deeper canyon mimics the "exposure factor" and visual illusion of a much higher drop, testing the team's nerves and changeover safety skill.

Whiteside Mountain

North Carolina

A grueling **660-foot main drop** (710 feet total from the rig point) down a granite bluff. Its exposure level exceeds the bridge itself, with views spanning miles that twist into view as the free-hang rope swings the rappeller around.

Summary of Events

The team coordinator and a partner completed Friday pre-rigging, landscaping, and safety line placement at Whiteside Mountain. Despite a threat of storms, Saturday brought near-perfect weather. All 18 participating cavers passed both the Weavers Point and Whiteside Mountain trials flawlessly. The trip concluded with a heavy haul of a 750-foot rope coiled into a backpack, narrow evasion of lightning storms, and a celebratory team dinner ahead of the official Bridge Day event.

Serious inquiries and for more information, see Harold.

Canyons 2026: Lemons, Blizzards, and Polymer Highways By Qn

Canyons 2026 started out with a bang, and it truly was the gift that kept on giving. Six of us flew out from Alabama. Jake's friend, Josh, was scheduled to meet us a couple of days later in Utah. Everything was set: renewed canyon-centric vertical training, gear packed, and airline tickets secured. What could go wrong?

The excitement started mere hours before we even boarded the plane and ate our first pack of peanuts. Those flying out of Birmingham received notice that our flight was canceled due to Hurricane Isaias, which was expected to make landfall a few hours before wheels-up. Since Jake was flying out of Huntsville, we scrambled to see if we could get on his flight. After a mad dash, we all managed to book a seat—though we had no idea if that flight would face delays, too. It ultimately worked out, even if it meant a long commute (for Melanie) and very little sleep before our 5:00 AM departure.

Lucky to catch even three hours of shut-eye, we finally made it into the air. As we flew out, the captain announced, *"In case you're interested, we're flying directly over the eye of the hurricane right now."* We couldn't really tell; I guess we were just high above it all and too sleep deprived to give a rip. With the trip officially underway, we figured the worst was behind us. The hurricane was back in Alabama, and we were heading to southern Utah...

Only to fly straight into Cyclone Rachel making landfall near Baja California. Rachel would prove to be our nemesis for the next three days.

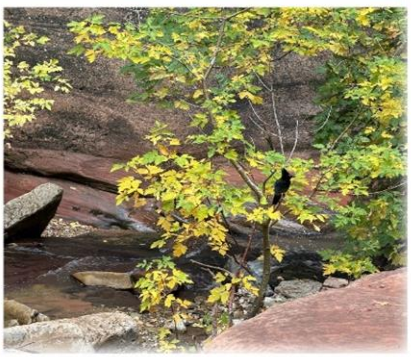
The Journey Begins: St. George & Kanarra Falls

After arriving in St. George around noon, we secured a rental car for the first two days. By Sunday evening, Josh arrived to provide extra transportation with his Toyo Runner. Our amiable host, James, also provided two Teslas—affectionately dubbed "Zippy" and "Zubi"—giving us a sunshine fed fleet to launch our week's adventures.

We managed to salvage the remainder of Saturday with a trip to Kanarra Falls. Unfortunately, the autumn leaves hadn't fully displayed their vibrant, calico array quite yet, but the scenery was still absolutely eye-catching. We capped off the evening with pizza at the River Rock Roasting Company. A shaky start to the day, but a beautiful finish.







Sunday: Canceled Plans & Diana's Throne

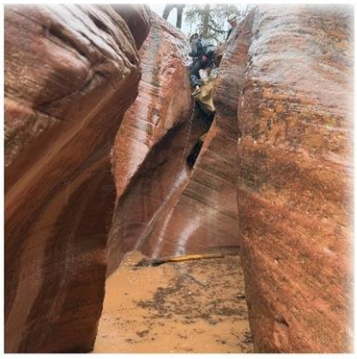
Sunday, day two, was supposed to be better because we held a permit for Spry Canyon. What could

go wrong? You guessed it, that morning, we discovered that our permit—and frankly, all permits in Zion National Park—had been canceled due to the oncoming cyclone's forecasted rain. The wilderness desk apologized for the inconvenience, and a nice ranger lady suggested an alternative outside the park: Diana's Throne. Had heard of it, so we figured, why not?

