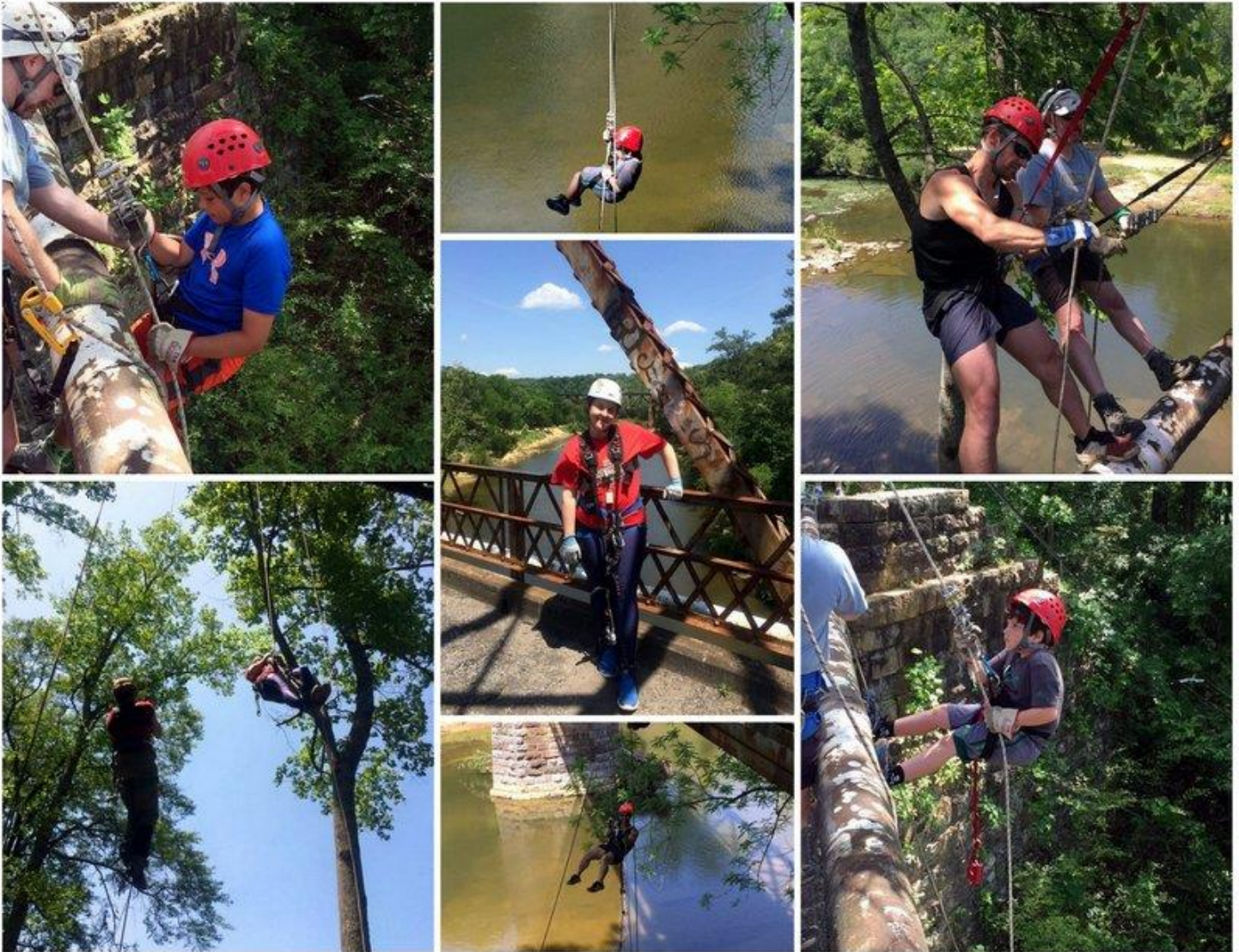


The FLOWSTONE

Vol 23 Issue 6

June 2016



Practice Day

A Monthly Newsletter of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

CULLMAN GROTTO FLOWSTONE



June 2016

Volume 23 Issue 6

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The Cullman Grotto will exchange by request with any publishing grotto. Republication of items within *The Flowstone* is allowed provided credit is given to author and source.

