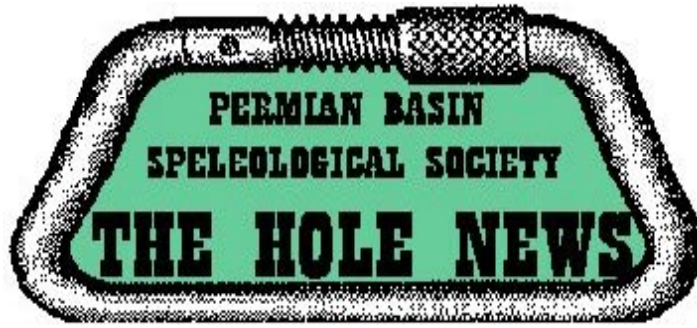


The Hole News

Volume 25 Number 4

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Ranchers, Rattlers and Recharge

Caving on the Phillips Ranch in Crockett County, West Texas



By Sofia Casini

Participants: Don Arburn, Peter Sprouse, Ryan Reid, Geoff Hoese, Sofia Casini, Jacqui LaRue Thomas
A Texas gas and sheep rancher, Toby Carlton, contacted Peter Sprouse about coming to check out a cave unearthed on his land in November 2009 when the gas company ripped open the earth with a bulldozer. His family was enjoying tooling around in it, and was looking for the expert take on what had been discovered and what should be done about it. The caving crew set out on their mission with a few good leads – the main cave on site and another called Phillips Cave, which Peter found a reference to in the TSS files prior to

the trip. The weekend was promising. The caving crew arrived to a warm reception Saturday morning, March 6th 2010. The ranching family – 81 year old Toby Carlton, his wife Coco, their children and grandchildren - all excitedly welcomed the cavers. They shared their finds so far from earlier exploring – reporting “wooly mammoth teeth and a massive thigh bone” – and some important information about Phillips Cave, explored 50 years ago by Coco and now home to a mass of slithering rattlesnakes.
Paleo Cave: Led to the recently unearthed cave, the team set about surveying (Peter sketching,

Continued on pg.3

*Scheduled
Upcoming
Events*

- *May 11*
PBSS monthly meeting
- *May 22*
Abyss Cave
- May 29-31, 2010*
SWR Memorial Day Regional
Location TBA
- *June 8*
PBSS monthly meeting
- *June 12*
Special vertical trip TBA
- July 3-11*
Ft.Stanton Project

** indicates PBSS
club activity*



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Ryan setting stations, and Sofia reading instruments.

The cave was found when a bulldozer excavating caliche for the gas well pads scraped the bedding plane open which formed the top of the cave. The newly formed entrance led into a larger chamber, with promising leads shooting off in a few directions - most leads stopped up shortly and one was too small to pass. Notable was a small skylight in a dome, about 1 inch in diameter and width, showing the thinness of the cave ceiling.

Another similar hole was found outside of the cave between two of the trucks, leading to speculation that another chamber may exist – and that it would be desirable to find another parking place. Also notable were four paleo sink entrances, now plugged, which had left large debris cones, ranging from 20 centimeters to 2 or 3 meters. These were filled with many old bones.

A tooth of unknown origin, which was later identified as a horse tooth, was about 2 inches long and curved. Left in the cave for the family and future explorers, pictures were taken to be analyzed by paleontologists. Sadly, the family was informed their “wooly mammoth teeth and bones” were simply cave formations.

“Paleo Cave” was home to fossils and numerous small formations, such as popcorn, gypsum crests, stalagmites, stalactites, and fried eggs. It was also home to small critters like crickets, roaches and centipedes, and, of course, to many, many bones.

Relatively untouched for some folks using beer cans Hansel and Gretel style to get out of the cave, Paleo Cave is promising in its wealth of data for paleontologists. The cave opening took a lot of runoff water after it was opened up in 2009, demonstrated by goat manure in the back passage place high on the cave wall and the significant erosion on the cave floor between debris cones in this short of a time span. The team speculates that the water may either fill the cave in the future or widen narrow passages, leading to other chambers.

