

The FLOWSTONE

Vol 23 Issue 1

January 2016



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

CULLMAN GROTTO FLOWSTONE



January 2016

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Visit us: www.cullmangrotto.com or

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The Flowstone is published monthly by the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society. Items submitted for publication must be received by the 20th of each month for inclusion in the following month's issue.

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.

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Front Cover: Cullman Cavers Jeff Lynn & Mandi Hulsey "tying the knot" with Harold Calvert officiating

Photo by: Bo Franklin

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ECHO)))) CHAMBER

NSS 75th Anniversary

January 1, 2016



75 years ago today, the National Speleological Society was officially incorporated in Washington D.C.



This image is generally considered to be the first board meeting of the society. William J Stephenson, at the center of the photo, was the society's founder and first president.

Happy anniversary, NSS!

NSS 75th Anniversary Convention
July 16-23, 2016 ~ Ely, Nevada



Call for Volunteers

Jean DeVries

December 29, 2015

The Social Media Committee is looking for content managers for the NSS Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube platforms. Volunteer your time and talents to your favorite national caving organization from the comfort of your own keyboard.

Contact

<mailto:socialmedia@caves.org> for more information, or to volunteer for this exciting opportunity!

NSS Members Manual Update

Jean DeVries

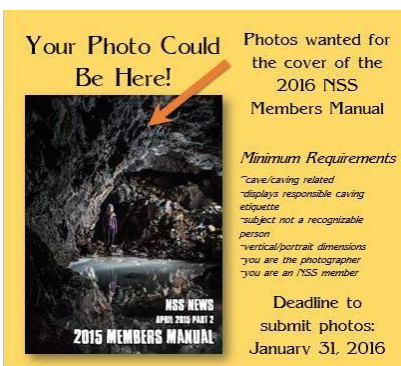
December 21, 2015

Did you move? Change your email address? Get a new phone number? Make sure the NSS knows about it so you can vote in the upcoming election, receive publications, and have your correct information in the 2016 Members Manual. Information can be updated at this link: <http://ow.ly/WbByV>.



NSS 2016 Members Manual Cover Photo

Kelly Smallwood



December 16, 2015

The deadline to submit your photos for the cover of the 2016 NSS Members Manual is January 31, 2016.

Please send no more than FIVE high-quality, vertical/portrait-oriented, cave/caving-related photographs for possible use on the front cover of the

2016 NSS Members Manual. The photographer must submit his/her own photos and be a NSS member. Horizontal/landscape photos or photos showing unfavorable practices (such as an ungloved hand holding a speleothem or not wearing a helmet) will not be accepted. While the subject of the photo does not have to be a caver, if one is present, he/she should not be the focus of the photo.

The deadline for submissions is January 31, 2016. Please email your photo submissions to the 2016 Members Manual Editor Kelly Smallwood at <mailto:rowland7840@bellsouth.net>.

Please be sure to include your NSS number and state of residence in your email, along with the subject line 2016 NSS MM Cover Photo Submission.

If you have more than five photos that you would like to submit, feel free to send them using Dropbox.



SERA Winter Business Meeting

Saturday, Mar 12, 2016



The annual meeting of the Southeastern Regional Association of the NSS will be hosted by the Smoky Mountain Grotto. Map and Photo/Art Salons will start at 11:00 am (ET). The general meeting will begin at 1:00 pm. Each grotto within the region (AL, FL, GA, MS, NC, SC, and TN) is encouraged to attend the meeting and give an update on the

activities that have occurred within their grotto over the last year. Following this, reports will be given, issues discussed, motions made, grants awarded, elections held, and award committees will meet. The meeting will conclude with a banquet from 6:00 - 8:00 pm where SERA awards will be made and a special speaker will present. We hope you can attend this fun and informative event! Updated event details may be found here: [SERA WBM facebook event](#).



Nepal's High-Risk Helicopter Rescue Unit

By Freddie Wilkinson
Men's Journal



Simrik Air flies several hundred rescues per year, which can cost \$2,500 per hour. Credit: Photographs Courtesy of Simrick Air

"The look on people's faces was total panic," says American helicopter pilot Aaron Mauck. "You could see it in their eyes." Mauck, who works for the Nepalese company Air Dynasty, had been dispatched to rescue trekkers stranded at High Camp, a small cluster of stone lodges below Nepal's 17,769-foot Thorong La Pass, the highest point on the popular Annapurna Circuit. The group had survived the initial blast from cyclone Hudhud in October, a Category 4 storm that dumped more than five feet of snow in the mountains. But now, two days later, the trekkers were exhausted and

stranded in the deep snow. The helicopter was their only way out.

As Mauck set the chopper down, a strong downdraft and unstable snowpack made it too risky to power down, so with the blades still whirring, the survivors started piling in. Mauck worried that a panicked trekker might rush headlong into his main rotor.

Because of the altitude — 17,000 feet — Mauck's helicopter could carry only three passengers, half its normal capacity, and Mauck yelled at those climbing in over the thump of the rotors: "You need to get out! We're not going to be able to do this!" As soon as two exited, two more would climb in. It took several minutes to convince the trekkers to wait their turn. Mauck lifted off, shuttling the survivors to a small village nearby, then returned for more.