Membership to the Cullman Grotto is fifteen dollars (\$15) per year for individual or twenty dollars (\$20) per year for family. Dues are payable at the first grotto meeting of each year (January) and includes subscription to *The Flowstone*. Subscription rate for non-members is fifteen dollars (\$15) per year.

The Cullman Grotto meets on the first Monday of each month unless the first Monday falls on a holiday or otherwise noted. In those cases the meeting will be held on the second Monday. Meetings begin at 7:30 p.m. and are held at the old L&N train depot, Arnold St., Cullman, AL. All visitors and prospective members are welcome.

Official Grotto Address

Cullman Grotto
c/o Harold Calvert
123 Co. Rd. 250
Cullman, AL 35057
webecavers@hotmail.com

Newsletter Exchange

The Flowstone
Sharon or Perry Clayton
1628 Edmondson Rd
Hanceville, AL 35077
dcpbookwyrms@hotmail.com



Front Cover: Pictures from the Grotto Practice Day at the Old Garden City Bridge.

Photos by: Sharon Clayton and Rachel Krumm-Cleek

2016 OFFICERS

Chairman

Harold Calvert
123 Co. Rd 250
Cullman, AL 35057
(256) 287-9770
webecavers@hotmail.com

Vice Chair

Perry Clayton
1628 Edmondson Rd.
Hanceville, AL 35077
(256) 352-0235
perryclayton@charter.net

Secretary

Evon Thompson
378 County Rd. 395
Cullman, AL 35057
(256) 352-0235
binerbat@gmail.com

Treasurer

Tracy Calvert
123 Co. Rd. 250
Cullman, AL 35057
(256) 287-9770
webecavers@hotmail.com

APPOINTMENTS

Advisor

Victor Bradford
8333 US Hwy 31
Hanceville, AL 35077
by carrier pigeon only

Safety

Jeff Lynn
(256) 558-7042
bamacaveman@yahoo.com

Membership/ Library

David Drake
110 Co. Rd. 1386
Falkville, AL 35622
(205) 790-1350
dmdrake1@gmail.com

Webmaster

Kuenn Drake
100 Co. Rd. 1386
Falkville, AL 35622
(256) 739-6915
kuenn.drake@gmail.com

ECHO)))) CHAMBER

Mysterious Cave Rings Show Neanderthals Liked To Build

By Christopher Joyce (Heard on Morning Edition - NPR)
May 26, 2016



Researchers found numerous ring-like structures inside France's Bruniquel Cave. They believe they were built by Neanderthals some 176,000 years ago. Photo by Etienne FABRE - SSAC

Here's a mystery found in a French cave. It appears that a group of Neanderthals walked into that cave about 176,000 years ago and started building something. Neanderthals were our closest living relatives but they weren't known as builders or cave explorers.

Scientists identify the forms as "constructions," but they can't figure out what they were for.

It was in 1990 when a French archaeologist first ventured deep into Bruniquel Cave in southwestern France. Spelunkers had just broken through the entrance, which apparently had been obstructed for millennia. The archaeologist traveled deep into the cave, over 1,000 feet. There he discovered something strange — someone had broken stalagmites from the floor and arranged them in two large ovals. But he died before he could fully explore the site.

Twenty-three years later, in 2013, a crew of scientists managed to get back to the site. Geologist Dominique Genty with France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) was there.

"It was very strange," he says, "it was kind of obvious that it was not natural."

The team found the circles of stone spikes, almost like 2-foot-high fences. But they found more than the original discoverer. There were more stone fragments lying in piles nearby. It was like a huge Lego set, a Neanderthal Lego set, because all of this calcite stone dated back 176,000 years — long before modern humans arrived in Europe.

Writing in the journal *Nature*, the team says it's the most complex Neanderthal structure ever found. "We know now," says Genty, "that they were able to make a sort of elaborate construction," more elaborate than anything Neanderthals had been known to make.



A 3D reconstruction shows the structures built inside the cave. Photo by Xavier Muth/Pascal Mora

Why did they build it?