Phillips Cave: Next, the ranchers took the team to Phillips Cave. As promised, this mossy green entrance (1 meter wide) lead straight down (6.1 meters) to a floor bed populated by three (at least) enormous and beautiful rattlesnakes. Coiled comfortably in the direct light, these snakes bore detailed black, gray, and brown diamond shaped markings. When stretched out they appeared close to 6 feet each!

Explored by the grandmother Coco (now in her late 70s) when she was a teenager, the cave opens into a much larger cavern with unexplored leads. This cave was ini-

tially opened up circa 1950 when reportedly donkeys were used to move the large stones covering the entrance. The caving crew aborted the idea of entering the cave.

Rattling Yo-Yo Cave: The ranchers then mentioned another cave found by their adult daughter many years ago, whose location nobody could remember clearly. Rough directions were provided, and the caving crew spent hours ridge walking amongst cactus in search of this cave. The peaceful afternoon was marred only slightly by the non-stop noise of the gas compressor stations.

The final cave, named “Rattling Yo-Yo” was discovered by Sofia Casini. Fitting in description though not exact location, it’s unclear whether this was the same one found by the rancher’s daughter. Rocks were thrown searching for rattlers before Sofia lowered herself straight down from the small triangular shaped entrance (.5 meters). The cave (1.7 meters vertical) opened into a single chamber, with just enough room for everyone inside and standing room at the back of the cave.

Two small skulls and other body parts, possibly raccoon, were discovered, along with an old rusted metal yo-yo with whistling holes on each side. Animal scratches were also found closer to the entrance.

Quite lovely, the cave walls were decomposed limestone of chalky white with unknown black markings, and the floor consisted of large piles of rich black dirt. The day’s excitement pinnacled when trip leader Peter Sprouse, the last to enter the cave, stated, “How come none of you noticed these two rattlesnakes?” They were staring at him eye level, with their tongues flickering. Peter descended and the survey team (Peter sketching, Ryan setting stations, and Don on instruments) continued, while the team strategized on how to exit the cave safely. Peter thought of sending out an initial member, who could then drape a rain jacket over the snakes.

Sending up the member with largest body mass was discussed, as was sending out the member who was smallest and quickest. Don Arburn, at 6ft 3in, went to observe the situation, at which time he noted the snakes nestled in a crack near the entrance, just 8 inches from body passing, and exclaimed, “Oh, no, this changes everything. We have a problem here, guys.” Mustering courage, Don played sacrificial lamb and exited the cave first, draped the jacket over the wall crack, and each member proceeded to exit. Phew!

Back at the ranch, the caving team celebrated Toby Carlton’s 81st birthday with him and the entire family, and then slept soundly after a full day exploring. A good day’s caving!

More pictures on page 4





Five Mouth the 9th

24 April 2010

PBSS members Kerry Lowery and Jacqui Thomas [report] were joined by Dallas area cavers Charles Goldsmith, Cristina Estrada, and Ryan Monjaras. All arrived varying times of Friday evening and worked Saturday until about 1700

All were packed up and gone by 1800 Saturday.

When I went to the cave the Wednesday afternoon before the dig, the floor was sticky mud, reminiscent of chocolate pudding. I left the cave with boot soles two inches thicker than when I went in. I also spoke with Dr. Fields and we figured it would be dried out enough to dig, even if we had the bit more rain forecast for that night. Our buckets were lying where the foot of water left them but the saw-horses, sifting screen and light were all unaffected. (As was the big pile of tailings we had left from the last time).

Friday night offered some mist and rain spits and a brilliant light show on over 180 degrees of horizon, as we sat on the northern edge of a storm travelling from southwest to northeast through Rocksprings and Junction. I guess my wisdom (surely not age) overcame my enjoyment of lightning watching as I opted for retiring while Kerry watched from the rise with the cave entrances. We had a negligible amount of rain during the night.

The Dallas contingent arrived in the night.