Hudhud killed more than 50 people, with 400 others requiring rescue by helicopter. It was Nepal's worst-ever trekking disaster. But in a country with no 911 service and a crumbling road network, Hudhud also illustrated one thing: Nepal's privately owned, high-performance helicopters have become a critical rescue tool in the most mountainous country on Earth — one that is faced with more rescue calls every year.

"We've just scratched the surface of heli-operations in Nepal," says 39-year-old Siddhartha Jang Gurung, chief pilot and operations manager at Simrik Air, one of seven air companies in the country. "People don't even understand yet what we can do."



The new-generation B3 helicopter can fly 3,000 feet higher than other models.

Helicopters have been used for decades in mountains around the world, most notably in the Alps. In Nepal they've become standard tools for a host of jobs, from sightseeing tours to transporting supplies for heavy-duty infrastructure projects like hydroelectric plants. There have even been reports of wealthy Everest climbers using helicopters to fly back to Kathmandu from Base Camp after they've acclimated, in order to spend a few nights in a nice hotel before their final ascent. But the aircraft's greatest impact is in search and rescue. For years the Himalayas' extremely thin air limited its use in high-altitude situations, but that changed with the debut of the B3, a high-performance chopper. Since the first B3 arrived in Nepal, in 2009, they've been used on hundreds of missions, plucking injured climbers from altitudes where previous heli-rescue seemed impossible.

The Airbus AS350 B3, as it is formally known, has an official ceiling of 23,000 feet, but it's capable of flying much higher, something French test pilot Didier Delsalle proved when he landed a stripped-down version of the aircraft on the summit of 29,029-foot Everest in 2005. In 2013, Italian pilot Maurizio Folini used a B3 and a longline — a rope that lets a pilot extract victims on steep terrain while keeping the rotors a safe distance from the slope — to save an injured Everest climber at 25,590 feet. It was a record for the highest heli-rescue.

The feat garnered headlines around the world, but many found it self-serving. "That was a stunt," says Russell Brice, the owner of Himalayan Experience, the largest guiding company on Everest, pointing to the fact that the victim, once deposited safely on the helipad, walked away without seeking medical assistance. Whatever the reaction, the incident demonstrated just how powerful the helicopters could be in the right hands.

Currently there are eight B3s based in Kathmandu. The aircraft cost more than \$2 million apiece, so their owners use them as often as possible, and there's heavy incentive to push the limits of aircraft durability, pilot skill, and weather conditions. Because the companies are private, they often compete for jobs. Anyone can charter an aircraft, even during emergencies. Mauck's flights in the wake of Hudhud, for example, were paid for by the Israeli government, which had hired Air Dynasty to evacuate its citizens from the disaster zone. More troubling, if a victim has no way of guaranteeing payment (flights can cost upwards of \$2,500 per hour), a helicopter might never be sent or an individual could decline rescue based on cost. Simrik pilot Bibek Khadka, for one, recalls a trekker who, not having insurance or cash on hand, insisted he could walk out instead. "The next day, the embassy paid for us to go get his body," Khadka says.

Not surprisingly, flying helicopters in the Himalayas is extremely dicey. According to the Aviation Safety Network website, there have been 24 accidents involving helicopters between 2001 and October 2014 — including a 2002 incident when a chopper flying near Makalu vanished and still hasn't been found.

"Most crashes are a combination of weather, terrain, and pilot inexperience," says Kunda Dixit, editor-publisher of the Nepali Times and a longtime observer of the industry. "Add one other factor to the mix — an overloaded plane, poor maintenance, improper communication — and then it gets truly dangerous."

Leading the push to make the industry safer is Siddhartha Gurung, one of Nepal's most experienced helicopter captains. Gurung trained for two years with Switzerland-based Air Zermatt and now, at Simrik Air, organizes training programs for pilots and rescuers, no matter what company they work for.

"Part of the problem in Nepal is that nobody works with each other," says Brice. "Siddhartha's one of the only guys who's trying to pull people together."

Gurung is also part of an effort to start a nationwide emergency-response service to coordinate rescues.

"You can have the best pilot," says Gurung, "but if you have bad operations, bad management, it will get you in trouble."

To illustrate, Gurung points to a former colleague, Nepali pilot Sabin Basnyat, who died in a 2010 crash while attempting to rescue a pair of alpinists at 21,000 feet. Basnyat and Gurung had recently returned from training in Switzerland and had been urged to proceed cautiously, in part because they didn't have proper communications equipment. But Basnyat, at the behest of his company, took on the job. He had just picked up one climber from the slope when his B3's main rotor clipped the ridge. In an instant the blade disintegrated, and the machine tumbled down the slope. It was Gurung who flew Basnyat's body off the mountain, then went back to rescue the remaining climber.

Gurung blames his friend's death in part on lax oversight and pressure from management to perform. "They said, 'Go and do it,'" he says, reflecting. "They put something they should not have in front of him."

The accident quickly raised questions about how and when the aircraft should be deployed. It also brought up concerns about climbers' risk assessment, with many believing that some climbers have become reckless, knowing that a rescue is only a flight away.

