



BATS News

July 2010





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Cover photograph by Sarah Richards: The Aftermath of the Fall VAR 2009 Wine Tasting

About BATS News

By Meredith Hall Weberg
BATS News Editor

Finally, right! A grotto newsletter! We've had a couple of volunteers since our last editor, April Cantrell (thanks again!!), but for various reasons, a lot of time passed without a publication. I can almost guarantee that this won't be up to April's award-winning standards, but you are reading it, aren't you? That's what counts.

The BATS Executive Committee decided that we could actually print and mail out this issue, but the editor decided to wait to do that for the next issue; this issue is HUGE. We have some very good writers among us and I've tried to use everything that has been submitted in the past four years. The issue mostly goes backwards in time. Since we're distributing this as a PDF, we're sending it to everyone who has been a BATS member since 2006, if we have a valid e-mail address. Seems only fair; you paid your dues.

I will state that the next issue will be printed and mailed but only to current members. That should be incentive for you to pay your dues! Also, elections are coming up in the fall and only dues-paying members can vote.

Anyhow, I'm glad to finally have a BATS News again. Hopefully we won't let another four years go by without one.

From the President's Pen

By Meredith Hall Weberg
BATS President

The last time I wrote one of these was in 2007. I extolled the grotto for having such wonderful members. I gushed about how we had recently hosted an NSS Board of Governors meeting that was very successful. I expressed pride in our sponsorship of the Howdy Party at the Cave and Karst Conservancies Forum and our many conservation efforts. I still feel all this, but also felt that I needed to rewrite the President's Message for this long-awaited 2010 edition of the BATS News.

I wish I had better news about the grotto. We seem to be diminishing, and I attribute this mostly to the caving moratorium. The grotto's main function is to cave. Take that away and what benefit do we derive from our membership? Well, I am happy to say that you are reading one of the benefits! I'd like to thank all past BATS News editors for their efforts over the years to produce a newsletter. I know personally what a time-consuming pain in the patootie it can be. I've looked forward to this issue for a very long time!

Another benefit is getting together with a good group of friends. Despite the caving moratorium, the grotto has tried to get together to do things "upstairs." Too bad Mother Nature foiled our plans in February. I am glad to say, though, that our belated Christmas Party in January was a great suc-

cess. Twelve BATS and Friends of BATS showed up. I believe the chocolate fountain that Charley and Deloris brought was the hit of the party. It was so good to see so many BATS in one place. Thanks to Susi for hosting. We'll continue to try to arrange activities that we can do even if we can't get underground.

As the summer goes on, the grotto has actually gotten to do more together as a group. I am very glad of this. I think the grotto WILL survive the caving moratorium after all. And the good news is that, while the moratorium continues on public lands, Virginia has declared itself a White-Nose Syndrome-positive state and therefore we no longer have to follow the

decontamination procedures (except in Lee and Wise Counties). That's partly why I stopped caving—it was not fun anymore with all the decon. So, let's go caving, BATS!!

And there is actually a grotto cave trip scheduled for August. Before that, we'll have had our annual BATS Anniversary Weekend, this year again at Big Bend Campground in Smokehole Canyon. Also in August we've got a tubing trip planned. And of course OTR the beginning of September!

Thanks for your continued support of what I think is still one of the best grottos I've ever been a part of.

BATS Sighting in Northern Virginia

By Charley Hansen

In a rare display of daylight activity, a small number of healthy and energetic BATS were spotted in Prince William Forest National Park on Saturday, June 12, 2010. Later that day the group sheltered during a severe thunderstorm at Five Guys in Dumfries, Virginia. A final sighting of the group occurred after the rain stopped at JoJo's Original Soft Serve ice cream, also in Dumfries.

This group has been identified as Allan Weberg, Meredith Weberg, Crys Turner, Jake Wright, Monica McGurty, Deloris Hansen, and Charley Hansen. Since the group appeared to be enjoying themselves, free of WNS, and wasn't asked to leave any of the sighting areas, there's hope for an increase in the Northern Virginia BATS population.



(Photographs by Meredith Hall Weberg)

Name This BATS Caver

Which one of your
grotto mates is this?
See answer elsewhere
in this issue.



