

The FLOWSTONE

Vol 19 Issue 1

January 2012

It's a Major Award



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

CULLMAN GROTTO FLOWSTONE

January 2012
Volume 19, Issue 1

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Inside this Issue

- 2** **Echo Chamber
TAG Calendar**
- 3** **Message From the Chair
Varnedoe Trip Report**
- 4** **Varnedoe
Fantastic**
- 5** **Christmas in Cullman...It's
a Major Award!
How long has it been
again?**
- 6** **Neversink – First Timer**
- 7** **Minutes**

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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.



Front Cover: Hallie Drake with this year's "Major Award"

Photo by: Jesse Calvert

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ECHO)))) CHAMBER

U.S. Congress Approves \$4 Million for White-Nose Syndrome

December 22, 2011

This past Friday the U.S. Congress went ahead and allotted \$4 million USD of the Department of the Interior's 2012 Endangered Species Recovery Fund toward the research and management of White-nose syndrome.

While much less than the \$10.8 million USD requested, \$4 million USD is quite significant considering that overall spending has been reduced by more than \$400 million USD when compared to last year.

Another positive outcome is that white nose syndrome was mentioned in directives to three different agencies, expanding from solely the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to now include the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service.

Small Isolated Colonies of Bats Surviving in Northeastern US

December 21, 2011

Researchers studying White-nose syndrome are optimistic that they have been finding small isolated colonies of surviving, healthy bats across the northeastern US, the region hit hardest by the disease.

While it's still to early to say that these bats represent a nucleus of re-population for the species, the positive news that some bats are surviving is something to get excited over.

In Vermont, there are 15 colonies in the western part of the state where, despite reduced numbers of little brown bats compared to before

white-nose appeared, they are surviving and seem to be healthy.

Meanwhile in New York, a maternity colony of little brown bats at Fort Drum has been surviving and reproducing over multiple years, despite being exposed to WNS.

Whether it's something unique about the mines and caves they hibernate in, the bats themselves, or some other unknown reason that allows these colonies to survive when all their neighbors aren't so lucky, is still unknown.

A meeting has been planned for early 2012 in Pennsylvania to allow scientists to discuss the best ways of unlocking the secret of the survivors.

Scientists hopeful in fight to stop bat die-off [Wall Street Journal via Dean Wiseman]

Tennessee Cave for Sale

By:LaurieAdams
laurieadams@triad.rr.com

Greenhouse Cave in Claiborne County, Tennessee is now for sale. The price is 37,500.00. I don't know how much acreage. The brick house burned down several years ago and the greenhouse is no longer there. This is a challenging 3 mile cave that is yet to be fully explored. Feel free to contact me about the cave. Would be really great if a caver could buy it and exploration could resume.

Massive House Sized Sinkhole Appears Overnight

December 2, 2011 / Oklahoma

A sinkhole nearly 12 meters (40 feet) wide and over 12 meters (40 deep) opened up during the night in a Sayre, Oklahoma field a few weeks ago.

The hole, large enough to fit a small home, opened up just two days after an earthquake struck the region and

it's still growing.

Jack Damron, a resident of the area, has been farming the land for nearly 20 years, driving tractors over this exact location the sinkhole formed. He never considered that the ground could give way.

"You can see the tractor went right over it. It would have swallowed the tractor," he said. "We had a lot of onlookers." - Jack Damron in an interview with KFOR-TV

Experts don't believe the sinkhole and earthquakes are related and suggest that drought conditions this summer could have contributed to the opening of the sink.

TAG Calendar

Jan 7
Grotto trip
TBA. Meet at Library at 8am.

Jan 21
Grotto trip
Combined trip with Montgomery Grotto to Cemetery Pit/Cave. Seek out Harold for details.

Feb 6
Grotto Meeting
L&N Train Depot, Arnold St 7:30p

Feb 18
The Montgomery Grotto has tentative plans to go to Horse Skull Cave. All are welcome. (From Chuck Tice via Facebook).