There are only clues. For example, the stalagmite pieces all showed signs of being burned. Was it a ritual? Or perhaps it was a sort of fireplace, to warm them or maybe to repel cave bears. Genty says no one knows.

Then there's the location, more than 1,000 feet from the cave entrance. Archaeologist Marie Soressi with Leiden University in the Netherlands is a Neanderthal expert and says that's astonishing.

"What is most surprising for me is that this discovery is showing that Neanderthals ventured underground and far away from any source of natural light," says

Soressi. While Neanderthals no doubt took shelter in caves, they were never to known to go that deep, so far from light.

The scientists found pieces of burned animal bone at the site, which they think could have been used as torches because the fatty interior of bone burns.

Soressi points out that recent discoveries keep stoking the argument that Neanderthals were in fact not dumb throwbacks compared to modern humans. "I think ... we have by now many different lines of evidence to show that Neanderthals, and even Neanderthals 200,000 years ago, had cognitive abilities not so different from our direct ancestors."



Save the Dates

By: Bill Jackson (Cross Junction, Virginia)
unclebill14784@gmail.com



Save the Dates: Friday December 30, 2016 thru Monday January 2, 2017

Inaugural NSS New Year's Eve Bat Ball and Fundraiser at the NSS Headquarters and Conference Center, 6001 Pulaski Pike, Huntsville, AL 35810. It's a party and a fundraising event for the NSS. Spin the Jim Wilbanks Disco Ball. New Year's Eve dinner, dancing, band, DJ. On site camping included with pre-registration.

Grottos wishing to participate at a higher level should contact event chairman Fennigan Spencer, fennigan@gmail.com, (205) 266-5088.

Corporate sponsors are welcomed and encouraged. Contact Fundraising Chair Bill Jackson, unclebill14784@gmail.com, (706) 840-2619.



SCCi Announces Bats, Beer, & Bluegrass Anniversary Party

By Ray Knott
MAY 24, 2016



The Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. is planning its 25th Anniversary celebration and fundraiser titled Bats, Beer, & Bluegrass. This event is sure to excite cavers, nature enthusiasts, bluegrass fans, and more! The event will feature Barefoot Nellie & Co., a smooth driving bluegrass band based out of Chattanooga, TN. The group compiles impressive driving, darker arrangements, blending standard traditional bluegrass with a more innovative approach – and they have quite a fan-base!

The event will take place at the Frick's Cave Preserve, located in Walker County, Ga. on September 24, 2016 @ 7pm. Although the cave will be closed at the time of the event to protect the hibernating bats, guests will be able to enjoy the above-ground features the preserve has to offer. Food will be provided by 212 Market Restaurant, Tennessee's first green restaurant and winner of the Best Farm to Table

restaurant in Tennessee by Travel & Leisure magazine. Beer and 25th Anniversary merchandise will be available for purchase at the event.

Sponsorship & ticket price information, and further details will be publicized in the coming weeks.

If you are interested in sponsoring or volunteering for this first-time bluegrass event, please email amber.lehmann@scci.org or ray.knott@scci.org.



NSS Convention Cave and Karst Management Session

By Jean DeVries
June 1



The Cave and Karst Management Session is looking for cave and karst managers from all backgrounds to present at the 2016 NSS Convention in Ely, NV. This is open to everyone - cave/ karst conservancies, state, federal, or private land managers. It would be especially great to have some presentations from our cave/ karst conservancy groups on what's been happening with them. Researchers contributing to management are also welcome! Presentations do not need to be about large projects or specific issues; you can just talk about

management strategies, current practices, etc.

Typical presentations are 15-20 minutes in length, although we can provide some 30-minute slots. Single or multiple presenters are welcome. Presentation format is open - PowerPoint or other computer media, slides, or just stand up and talk about what you do.

Please send an abstract (short summary of what your talk is about - 250 words max) to Johanna Kovarik, Cave and Karst Management Session co-chair at jkovarik@fs.fed.us. This session is co-chaired by Dale Pate, National Park Service and Jim Goodbar, Bureau of Land Management.

The session is scheduled for Thursday.