Deloris Hansen Gets Her Master of Science in Nursing

By Charley Hansen

Deloris received her Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) from Frontier School of Midwifery and Family Nursing on October 24, 2009, with Honors. Dr. Mona Counts, a fellow caver and nationally recognized Nurse Practitioner (to the left of Deloris in the picture), delivered the commencement address. Deloris has since completed her American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) certification and is licensed to practice in Virginia. She is practicing at Fredericksburg Primary Care in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

(Photograph supplied by Charley Hansen)



Milestones

Compiled by Sarah Richards

We've had some significant happenings in the grotto since late 2006.

Weddings

Laura and Will Austin, March 29, 2007

Allan and Meredith Weberg, August 2, 2008

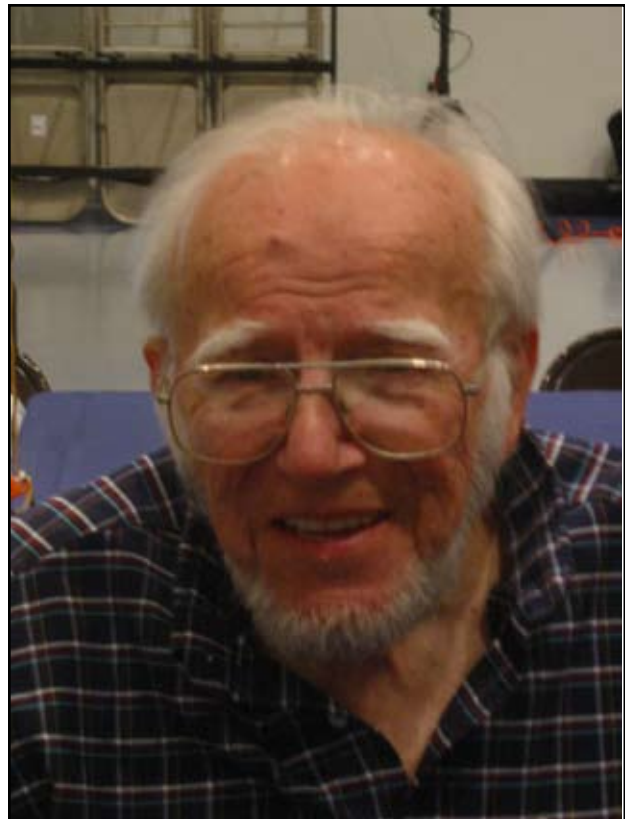
Kurt and Kathy Waldron, August 8, 2008

TinY and Nikky Manke, October 10, 2008

Deaths

Ken Hornung, October 12, 2007

(Photograph of Ken Hornung at his 85th Birthday Party by Meredith Hall Weberg)



BATS and DINGO Grottos Host Fall VAR 2009

By Susi Weston

With only a few short months of planning, no cave trips, no vendors, and lousy weather, we managed to pull off a pretty good Fall VAR. By the time of the Spring 2009 VAR meeting, no one had stepped up to host the Fall VAR. So, of course we did the only logical thing and volunteered. BATS and DINGO grottos decided to take on the task of hosting a caving event during the height of the White-nose Syndrome (WNS) caving moratorium because it needed to be done, and because cavers are resilient folks who enjoy a good party.

The venue for the event was chosen for its proximity to the Northern Virginia region and nearby historic battlefields, not to mention several commercial caves. The Battle of Cedar Creek Campground, located in Middletown, Virginia, turned out to be just the right size and offered an indoor activity area that was used throughout the weekend. Situated right along Cedar Creek, VAR attendees enjoyed paddle boating, canoeing, fishing, and hiking before the rain set in.

Offered in the place of wild caving trips were many opportunities to explore the area and even put in a few hours doing conservation activities. For those who just had to get underground, we worked with the nearby commercial caverns and were offered significantly discounted entry fees for VAR participants. Underground cave clean-up opportunities were available at neighboring Crystal Caverns, and a karst

trail project was completed at Skyline Caverns. Groups also ventured off to the Via Ferrata and on a geology hike along Panther's Cove. Still others learned about geocaching.