Oct 4-7
35th Annual Tag Fall Cave-In
TOTM. Hosted by DCG

May 4-6
61ST SERA Summer Cave Carnival
Estill Fork, AL Hosted by B'ham Grotto

Message from the Chair

By Harold Calvert,
Chairman, Cullman Grotto

Happy New Year!

I would like to start by saying thank you for the opportunity to lead the grotto for yet another year. And would also like to thank all the people that make the grotto what it is today. Without you, it would not exist at all.

It has been said that most grottoes last ten years or less. Ours must be successful; it is quickly approaching the twenty year milestone! I think it is the people of our grotto that makes it what it is; the group has been called more of a family than anything else. We need to be close, for we put our lives in other members' hands regularly and with trust and confidence. I know that the grotto has transformed me into the person that I am today. It has pushed me to the limits and far beyond anything I could imagine. When I first joined the grotto, there were skeptics, but they still took a vertical rookie under their wing and from there, there were no limits. I have seen and done more than imaginable. Things that at first I told them were not able to do, only by highly trained athletes. Now my family gets tired of me watching TV and saying "Been there, done that."

As the grotto gets older, however, so do the members. I feel that we are going downhill unless we do something about this. Without new members, and new enthusiasm, we grow stale. This is a problem not easily remedied. What can be done? It is expensive to do the style caving that our group is known for. Young people don't have that to spend, plus they are not willing to gradually work into something. Training with what we do takes time; they are impatient and grow bored quickly. It is a problem that needs addressed within the grotto, there is not a good solution.

So, as we start a new year, I would like to once again say thanks to all the members of the grotto.

I would like to name this column in remembrance of members past and present.

In Bill Cuddington's words,

"Let us go down from this place..."



Varnedoe Trip Report

By Sharon Clayton

Last year, about this same time, Perry, Harold, Scott and I made an unsuccessful attempt to visit Varnedoe Cave. We were thwarted by a host of shiny new No trespassing signs and ended up bouncing Natural Well instead. As it turned out, that change of plans was a good thing, as we might have saved the Huntsville Cave Rescue squad the trouble of rescuing an inexperienced climber there. This year, Harold did a little research; found that we should be able to access Varnedoe via the old parking area by the Fire Station. So, off the four of us headed multiple ropes in hand.

Getting to Varnedoe is something of a challenge. The path there is very steep down the side of a rather pretty waterfall. The leaf fall in the area was knee deep (or deeper) and made the footing very treacherous. Add to that a number of large, solid-looking rocks that turned out to be shifty and it made for very slow going. But with the help of Scott's trusty GPS, we were able to locate the cave without much trouble. The day had started out cloudy & grey, but by the time we made it to the entrance and started the rigging, it was clearing up nicely. Normally, this wouldn't matter, since we would be underground most of the day. However, it did make a difference here. When I got to the bottom of

the entrance pit, Perry told me to look up. The sun was shining in through the cave entrance and making a golden beam across the top. I found myself really wishing I had brought a camera. It was a truly beautiful sight.

At the bottom of the second drop, we found our first obstacle. I was next to last down the drop and found Perry & Harold looking at the small crawl space leading (so they said) to the next room and the third drop. There was a lot of water there and it looked like there was no way through without dropping down on your belly & getting completely soaked. I left them there for a moment to go look around the room a bit. When I got back, I found Scott there, laughing at them. Silly people...he knew a rabbit hole to get to the next room without all that wet! At least he told us about it before we got all soaked!

My second obstacle was found at the squeeze you go through to get down to the rigging area for the last drop. I had no trouble getting through the squeezey parts, although it was pretty tight. But there was a bit of a drop-down ledge from that point that my legs were just a little too short to reach. I ended up straining my shoulder just a bit trying to lower myself down. And I wasn't looking forward to trying to haul myself back up that spot either!

The room at the bottom of the fourth drop was really nice. There was a little pool at the bottom; several bats nestled in the walls around us for their winter's nap and some really nice acoustics. We did have to be careful not to disturb the bats on our climb up...some of them were positioned right where a stray boot could knock them about.