TAG Calendar

June 6
Grotto Meeting
L&N Train Depot, Arnold St 7:30pm

June 11
Grotto Trip
Gourdneck Cave – Kimball, TN
Meet at Cullman Library at 8 am

June 2-5
SERA Cave Carnival
Hosted by the Nashville Grotto
Pigeon Mountain, GA

July 16-23
75th Annual NSS Convention
Ely, NV

September 24
Bats, Beer & Bluegrass – SCCi 25th Anniversary Celebration & Fundraiser
Frick's Cave Preserve, Walker County, GA 7pm

A Terrifying Adventure in an Abandoned Mine

BBC Britain

By Amanda Ruggeri

19 April 2016

It's been described as "the craziest thing you can do underground in Britain" without special certification. Amanda Ruggeri traveled 400m beneath the earth to see for herself.

"No," said the man in front of me, staring into the abyss below. "Just no. No, no, no."

We'd chatted earlier this morning beneath the bald, foreboding peaks of north Wales' Snowdonia Mountains. There, back on the surface, he'd seemed like a pretty happy-go-lucky guy. Here, 100m below, it was if the darkness of the mine had swallowed any light-heartedness whole.



The walk to the mine passes abandoned workers' cottages (Credit: Digital-Fotofusion Gallery/Alamy)

He wasn't alone. Even before we entered, on our mile-long walk uphill past enormous heaps of broken slate and several abandoned miner's huts, we'd lost one of our eight-person group. It turned out she hadn't fully realized what she was getting into.

In fact, none of us had – until now. We were tackling the Go Below Ultimate XTreme Adventure – a three-mile route through a massive slate mine that includes the world's deepest underground zip line, first underground free fall, a 22m abseil and numerous traverses and via ferrata-style climbs, not to mention goes to the deepest underground spot in Britain that's accessible to the public.

If that weren't bad enough, we'd later discover that the mine, Cwmorthin Quarry, was nicknamed "The Slaughterhouse" by locals – thanks to the number of miners killed working there in the 19th Century.



Looking into the bowels of the mine once nicknamed "The Slaughterhouse" (Credit: Gavin Haskell/Alamy)

Now, barely an hour into the daylong experience, we stood at the edge of a cavern. The next step would take us onto a wooden ledge the width of my foot. Below was a nine-storey drop.

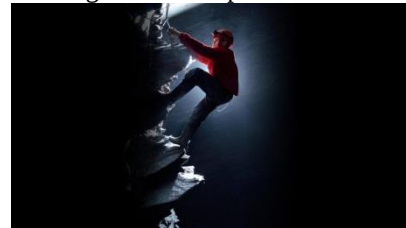
The 4m-long ledge was followed by another, but we couldn't see that far: the vertical rock wall – and the darkness beyond – made it feel like our guides were asking us to walk the plank into complete oblivion.

Meanwhile, I wasn't sure what was more disconcerting: that we were 100m below ground, or that this depth was nothing in comparison to what we would do. Later in the day, we would reach a spot so far underground – 400m – that you could fit the tallest building in Europe, London's Shard, between us and the surface of the hill above.

This, of course, is exactly what makes the route so thrilling.

Launched in 2015 after five years of planning, the 18-and-over Ultimate XTreme Adventure is the latest, and nuttiest, offering from Snowdonia-based company Go Below. Founded in 2010 by husband-and-wife team Jen and Miles Moulding, the company also has less extreme options,

including a half-day adventure for those aged 10-and-up.



Go Below's Ultimate XTreme Adventure includes climbs, traverses and an abseil (Credit: Go Below Underground Adventures 2016)

Whichever experience you book, the mine is not a show mine. Opened in 1810 and scattered with historic remnants like old railway carts, tallow candles and even a leather miner's cap, it hasn't been modernised. There are no electric lights, guardrails or even smooth flooring.

Instead, whether we were finding footholds in rock walls or tiptoeing around well-sized holes in the floor, we depended on the classic trifecta of climbing gear: harness, ropes and karabiners to clip ourselves into the fixed ropes that were bolted to the rock.

The only light came from our headlamps. At one point, we turned them off. The blackness that ensued was velvet-soft, so deep that I saw little sparks as my retinas tried to make sense of what was going on.