The beta indicated nine rappels, several of which could be bypassed if needed. But why bypass anything? We came to canyoneer. Going somewhere entirely new always brings the thrilling excitement of the unknown. Diana's Throne is located a few miles south of Mt. Carmel, out the east entrance of ZNP. It was a nice drive, and since we'd be passing Tom's place, we planned to stop in for a quick "howdy."

Alas, the person who met us at the door was not Tom. We knew something was wrong the moment we walked up and spotted a baby carriage and little pairs of shoes parked near the back door. The new homeowner informed us that Tom didn't live there anymore – duh – had moved to Kanab. Alrighty then, no problem.





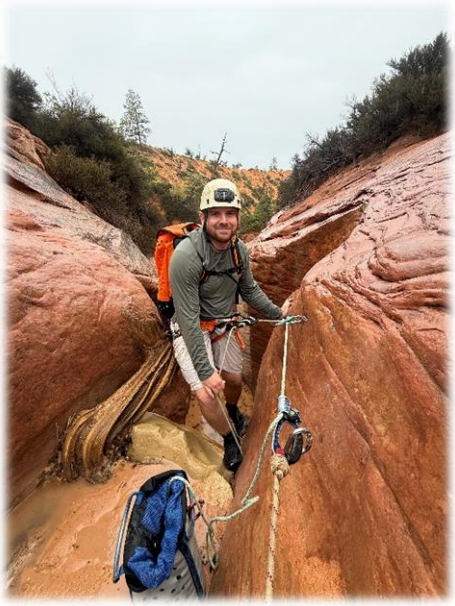




We continued a few miles down the road to the trailhead for Diana's Throne. The weather was beautiful, and it looked like we had successfully left the rain to the west. A gorgeous day and a sweet new canyon.

And it was—although the rain caught up to us about halfway through. Dropping into the slot, we were surrounded by stunning Navajo sandstone; we quickly reached the first rappel into a pothole filled with nasty water and a barky-debris field. "Icky" was Sharon's description. The previous night's downpour had filled every pothole to the brim. It was clear we were going to get wet, which was'nt necessarily a problem, even though we hadn't prepared with wetsuits. However, the outside temperature was manageable, so we decided to plunge right in.

Literally. Jake plunged right in.



He was the first to rappel down. Unfortunately, no one captured it on video, but it was a total comedy of errors. As he was getting off rope, the water line crept up past his waist, then his chest, and then—bloop—total submersion! Jake surfaced laughing, scrambling to get back to the rope. It was a hilarious moment. Thanks, Jake!

His plunge actually gave me the idea to teach the crew about guided rappels, a new concept for most of them. Since Jake was already down there, he served as the "meat anchor" for the guideline. That in itself was pure entertainment, as he quickly received a firsthand lesson in vector force multipliers!

With the first rappel conquered, everything else was "downhill" from there. Diana's Throne kept delivering fantastic drops, gorgeous scenery, and plenty more water. It was everything we had hoped for. Even the hike out wasn't half bad, making it a highly successful first full day.

Monday: Waterfall Chasing & a Moses Quote



Monday, would be even better… again. We held permits for Mystery Canyon—my personal favorite in Zion. Onward and upward!

Not so fast. Cyclone Rachel was still delivering precipitation on a biblical scale for southern Utah. The perky lady at the wilderness desk gave us the grim news: "*all Zion permits are canceled for the day.*" A very plausible quote from Moses felt entirely appropriate right then: *"Hey Joshua, I think we've arrived in the Valley of Shittim!*"

James came to the rescue, suggesting it was a perfect day for chasing waterfalls. And he was right! When life hands you lemons… you make an adventure. It turned out to be one of the more exciting, unexpected highlights of the week. Knowing we'd be in the downpour, we dressed as appropriately as we could. Along the way, we learned all about "KFC" (and no, it wasn't chicken). [Kolob Finger Canyons]



We clocked six or seven miles with respectable elevation gain, watching pristine waterfalls form right before our eyes. The scenery was absolute, knockdown gorgeous. James had promised us a technical exit, and after hiking around and taking pictures, we headed toward a three-rappel slot to drop in and out. Along the way, we even got a quick geology lesson from Ranger Marvin about glauconite "greensand", and how it's only found in certain areas of the park.