Sure enough, that little ledge at the top of pit four was a booger. Perry gave me a good shove and managed to hoist my booty up it finally, but it did lead me to resolve to develop a little better upper body strength in the coming year. Curls, dips and

push-ups, here I come.

We made it back to the entrance pit in good time. The beam of sunlight was gone, but in its place was a warm golden glow all over the top of the pit. Once again, silly me for not bringing my camera.

We ended up making the whole trip in about three hours, which was good, since we really didn't want to hike back up the side of that bluff in the dark. Even in the daylight I still managed to bark my shin on a rock and arm wrestle a tree for possession of my new hot pink fleece beanie.

Scott had places to be and things to do that evening, so he left Perry, Harold and I to complete the trip with the traditional dining on Mexican food before driving home.



Varnedoe

By Perry Clayton

Last year about this time we made an effort to do the multi-drop Varnedoe cave, but confronted with a plethora of "No Trespassing" signs, we opted to go for Natural Well and Hooper's instead. It was probably a good thing because on that trip we wound up helping out some "spelunkers" who got into a bit of a jam at Natural Well. (See ["All's well that Ends Well"](#) Flowstone February, 2011.)

This year we had a little better intel on how to make the approach, so Sharon, Harold, Scott and I geared up for the 4-drop pit.

It was worth the wait.

The trip begins with a beautiful 72 foot drop into the first pit. I was the first one down, and looking up as the others rappelled, I chafed at myself for leaving my camera at home. The

sunlight pouring through the cave entrance shot a beam of light that was interrupted by the other rappellers as they rigged and negotiated the lip. Very picturesque.

Next came a short nuisance drop of about 18 feet or so. I rigged into a couple of bolts there, making sure that loops of my double figure 8 formed an angle much less than 90 degrees. (See Will Drake's excellent article, "Double-bolt Rigging Angles" in the October 2011 Flowstone).

Next came the part of the cave I was dreading. The belly crawl through the stream. Kuenn had warned me about this part of the cave. "You can't avoid getting wet there," he had said. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against getting wet, especially if there's good caving to be had on the other side of the water. Just see ["McBride"](#) and ["I Survived McBride"](#) in the December 2010 issue the Flowstone and read about our McBride trip of you don't believe me. Still, if the wet stuff can be avoided I had just as soon do so. I waited on the others to arrive and soon Harold joined me, examining the stream-bed crawl with an obvious lack of enthusiasm.

When Scott arrived and giggled at both of us. "You don't have to go that way" he said. "Follow me." So we did, and it's a good thing. By doubling back into the undercut behind where the rope came down we were able to get to the next room and remain dry. (This route was one that Kuenn had not mentioned...).

Next came a 40 foot drop which we rigged near a waterfall using the bolts that were already in place. This dropped down into a nice little room where we had a great view of the waterfall pouring off to the right as we rappelled down. From there it was a very short amount of very tight (turn sideways and suck in your stomach) caving to the final, 75 foot, drop. Again, handy bolts were already in place for rigging, although

we did do a bit of redirecting here to keep the rope from chafing against the wall of the cave. At the bottom we found a canister for a cave log, but all that was inside was a map of the bottom portion of the cave.

From there it was a simple matter of doing everything in reverse to exit this lovely little cave.



Fantastic

By Harold Calvert

What else needs said? Fantastic. The deepest free fall pit in the U.S., 586 feet deep. No lip, ever! The rig hangs from the ceiling, out over the pit, nothing but air! The pit is in Ellison's cave, in northwest Georgia. It has the two deepest pits in the U.S., Fantastic at 586 ft. and Incredible at 440 ft. The target of this trip was to bounce the 586.

Our trip to the parking spot was uneventful, just the way we like it. After signing the park form, we were on our way to the cave. The hike to the entrance is steep and long. I estimate it at near two miles and takes about an hour to do. There are two ropes that have to be carried, a 200ft. and a 650ft. The entrance has been eroding with the floods from the past few years, but was better than the last time we were there.