Saturday morning Kerry rode with Dr. Fields to get the Bobcat. Our first order of business was to collect buckets and sift and remove the existing dirt pile and haul out the broken rocks also left from last time. Sifting turned up no interesting objects. We filled a couple of Bobcat buckets just with the loose stuff. (I have looked up bucket capacities and looks like a level bucket-full is just over a yard of material—1.3 cf—so we moved 10.8 cf). After we hoisted those buckets we moved the pipe frame to the smaller entrance closer to where we were digging. We decided to concentrate on our original direction, as the shelf of collapse and dirt continues in to fairly rock-free

soil, where everywhere else we had tried was compressed small cobbles and dirt. As we peeled back the ledge and cleaned out and widened our trench we continued to dig carefully and inspect all tailings for spear points, bones, and other items of interest. Christina found a small snake that Ryan brought out for identification. Dr. Fields thought its presence in the cave was intentional so it was returned.

[Thanks to Bill Bentley's research the snake has been identified as most likely a Texas Blind Snake. He/she is meant to be there and what we found is adult-sized].

We found no points. We found one large flake of chert, a mystery incisor-looking small tooth, a couple of large bones, and a large brown tooth that looks like the cat tooth we found on an earlier dig. All but the cat tooth were found while peeling back the ledge.

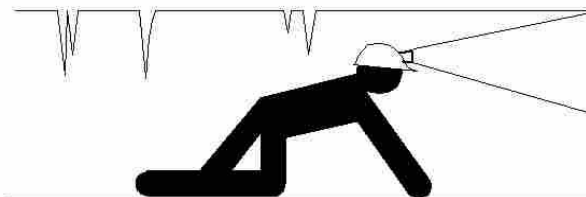
We were visited by Jeryl Fields and her neighbor Tami Love, who is a science person and a teacher at the Middle School. We were able to persuade her to come down and look around, mostly by promising we could get her out again if her knee acted up.

Fortunately we did not have to make good on our promise.

We were disappointed that we did not find anything of significance but we were quite pleased to have cleaned up the site and made some progress. We are also excited by the prospect of another trip soon, led by Charles. There is an archaeology student who may be able to join the next dig, and we will have contact information for the caver that Jeryl met in Arlington before we started the dig. She also expressed interest. The Fields' met a San Antonio caver at the latest Rock Art Foundation trip and he also is interested in joining us. Looks like we will have enough people to make significant progress into the cave.

We are already talking about another dig the first Saturday in June (the 5th). It will be led by Charles Goldsmith and hopefully will be a large and productive group including some PBSSers and the archaeology person from Dallas.

Pictures on page 6





Gloved cat tooth



Kerry and his rock



Cristina and Ryan enjoying the Ledge

Landowners and Lawyers

Or How Never the Two Shall Meet

As cavers, the farthest from any of our minds would be legal action against a landowner should an accident resulting in injury occur while caving on private land. However, the landowner probably doesn't know this about cavers. Landowners are in business to protect their assets and livelihood.

So, should a caving trip conversation with a land-

owner present itself, and the subject of a liability waiver comes up, think of it in three ways: 1. If I refuse to sign a waiver, a potential caving trip might be shot to hell forever. 2. Consider the landowner's concerns and what would you do if you weren't a caver. 3. If I refuse to sign a waiver, a potential caving trip might be shot to hell forever.

Photo Credits

Cover Photo:
Rattling Yo-Yo Cave

Paleo-Cave and Rattling Yo-Yo Cave photos by Peter Sprouse and Geoff Hoese

5 Mouth photos by Jacqui Thomas

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2010 Carlsbad CRF Schedule

The 2010 dates for the Cave Research Foundation Expeditions at Carlsbad Caverns National Park are:

Memorial Day, May 29 to 31

Labor Day, September 4 to 6

Thanksgiving, November 25 to 28

Restoration Field Camp dates will be announced later.

Contact information:

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<http://www.caver.net/pbss/pbss.html>
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