By the time we reached the drop, everyone was completely soaked. The first rappel plunged into unknown depths, and this wasn't balmy Alabama rain or tepid Southern water—it was quite frigid! We chose prudence over valor, retreated, and hiked out an alternative way. Even the detour was a great adventure. Day three was officially salvaged, and it couldn't have gone better.



"Sometimes you have to hike through the rain to get to see the best waterfalls." Sharon Clayton

Tuesday: Trifecta Fail & Snow in Bryce Canyon





We had high hopes for Tuesday, day four. We checked the online reservation kiosk ahead of time: no alerts, no closures, no canceled permits. We are finally good to go!

Or not.

At the desk, the ranger lady sighed. "Sorry, guys." "Wait, what?! You're telling us they're canceled again?" "Yeah, more heavy rain expected this afternoon."

At this point, my patience was worn thin. My thick southern drawl came flying out: *"Do y'all have any idea how far we've come, only to be stymied three days in a row with canceled permits?!"* She was incredibly understanding, but wasn't budging.

When I walked out of the visitor center, I threw up the infamous cross-forearm "failure" sign to the crew waiting on the sidewalk. They couldn't believe it either. We were officially completely tired of lemons.

"How can we salvage this day?" we asked. Melanie piped up, *"Well, I've never been to Bryce Canyon."*

That was all it took. Pack it up, we're going to Bryce! It turned out to be a fabulous, unexpected alternative choice. As we drove over the pass, leaving the warm valley behind, it actually started snowing. A beautiful touch from above! Even HE felt sorry for us.

Bryce didn't disappoint. We tackled the Fairyland Loop Trail—a solid 6.2 miles for most of the pack, and a respectable 4.2 for one old dude.

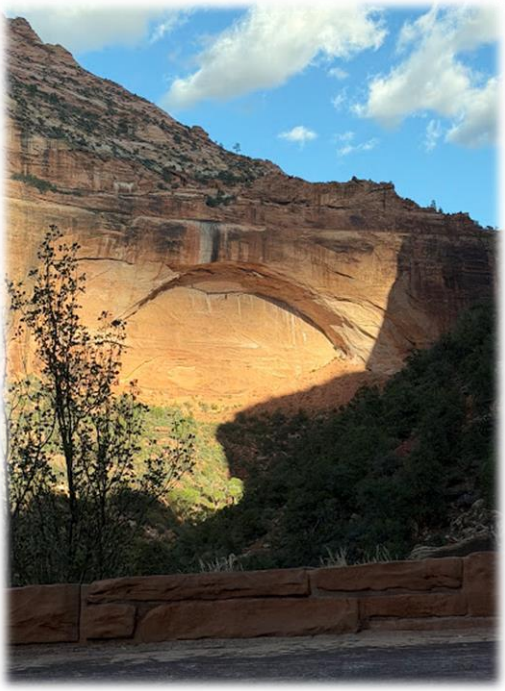
It was another deeply satisfying pick-up-game day spent with great company and incredible scenery.

Evening meals being a big part of the week's adventures, not to mention we were all starving, so, to top it all off, Jake introduced us to Mo' Bettahs' Hawaiian Style Food in Cedar City for dinner.

Great choice to end the day!



Wednesday: The Great Arch



The next day, Wednesday, we decided to take fate into our own hands. We were going to do something in the park that required absolutely no permits and zero interactions with the wilderness desk: The Great Arch!



We were looking at 460 feet of nylon highway. Helaman's three bolt anchors were still securely in place, and Jake stepped up for Sherpa-pack mule duties. With donned full vertical gear… Let's do it!

The canyon overlook was rather crowded with sightseers, no problem, our play spot is set up just off to the left of the main tourist traffic. It didn't take long, however for them to spot us and come investigate as to what we were doing. One Asian woman got waaaay too close to the edge, next to our rope, for a peek. Seeing her approach the edge line, we all instinctively shouted, *"NO!"* She was basically one step away from splat. Apparently ESL, because she quickly reversed course, deterred by our loud chorus of 'NOs', no doubt!

With that excitement out of the way, it was time to drop-in. This would be a milestone high-mark for Josh, marking his first time both rappelling and ascending a drop of this scale. He did fantastic. In fact, we all did great. Melanie and I ascended tandem, pausing occasionally to catch our breath and take in the unmatched scenery.