Once into the cave, you drop into a stream passage for a few hundred feet. At the end of this is the first pit, 124 feet. This is where the two guys died on rope last year. They were not equipped for the pit and did not have the experience needed to attempt a pit. There is still debris around from the recovery of the bodies. It was a solemn reminder that even the safest trip can go wrong after a series of unfortunate events.

The warm-up pit was dry that day, a welcome sight. It is usually wet from a nearby waterfall. From here there is a short passage that ends with an 18 foot pit to climb. This rope stays rigged and is replaced regularly when needed.

With all arriving at the top, we proceeded to the big pit. There is a short passage, then a crawl around to the left around a dugout ledge. This ledge is narrow with a low ceiling and rigged with a safety line to rig into. With one leg hanging off a 586 foot pit the safety rope is a welcome addition!

After arriving in the attic room the next step is to rig the big pit. A double figure eight is used, clipping into ceiling attachment points and backed up to another bolt in a boulder in the room. The backup is also used as a safety line to get to the main rig point. With the rope rigged we one by one began our descent.

The main pit was dry this day, and gave a good look at the pit. You could see the cavers on the bottom walking around from the top. Our new rope did not give us the smooth ride that we hoped for. It spun, and also would stop you as if being belayed. All had similar incidents while on rope. It did climb excellent though, we all had good climbs and good times.

It was decided to stuff the rope in a bag to take it out of the pit. It is easier to carry up the other pits in this fashion. Kuenn and Scott climbed first. Kuenn needed to leave as soon as possible. Perry, Sharon and I brought up the rear, derigging the short pit. The hike down the mountain was not bad, definitely easier than going up.

After stashing gear in the car, we all headed out, looking for food. It makes for a long, strenuous day, but we feel that the accomplishment is worth it. That is our black Friday annual trip; at least it was not crowded.

Christmas in Cullman...It's a Major Award!

By Sharon Clayton

The Cullman Grotto gathered Friday evening, December 16 at Kuenn and Cyndy Drake's house for our annual Christmas party and dirty Santa. Perry and I arrived to find the kitchen counters laden with all manner of tasty treats, added our own contributions, and settled in to enjoy the fun.

After giving thanks for another year of shared fun, safety and new experiences, we tucked in to the goodies. There was so much to enjoy it required multiple returns to the kitchen (especially since there is only so much food I can get on my plate before there becomes a danger of having things start touching... even with the nice divided plates that were so thoughtfully provided). It was really nice to get a chance to talk to everyone and enjoy the company. Not to mention getting to see my fellow cavers in something besides coveralls & mud!

Once we had our fill of food and were ready for a breather, we gathered in the living room for the annual round of dirty Santa. It's always a hoot to see who ends up with what...and what the "most stolen" gift of the year will be. I think it's safe to say that a certain lamp was the prize to be had...but how could it not be? It was a Major Award, after all! There was also a gift I am VERY glad not to have gotten...who in their right mind would wrap up such a creepy nutcracker? Ugh...I'm still having nightmares about the axe it was holding!

I think it's safe to say this year's Christmas party was a resounding success. Here's to many more years of laughter and friendship ahead of us!



How long has it been again?

By Will Drake

During our trip to Neversink, I became painfully aware—literally and figuratively—that it had been much too long since my last rappelling trip. To start things off, we began pulling out gear and getting things ready for the trip the day before. Dad has organized the gear cabinet in the garage so that it is much easier to find what you need, if it's there. He had all of his gear out and packed in just a few minutes, but he and I spent hours looking for my climbing gear. We thought that I could have left it in Utah, but my helmet, seat harness, and climbing gloves were all still up in my room—not the most organized place even on the best days. It just didn't make sense why I would have kept my climbing gear out West when everything else was here at home. Throughout the search, I had clearly fixed the image of my gear in my mind—Pangaea brand, mostly purple and green with yellow straps. Eventually we gave up looking for the harness and decided to make do with Dad's gear and Amel's.