As intense as the experience was, we couldn't say that we hadn't been warned. "Many people who've done it have later said it was one of the toughest days out they've ever had," the website says, urging that you not sign up unless you're prepared for "a long day of scrambling, walking, climbing, zip lining and swinging on ropes" and adding "there are copious vertical drops which will test your nerve even if you're not normally scared of heights."

Still, I had thought, given that it was open to the public, how insane could it be?

I got my answer from Will Virano, one of our two guides: "This is the craziest thing you can do underground in Britain without special certification," he said.



The gear used is relatively low-tech, but effective: harness, ropes, karabiners – and of course, helmets (Credit: Go Below Underground Adventures 2016)

Of course, the danger we felt was mainly psychological. Everything has been tested, and is continually tested, to the nth degree. There's an easy alternate route for every section, just in case someone panics – or is hurt – halfway through. And aside from some bumps, bruises and a re-aggravated knee injury, there haven't been any major issues.

But it's easy to forget all of that when you're facing an abyss – which is where the other main safety factor comes to the fore: the guides. Will and our guide Danny Woodford-Phillips not only knew every twist and turn of the mine like it was their own living room, but – somehow – knew how to encourage us to take them on.

Like at that first challenge. As my fellow adventurer stood shaking his head, the guides quickly intervened and moved him to the back where Will spoke with him calmly, giving him time to decide whether to continue.



The first challenge on the Go Below Ultimate XTreme Adventure, called "The Catwalk", involves scooting across a ledge 10cm wide (Credit: Go Below Underground Adventures 2016)

That made me next. Taking a big breath, I stepped onto the plank and edged along it. I slid the two karabiners from my harness along the rope above me. At the bolt, I clipped off one rope and secured it to the fixed line, then the other.

Halfway across, I did exactly what they told us not to do: I looked down. The beam from my headlamp bounced faintly off the rocks 27m below.

Danny's words echoed in my mind: "You will find yourself beyond your comfort zone today. If you don't, we aren't doing our job."



After three challenging traverses came a 22m abseil (Credit: Go Below Underground Adventures 2016)

Once on the other side, I saw that everyone was on their way; no one had decided to turn back. But there was no time to relax. Next up was a wall with only metal loops, followed by one with the occasional bit of stone sticking out. After that? A 22m abseil over the edge.

With each section we completed, another, somehow more challenging section seemed to come next.

The organisers had affectionately named our first zip line "Goliath". The 130m-long cable runs across a gaping cavern, plummeting down 60m. The world's first underground "zip ride", it looked incredibly eerie: a wooden playground swing, dangling in the darkness from a 13mm cable. But once on it, it was hard to feel afraid. If I shrieked "wheeeee!", I wasn't the only one.



The world's first underground "zip ride" uses what looks like a playground swing (Credit: Go Below Underground Adventures 2016)

The next zip lines didn't have so much as a seat. Instead, you clipped yourself into the cable and stepped off the edge. When Danny and Will explained that one of the lines didn't have enough vertical drop to get you from one side to the other – meaning we'd each have to take a running start and hurl ourselves off the edge at speed – I started laughing.

Everyone else started laughing, too, when I clipped in and found myself, at 5'3", lifted slightly off the ground – so that instead of taking a running start, I could only tap my tiptoes beneath me, their maniacal rhythm matched only by my increasingly nervous laughter.

So maybe there was no point at which we became completely comfortable. But that was the point.

At the day's end, our final challenge was the free fall: a 22m plummet to a cavern floor. I readied myself at the edge. "OK," I said, and waited.

"You have to take the step yourself," Danny said patiently.

"Oh, right." He'd told us that, but my nerves had already turned the memory of his instructions to mush. "Yes. OK. I'm going." I stepped – and barely had time to register that I was hurtling to the floor before the brakes kicked in and I landed, safely, on my feet.

Was the Ultimate XTreme Adventure more terrifying than I'd imagined? Yes. But as it turns out, you can be scared stiff by something... and do it anyway.