This day easily ranked as one of my absolute favorites of the week. The weather was flawless, the rain held off, and while the cliché saying goes, "pictures can't truly do it justice", a few came pretty close. Add to that the snarky adventurer's quote, *"I've peed in places most people will only ever see as a screensaver,"* definitely came to mind. (And yes, I did, once the coast was clear).

Enoch and James passed on the arch, they spent the day up at James's place in Cave Valley, tinkering with solar technology.

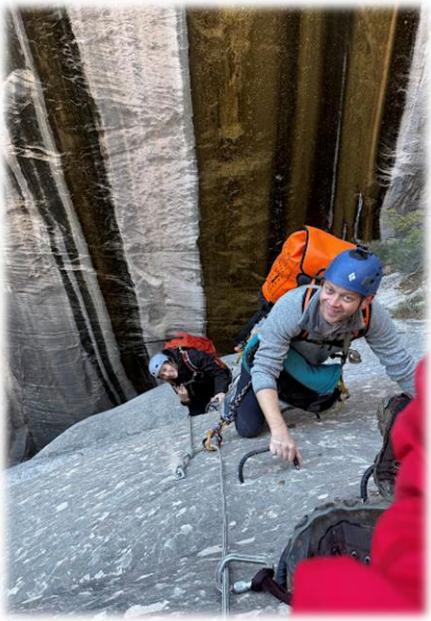
If the day couldn't get any better, we topped off the night with a visit to Zion Canyon Hot Springs resort—which is literally right next to "the Bunker." Once again, James provided us with some gracious, deep-pocket access. A nice touch, perfectly relaxing end to an incredible day. We soaked from pool to pool, absorbing sulfur, potassium, and every other mineral compound imaginable in what felt like a giant Alka-Seltzer experiment. The water temperatures ranged from a balmy 109° down to a freezing 45°—the latter testing everyone's insanity meter.

Thursday: Eye of the Needle & Cave Valley Dining



Thursday, we had originally discussed doing a combination route through Kolob Canyon with an Eye of the Needle – via ferrata exit. We adjusted the plan slightly and dropped the Kolob section, but Eye of the Needle never disappoints. Full wetsuits were required to handle the high water volumes. We also welcomed a new partner for the day in Haley.

With seven rapid descents that just keep coming at you, it is a true Southern Utah canyoneering classic. Culminating with a 500-foot zip across the canyon to complete the journey – never gets old.







The day ended with James hosting us for a fabulous Mexican dinner at his place in Cave Valley. Between the breathtaking sunset, star-filled night sky, and getting to sift through the journals of Robert Perkins' library, it was a night of great conversation and dining.

Life is good!

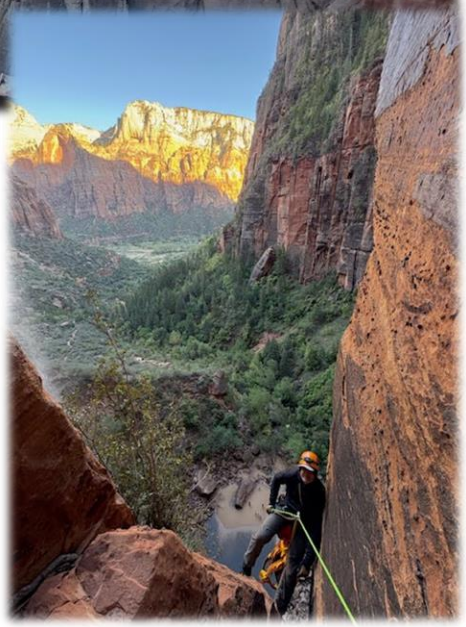


Friday: Splitting the Team — Heaps Canyon vs. Cassidy Arch

Friday, our last day of the trip, we broke up the team.