That evening Amel brought his gear over and I said, "Where did you find my gear?!" Only it wasn't my gear, it was Amel's. Point number one on why it'd been too long since my last trip: I had come to think that Amel's gear—which I've used for years—was my gear, and I'd completely forgotten that my own,

nearly-new gear is red and black and made by On Rope One.

The drive to the pit was uneventful and the scenery beautiful. I never cease to be amazed at how Dad can remember the road to a pit that he hasn't been to in a while, but remembering other things sometimes proves difficult, though I guess I don't really have room to talk there. We met Perry and Sharon and their dog Anna—who loves beef jerky—in the parking area and hiked up to the pit. About halfway up, the three youngest members of the group—Hallie, my wife Johannah, and I—stopped to catch our breath, while the three oldest members—Dad, Perry, and Sharon—kept on going. Not much advantage in youth if all you do is sit around all day. At that point I was becoming painfully aware in the literal sense that I don't get out often enough.

It was perfect weather for doing the pit. Cool enough that you didn't get hot on the hike in or the climb out of the pit, but not so cold outside that you needed much of a heavy jacket. It did get a little chilly on the bottom in just a long sleeve cotton shirt. The view with all the waterfalls rolling was as spectacular as ever. The climb out reminded me again how long it had been since I'd been on rope. And I'm feeling it worse now, two days later.

I'll let the others fill in the gaps with who went down when. All in all, an excellent trip and a good reminder to keep a finger on where your gear is and a leg up on staying in shape for caving.

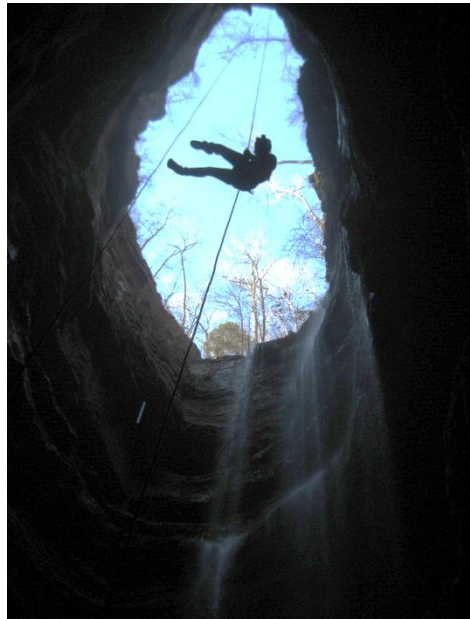


Neversink – First Timer

By Hallie Drake

It was the earliest I had gotten up in the past three weeks since I had been home for Christmas Break from UA; 6:30am. Sad I know. I have never really been rappelling before, at least

not an actual pit. I had done some ropes courses here and there but nothing over 60 feet. My dad, Kuenn, mentioned going to Neversink and I immediately asked if I could go. Of course he said yes and then had me go to the barn where his rappelling “workout room” is set up to practice things, such as getting over a lip and basic rappelling and climbing. I have almost zero knowledge on what everything is called and felt like I was preparing for deep sea diving when I had on all the gear I needed



Hallie - On Rope - Neversink

for climbing out. Harness, helmet, biners, some big metal thingy I feed the rope through that hits my knees when I walk, still have a bruise fyi, some crazy foot get-up for climbing, etc. Dad helped attach me to the rope and I started climbing. I was basically suspended in mid air as my brother Will kept feeding me rope and I climbed it. After about 100 feet I felt was I was good for the next day.

As I said, 6:30am is early for me, so I found myself sleeping most of the car ride there and waking up in what looked like the middle of nowhere. No signal, perfect. Some long and winding roads later and we reached a gate which Will opened and we

drove in. Perry and Sharon had just pulled in when we showed up. We strapped our packs on and started the hike to Neversink. I think the hike about killed me. Three weeks of sitting on the couch did not help much. There were soo many rocks!?! We finally reached the big hole, which is literally right there in the middle of the woods; tree, tree, rock, rock, more rocks, GAPPING HOLE, tree, tree, rock.... I grabbed onto a sapling and peered into it. Long way down for me.