"There should be some places, like above 23,000 feet, where we do not go," Gurung says. "It needs to be up to climbers to get themselves down."

Despite concerns, it's clear that helicopters aren't going anywhere. After an avalanche last spring on Everest killed 16 Sherpas (Simrik flew the dead and injured off the mountain), the discussion turned to whether helicopters should be used even more, to shuttle gear past the Khumbu icefall, where the avalanche hit, essentially trading one risk for another.

Overlooked in the tragedy was Simrik, which quietly went on to perform eight high-altitude longline operations. The most challenging involved plucking a climber with altitude sickness from a small crevasse at 21,000 feet on Ama Dablam. "We were only able to do this because we were ready," Gurung says. "Before, we were not ready. If you try to do something prematurely with helicopters, it won't work."



TAG Calendar

January 4

Grotto Meeting

L&N Train Depot, Arnold St 7:30pm

January 9

Grotto Trip

Signal Light Pit/Cave

Meeting Time/Place TBA

March 12, 2015

SERA Winter Business Meeting

Tennessee Valley Unitarian

Universalist Church, Knoxville, TN

Hosted by Smoky Mountain Grotto

Map & Photo/Art Salons begin at 11AM

General Meeting begins at 1PM



Cullman Grotto Christmas Party

Holiday plans and vile weather kept most of us out of caves & pits this month. However, we didn't lack for caver-related events, the first of which being the Annual Grotto Christmas Party. Jeff Lynn & Mandi Hulsey graciously hosted this year. We enjoyed a delicious pot luck supper, followed by a round of Dirty Santa that started off sedate & ended up in hysterical laughter. A fine time was had by all (including Max the giant Doberman!)



Lynn – Hulsey Wedding

Our second caver event of December was the marriage of Cullman Grotto members Jeff Lynn and Mandi Hulsey. The wedding took place on December 29, 2015 at Palisades Park and was officiated by our very own Grotto President Harold Calvert. Friends and family were in attendance. We wish them a long and happy life together!



Bee Branch Gorge – Sipsey Wilderness Area – Bankhead National Forest

By Kuenn Drake

Looking for a New Year's day adventure, I joined my son, Amel, and a few of his scouts on a 11 mile hike in the Sipsey Wilderness Area of Bankhead National Forest, located in northwest Alabama.

This particular hike would include a visit to a large yellow poplar, named Big Tree (which it is). This big Poplar (aka tulip tree - *Liriodendron tulipifera*), rises some 150 feet with circumference at the base of approximately 25 feet. It is, hands



down (or around), the largest Poplar in the state of Alabama. Those who are anticipating something on the order of the California redwoods will, however, want to lower their expectations.

Sipsey wilderness consists of the low plateau of Brindlee Mountain which is dissected into a rough landscape by several creeks and rivers. Due to the layers of limestone and sandstone



that make up the area, waterfalls are very common in the wilderness; which has earned the wilderness the nickname "Land of 1000 Waterfalls."

The wilderness is in the Appalachian mixed mesophytic forests ecoregion. Much of the wilderness was once logged, but new growth forests have now taken hold in the logged areas. Some old-growth forests can also be found in the wilderness. The most significant are about 260 acres along Bee Branch Gorge.

Bee Branch Gorge is where we would be for part of the hike; a beautiful place, with flora, fauna, and tree varieties that are unique to this area of the wilderness. The gorge, being atypical to canyon fare of the west, is however bordered by large bluff lines – very canyon like. Water runs through the gorge almost year round, and an optional 65' waterfall rappel just before the big tree. (I dutifully brought a rope.)

On Christmas day, north Alabama received between 8-10 inches of rainfall in a 24 hour period. The Sipsey River peaked at 40', from its normal 5' for this time of year. Evidence of flooding and 60 mph wind gusts could be seen throughout the hike.

There are two main routes for visiting Big Tree. Via Borden Creek trail head, 14 miles, or Thompson

Creek trail head, 11 miles round trip. The boys and two of the leaders would be over-nighting; I chose to make it a day hike with one of the leaders and his 7 year old son.

A good time was had by all!





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

December 7, 2015

The regular monthly meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society was called to order on Monday, November 2, 2015 by Harold Calvert, Chairman. 9 people were present.

The minutes from November's meeting were read. A motion was made by David Drake to accept the minutes as read. The motion was seconded by Harold Calvert. The motion was approved.

A Treasurer's report was given. It was noted that the grotto owes

\$22.50 for permits - payable to Harold Calvert.

Announcements:

Montgomery Grotto Christmas Party – Dec. 12 at Bo Franklin's house. 6pm

Cullman Grotto Christmas Party – Dec. 19 at Mandy's house. 6pm

Old Business:

There has been no contact from the people doing the Guffey Cave gate.

New Business:

Grotto membership dues are due in January.

Election of officers will be held in

January.

Nominations for officers: Chairman – Harold Calvert, Vice-chair – Perry Clayton, Treasurer – Tracy Calvert, Secretary – Sharon Clayton, Evon Thompson

Harold led a discussion of safety issues in falls.

December grotto trip – To be announced

Trip reports were given.