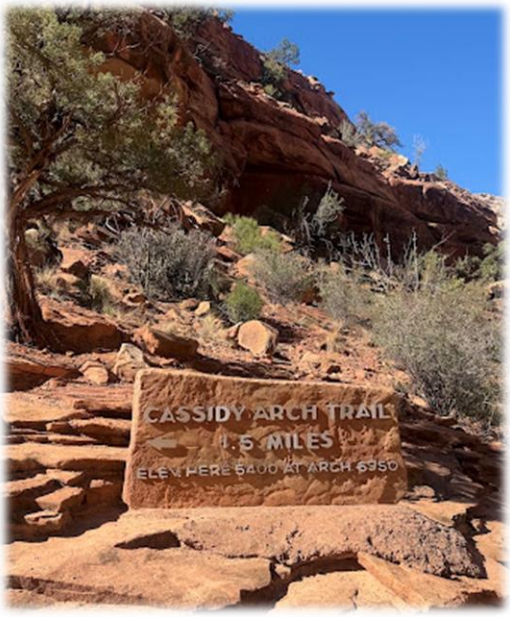






Enoch and Jake joined Jake's friend, Ryan, to assault Heaps Canyon – a beast of a route that is definitely not for the weak or faint of heart. They'll have to tell their own story, but from the post-trip debriefing, it sounded like an amazing exploit. Lots of swims, countless rappels, quicksand that absolutely lived up to its reputation, and a breathtaking final rappel sequence into the Emerald Pools.

And at 13 ½ hours, car-to-car, I'd say… **they absolutely crushed it!**



The rest of us chose to put in some more mileage and return to the North Country near Fruita in Capitol Reef to check out Cassidy Arch Canyon. From years past, this has always been one of my personal favorites. It has just the right amount of exposure, scenery, and flair to pull you back in every single time. And it didn't disappoint this day.

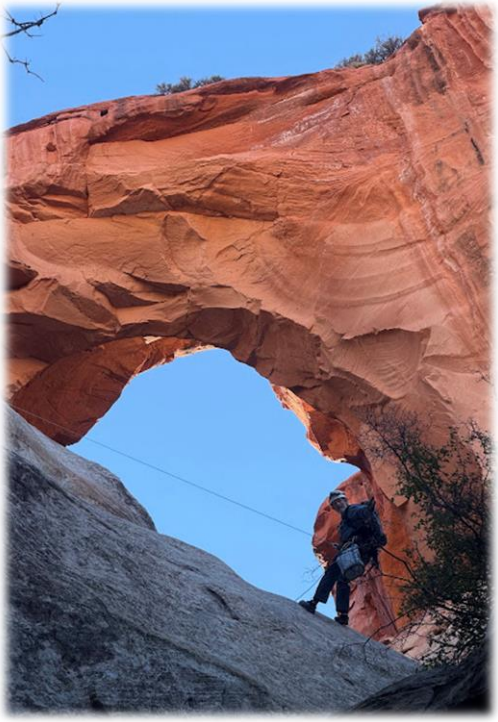
Perry and Sharon had been canyoneering in Utah before, but this canyon was a new one for them. Based on their comments, I think it's safe to say it's a new favorite as well.

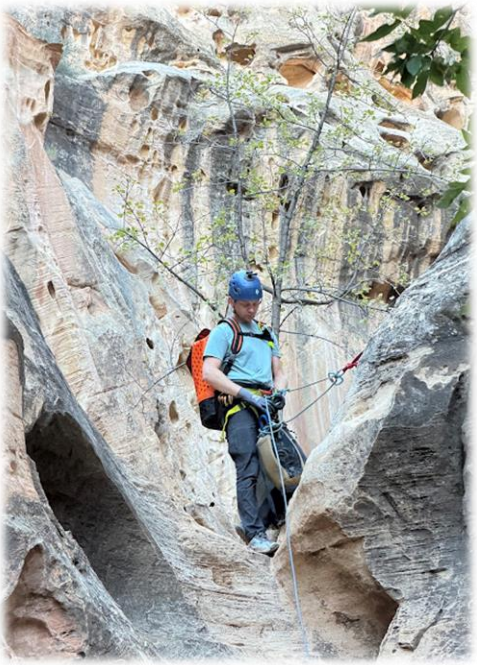


Melanie gained brief but meaningful experience – the difficulties of rappelling in a V. It sucks you right in and fights to keep you there. Proving again that not all rappels are created equal, some look deceptively simple at first glance. Josh and I played around with simul-rapping one of the drops – good fun, great times.

Cassidy is a Canyoneer's canyon. It unfolds like a living gallery, where each narrow turn gives way to sweeping, cinematic vistas. It speaks in the quiet language of a mellow day, yet underneath its serene surface lies a technical dance – just enough to quicken the pulse and remind you why you do this stuff.








We finally exited the canyon – with Fern showing off her anatomy in the setting sun. Cassidy Arch Canyon – named after the legendary outlaw of the Wild West – was an exclamation point on an amazing week!