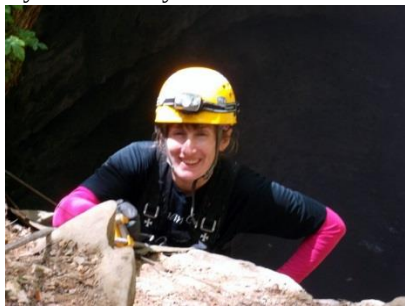
Back on the surface, after eight hours of underground thrills, Snowdonia's mountains look especially beautiful (Credit: David Lintern/Alamy)

More surprising still? You can have so much fun in the process that, as soon as you're back on the surface – covered in dirt, your heart still pounding, feeling thankful to see the rainy Welsh skies – you're already thinking about when you can return.



Practice Day

By Sharon Clayton



Vertical caving is a dangerous sport. Even if you've been doing it for decades, it never hurts to spend a day practicing and keeping your skills current. Especially those skills that may just save your life in the event of an unexpected emergency! The Grotto set aside Saturday, May 14th for a practice day down at the Old Garden City Bridge. We also made sure to bring some extra ropes & gear so that a few new folks who had expressed an interest could try out rappelling for the first time. The Bridge makes a great place for this kind of practice, since it's a short 35 to 40 foot rappel with plenty of room at the bottom for

belayers. There is also a stairway back up to the bridge so the new folks didn't have to climb back up (unless they just wanted to try!)



Turn out was light in the morning. Perry, Jason, Harold and I spent some time rigging ropes and checking the gear to make sure all was ready to go. We did a few change-overs to warm up, and then decided to play around with rigging a haul system. Jason was familiar with the process, so he walked us through it. We started with a simple 3 to 1 haul system, and then added another pulley to make it a 4 to 1. In order to test the system out, I played tug of war with the 3 guys (me on one end of the haul system, the guys on the other) It still took me a little work (mostly because we didn't have anyone to mind the prussic), but I beat the guys.

After that, I spent a little time working out my fears of rigging in to a very low rig point and going over the lip on one. It still gives me the willies, but finally managed to do it smoothly without having to go to my knees. I did a few more change-overs and crossed some knots (ugh!). While I was working on that, Leginia and her daughter Meghan arrived. Meghan was new to rappelling, but eager to try out this cool stuff she had seen pictures of her mom doing!

After getting her in harness & explaining how to use the rack, Perry helped her out onto the edge & took her through the process of rigging in & safety checks. She



did great on her rappel and was ready for more! While she was doing a few more rappels, our friend Terry arrived to get in a little practice, quickly followed by my neighbors, the Cleeks. They had heard lots of my "adventures" and their boys wanted a chance to try out rappelling.



Dad got on rope first, just to check things out and make sure it was something they felt good about letting the boys do. He had a great time & the boys were clamoring to get on rope next as soon as he got back up to the bridge. Brady went first, followed quickly by his little brother Jackson. Both boys did fantastic, quickly picking up on how to use the rack (something it can take us adults a while to learn!). They both wanted to do it again...I think they could easily

have stayed out there with us until dark if Mom & Dad hadn't had other things to do that evening! I hope we'll be able to have them join us for some more caving adventures in the future!



We wrapped up the practice day soon after our guests left. Ropes were coiled, gear was packed and the day ended with the traditional "Let us go down from this place". We'll probably have another of these practice days in the not-to-distant future. I hope more of our Grotto gang can join us for the day!

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

May 2, 2016

The regular monthly meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society was called to order on Monday, May 2, 2016, at 7:40 p.m. by Harold Calvert, Chairman. 12 members were present.

The minutes from the April meeting was read. A motion was made by David Drake to accept the minutes as read and was seconded by Harold Calvert. The motion was approved.

The treasurer's report was given.

Announcements:

NSS Convention – July 17-23, 2016, in Ely, Nevada.

SERA – June 2-5, 2016, at Pigeon Mountain, Georgia.

Old Business:

No old business.

New Business:

Potential dates for the annual grotto picnic are needed.

May Grotto Trip:

Safety training on May 14th at the Garden City bridge.

Trip Reports

Harold and Sharon conducted a presentation to an elementary class on caving and bats.

The meeting was adjourned.