Two ropes were rigged and Sharon and Perry were the first to rappel. I was glad for that since my dad would then be able to rappel down with me my first time. I carefully watched them go over the lip. What felt like 30 seconds later their ropes loosened back up to show they were off. Dang, I thought, they fly down? I would NOT be going that fast. Not long after they climbed back out. Will went down, then dad and I followed. I was grateful that Sharon allowed me to borrow her chest harness. The one I practiced with was my dad's and it didn't quite get tight enough. I had practiced everything at the barn but it still took me a little bit to rig myself in. I asked for a safety check then I was ready to go down.

I yelled “ON ROPE” three times to my brother who would be belaying me, he never heard a one. I was surprised at how heavy the rope was while trying to feed it through. Dad explained the cause for the weight and that it would get easier, in the mean time we snapped one of those medal bars off, I was ok with going slow though. The lip was a little



Kuenn helping Hallie drop a bar.

tricky but I managed. My dad watched and I never kept my eyes off my hands. I was glad for that too, once I made it over the lip I stopped myself and finally looked down for the first time. "Oh crap" I believe was what I said. It was beautiful, but I was a ways from the ground. The height didn't scare me though as I thought it might. I slowly eased my way to the bottom, stopping often to enjoy the sites. I felt more comfortable as I went. Soon enough I was on the bottom, unhooked myself and went looking around.

I was just amazed with the pit itself. The little waterfall, the random trees, the little niches the sides have. For a first pit it was a pretty one. I was getting a little chilly but knew that I would be warmed up once I started the climb out, I get hot very easily, like my dad. He helped me get with the climbing gear and I started up the rope. I took my time to enjoy the view but soon realized that going up was a little scarier than coming down. As I would stop to take a little breath I couldn't help but to look down, and the further I went up the further I was from the ground. Once we reached the lip I decided I wasn't going to look down again. My dad helped and I somehow managed to crawl/drag myself over that lip.

My dad, Sharon, and Perry went down again, but I rested knowing my lazy body probably couldn't handle a second run. After they got out we packed up and I had the joy of pulling the rope. Quite a little workout. Then after we were all packed up and ready to leave, I was tapped into the tradition of dismissing us by saying, "Let us go down from this place". Hike down was 1,000 times easier. The only time I would trip would be not over a stupid rock but in the Arby's we went to where I devoured my Beef n Cheddar. This trip has definitely piqued my interest and I hope for more to come!



Neversink - never looked better!



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

Dec.5, 2011

The regular monthly meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society was called to order on Monday, Dec. 5, 2011 at 7:35 pm by Harold Calvert, Chairman. 8 people were present.

The secretary read the minutes of last month's Executive meeting. A motion was made by David Drake on behalf of Patrick O'Diam to accept the minutes as read. David Drake seconded the motion.

The secretary read the minutes of the previous regular monthly meeting. A motion was made by David Drake to accept the minutes as read. Patrick O'Diam seconded the motion (by proxy).

A Treasurer's report was given.

David Drake said that he would continue to act as the Grotto Librarian, since he has the stuff.

The Trip Advisor was absent (probably off preparing for his other seasonal duties).

The Safety Officer reminded us to pay attention to which way our biners are oriented when rigging our ropes.

Announcements:
The Grotto Christmas party will be held Friday, Dec. 16th at Kuenn & Cindy Drake's home, beginning at 7pm. Remember to bring your Dirty Santa gift and tasty food!

Grotto dues will be due in January.

Old Business:
Shirts, hats...you know the drill.

New Business:
Nominations and elections for Grotto positions were held. Surprisingly (or not), everyone is still where they were last year.

The Grotto trip for December will be to Varnedoe on the Saturday, Dec. 10. Meet at the Library at 8 am.

Trip Reports:
Perry, Sharon, Kuenn, Scott and Harold told about last month's Ellison's trip. Arlon told about his hike to the Big Tree. Harold also reported about the 11/11/11 Neversink trip.

Kuenn shared a video of David Gant telling his story about being trapped in Nickajack Cave for the program.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 pm.