Final Reflections

Thanks again to James 'marvelous' Marvin! Superb accommodations, an excellent itinerary, and an all-around outstanding week. Let's do it again…. something about a chicken or duck.

If I may pontificate just a moment: these adventures are what add spice to any life. They rescue you from the monotonous, hum-drum routine that we all experience from time to time. Acting as a breakout oasis, restoring the deep fulfillment and wonder that I believe our Creator intended for mortality.

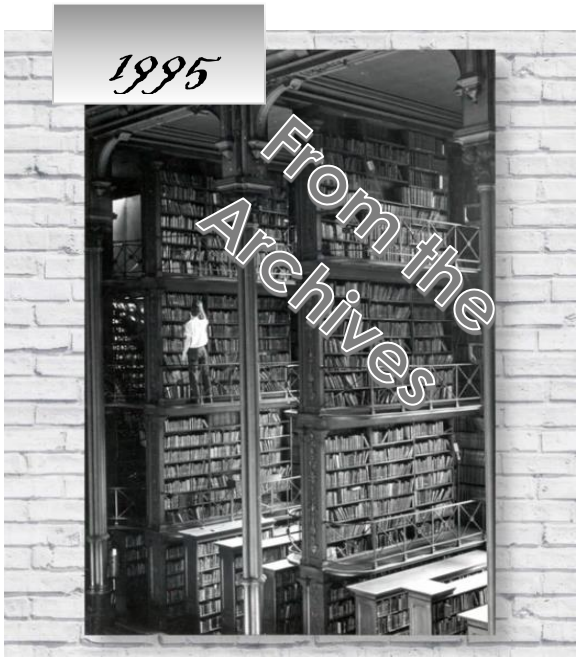
Furthermore, it creates a rare kind of bonding among the group—people who have each other's back and aren't caustic when things don't go exactly as planned. They are the exact kind of people you enjoy being around, leaving you hoping there's still time for more adventures… just around the bend.

Thanks to each of you, my friends! I can truly say, *"Loving it all, I'll never forget it!" — More roses in December.*

Measuring a summer's day
I only find it slips away to grey
Living reflections from a dream
And now a thousand years in-between

Now, back on your heads...





The Flowstone - 1995

1995 was the second year of the newly established Cullman Grotto. This1995 collection of **Cullman Grotto Flowstone** newsletters chronicles the group's early structural formation, monthly business meetings, trip logs, cave maps, and safety and conservation efforts across Alabama and surrounding caving regions.

Find this year and many more newsletter articles at:
www.cullmangrotto.org/1994-2000


A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE CULLMAN GROTTO OF THE NATIONAL SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Key Sections & Contents from 1995

Grotto activities and events

- The grotto scheduled regular **horizontal and vertical cave trips**, monthly meetings at the Cullman Public Library, and an annual picnic at Buck's Pocket.
- Major regional events included the **1995 SERA Summer Cave Carnival**, NSS Convention in Blacksburg, Virginia, TAG Fall Cave-In, and a pre-convention gathering in Virginia.
- Members participated in training, including a Huntsville rope-and-bluff class attended by about ten students; club programs covered knot tying and custom caving equipment.

Achievements and exploration

- Cullman members performed strongly in national rope-climbing competitions. **John McCrary** placed first in his age group and second overall at SERA, and he and **Jeff Lynn** later placed first and second in their age groups at the NSS Convention.
- The newsletter reports ongoing exploration at **Lucky Cave**, including several unpushed leads, a newly found roughly 30-foot drop, and a need to transport a ladder for further exploration.
- Regional discoveries included the 242-foot **Whopper Well** pit and additional drops bringing surveyed depth in that system to 457 feet; a Florida dig, Gremlin Cave, had yielded more than 600 feet of mostly virgin passage.

Safety, access, and conservation

- Safety is a recurring priority. A fatal fall near Gurley, Alabama, and a serious 30-foot fall in Hughe's Cave illustrate the dangers of bluffs and vertical caving.
- Access restrictions were emphasized: Monte Sano's practice-bluff parking was closed; Lamon's Cove access required arrangement through designated contacts; Case Cave required advance permission, limited group size, personal equipment, no alcohol or drugs, and mandatory conservation practices.
- Several caves and pits, including Valhalla and Neversink, were expected to operate through permits when reopened. Tumbling Rock was closed on Sunday mornings so its owners could attend church.
- The club planned a permanent rope pad at McClung's Hole to prevent ropes from being damaged by sharp rock edges, though the initial installation attempt failed because of forgotten equipment and a missing drill-chuck key.

Stewardship and community involvement

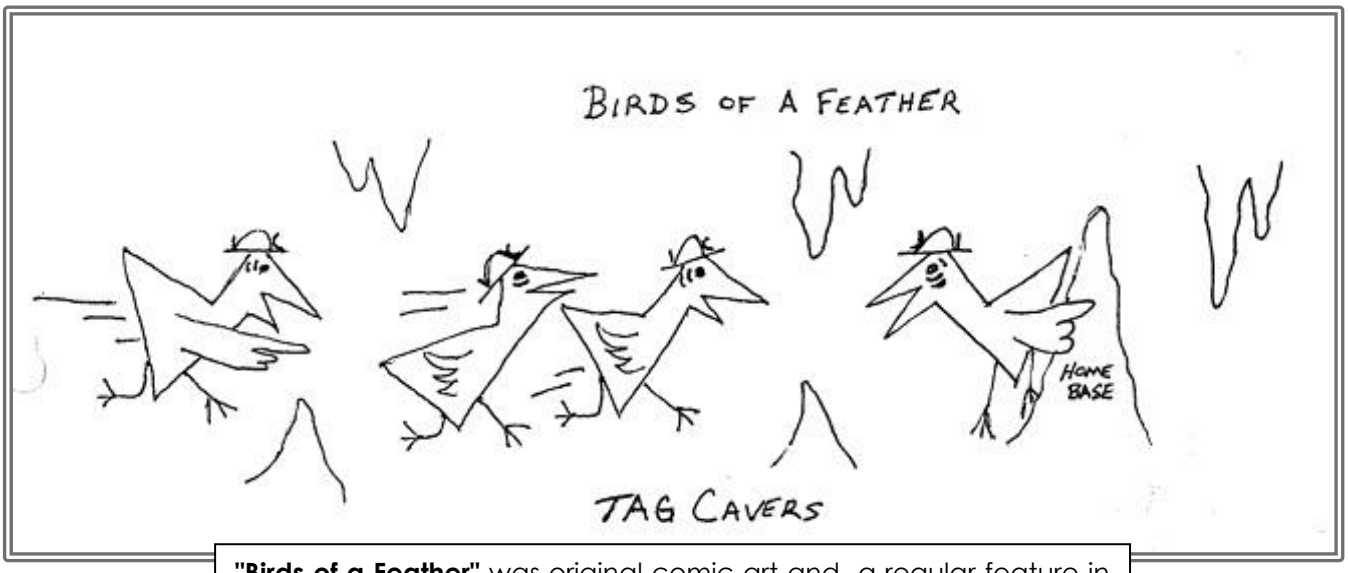
- Members helped protect Cathedral Caverns during filming of *Tom Sawyer*, enforcing a no-smoking rule and keeping sightseers away from the set. The resulting production-company donation contributed $150 in Cullman Grotto's name to the Neversink preservation fund, bringing the club's total commitment to $250.
- The Chattanooga Grotto sought donations to replace a vandalized gate at Cedar Ridge Crystal Cave with a stronger, tamper-resistant design. Donations of $25 or more from grottos would receive a club key.
- Cullman Grotto also discussed working with the Cullman County Park and Recreation Department on youth programming.

Newsletter and wider caving news

- The editor repeatedly asked members to submit trip reports, jokingly offering a $10,000 "Echo Chamber" reward because issues lacked member-contributed content. *(Current Editor: nothing has changed here!)*
- Other notes included a proposed NSS dues increase for 1996, the announcement of the 1998 NSS Convention in Sewanee, Tennessee, and promotion of John McCrary's new vertical-equipment business, **Pangea Gear**.

Communication and emergency plan guidelines

- *Leave a written trip plan with a reliable surface contact: cave, entrance, vehicle details, participant list, route, expected return time, and emergency contacts.*
- *Set a callout time, allowing a reasonable return-time buffer – two-hour leeway before rescue units are contacted.*
- *Ensure the surface contact knows exactly whom to call if the group misses the callout.*
- *Carry and know how to use first-aid supplies; identify who has medical and rescue training.*
- *For remote or vertical trips, consider surface support and make sure the group understands evacuation* limitations.



"Birds of a Feather" was original comic art and a regular feature in The Flowstone – David Drake creator.

It is often a satirical comedy focused on shared interests, joint grotto expeditions, current events, or anecdotes of cavers, who were represented as birds.

Featured Article from 1995 (In the original format)

SOUTH PITTSBURG PIT
Nov. 25, 1995
By Victor Bradford
NSS 15247

Arlon and Kevin Baker and I had decided the night before to travel to Tennessee and do Larson's Well, a 164' pit that had been blasted open in October 1994. We were to meet at Arlon's house at 8:00 in the morning. After giving myself a pat on the back for arriving only 25 minutes late, we all piled into Arlon's truck and headed for the Texaco station in Guntersville. After everyone stocked up on goodies we were back on the road to Tennessee.

On the way to Larson's Well is Russell Cave National Monument. Since Arlon and Kevin had never been there, we stopped to check it out. After rambling around in the visitors center, we walked up to the cave. The huge entrance is always impressive. Arlon pressed a button and we watched and listened to a very short slide program on the archeology dig that was done there in the Fifties by the Smithsonian and National Geographic Society. There are also some slide programs in the visitors center on the cave itself, including some by J.V. Van Swearingen. Russell Cave is in Alabama, just south of the Tennessee line, and since Larson's Well is about a mile north of the Tennessee line we were close to our destination. Once again we headed for the truck.

We found a locked gate across Mr. Larson's driveway. He had told me before that he always kept his gate locked while away from home. We were disappointed but knew we were in "cave country" and that there were plenty of pits in the vicinity. We decided to drive through South Pittsburg, Tennessee to Fiery Gizzard Cove and do Sawmill Well, a pretty 155' pit with fluted walls. When we arrived at the home of Mr. Charley Smith, the owner of Sawmill Well, he wasn't home either. We then decided to return to South Pittsburg and do Cagle's Chasm or see if Mr. Larson had returned. Shortly we came upon the parking area for Fiery Top Drop, a 166' pit. After reading a "Trespassers will be prosecuted" sign, Arlon suggested we continue on. As we approached South Pittsburg once again, I recalled hearing that South Pittsburg Pit had reopened after being closed for several years. We drove to the house where I used to ask for permission, and was told to drive back down the mountain to the owner, a Mrs. Catherine Brown. Arlon and Kevin stayed in the truck as I went to the door. After inviting me in and asking me about 400 questions and having me sign a blank piece of paper, she granted us permission to enter the pit. Mrs. Brown was concerned about our knowledge of vertical caving. I assured her that Kevin and I were experts, but we might have to help Arlon a little bit. We drove to the spot where Mrs. Brown wanted us to park. We gathered our gear and began our hike up the mountain. I knew that there was a road on the mountain that went right by the pit. We found it and the pit at the same time. There was a large pine tree that had fallen across and was suspended about 8' above the pit with the rope rigged to

CULLMAN GROTTO FLOWSTONE

a tree about 30' up the slope from the pit and then over the fallen tree, it made a perfect rig and easy to get on and off rope. Kevin was the first down followed by Arlon, I remained on top because I had promised Mrs. Brown that someone would remain on top at all times. When Kevin came up I went down and joined Arlon on the bottom. There were several large bones, a few dead animals and some gloves. It seems there are always a few gloves on the bottom of pits. Due to lack of time after running all over southern Tennessee looking for a pit to do, we didn't enter the cave at the bottom although Kevin did check out a short crawl. Arlon and I climbed out and the pit was derigged. We observed the odd looking bridge across the Tennessee river from our vantage point, talked about what a wonderful day we had had after all, and headed down the mountain and back to Cullman.

When I got home I checked my cave log and found that I had last done the pit in May of '88, and it has been closed since shortly after that time. South Pittsburg Pit is a real fine 160' free drop with more than 2,000' of cave at the bottom. This is just one more nice cave we have gotten back so don't give up.

South Pittsburg Pit

Length: 2,199 ft. Depth: 200 ft.
South Pittsburg Topo

Description:
South Pittsburg Pit is one of Marion County's older and more popular open-air, freefall drops. The entrance is 40 feet long and 10 feet wide, dropping 160 feet to a large talus slope. Several hundred feet of cave leads south from an 18 foot climb up. The passage then splits left and right. The left fork is well decorated and the right fork features large domes. This pit also features a beautiful shaft of light in late afternoon, beaming to the bottom.