Evening festivities kicked off with a very popular wine tasting on Friday night led by Sarah Richards and followed by caver music into the wee hours. The Saturday evening meal was delicious and plentiful. After dinner, Wil Orndorff presented the most up-to-date information on WNS, and several short films from the recent NSS/ICS Convention were shown. Door prizes (donated by the hosting grotto members) were given away, and the night concluded with John Fox opening the floor to music and dancing. Across the way, under the party tent, records were broken by very lithe cavers in the Charles Kahn's Guillotine Trough squeeze box. It is not clear whether records are maintained for couples traversing the box together, but if there were, new records would have been set for pure entertainment value.

Sunday morning arrived with a blueberry pancake breakfast hosted by the Front Royal Grotto. The VAR meeting followed shortly thereafter, with meeting topics ranging from WNS and cave closures to a motion to help out VAR hosts in difficult times. We didn't set any records for attendance, and we didn't make any money, but judging by the comments and e-mails, it's safe to say that a good time was had by all.

Whitings Neck Trip Report

By Josh Balcock

On Saturday, June 19, 2008, I took two new cavers, siblings Brad and Bethany Rohrs, to Whitings Neck Cave. We entered the cave by the horizontal southern entrance around 11 and made our way back to the 40 foot drop and turned back.

On our way back we explored a small side passage with some spectacular examples of folded strata. The different layers of limestone were clearly visible due to different rates of erosion. The rock could be observed to bend almost 90 degrees with a diameter of slightly over a foot. We then exited the cave by the horizontal entrance. At this point the cave was strongly breathing out, which pleasantly negated the effect of the hot muggy air outside. We walked to the other

entrance and went back into the handline climbdown but did not go past it.

After exiting the cave the second time, we proceeded to Indian River Cave where Brad and Bethany went in one entrance and out the other. Meanwhile I went wading in the Potomac, which was pleasantly warm. We left at about three. We didn't spot any bats in either cave.

Afterward we went to Tony's Pizza in Shepardstown. We then took a scenic set of back roads to Harpers Ferry where we walked across the bridge to look at Maryland Heights. We stopped for ice cream on the way out and then returned home.

Hooks Cave Trip During Spring VAR 2007

By Susi Weston

Susi Weston and Dave Johnston from BATS took advantage of a VAR-led cave trip to Hooks Cave near Durbin, West Virginia. Truthfully, we chose the trip because it was advertised as only five miles away, departure at 11:00 a.m., and expected return by 4:00 p.m.—in plenty of time for the BBQ chicken dinner. Other members of the trip included: Jeff Jahn (trip leader), Charles Kahn, Mark Maynard (with pal Sponge Bob), Twila Neeld, Pete Bracken, and Bob.

The cave was described as being a short uphill hike from the parking spot along the logging road up to the cave entrance, which was at the bottom of a 10 foot sink. The cave consisted of a deeply sloping passage ending in a room of breakdown in a longish horizontal passage, leading to several nuisance drops (one of which would be rigged with a handline), a couple of waterfalls, and a 250 foot muddy crawl to the back of the cave. The actual trip turned out to be a bit more challenging than expected, as the walls had a tendency to crumble just as you found that really good handhold, and the mud would beat you to the bottom of the drop every time. The nuisance drops could be translated into 10- to 15 foot chasms that were apparently fairly easy to climb down for the long of leg, but an acrobatic feat for the petite members of the team (Twila and Susi). Thanks to all the guys for all the help! We were all sufficiently slimed by the time we emerged from Hooks, and all felt as though we had accomplished something in our three or so hours underground.



Other VAR highlights:

- Charlie, the Durbin Express Engineer from Ohio, has a crush on one of the members of our Grotto (it is a secret—can't divulge the identity) and will probably show up at a future event.
- Carl Amundson from Berryville has committed to leading a Maryland cave trip for BATS sometime this year.
- It was bloody cold, windy, and wet (typical caving event).
- FRG did a great job with the logistics for the VAR.
- One of our canopys got creamed by the wind.
- Meredith represented us at the VAR meeting (THANKS, Meredith!).
- And – personal note: Sarah Pearce is GRADUATING from college on Saturday, May 5!!!! —from the proud parent.



Top: Group shot before caving
Left: Susi Weston and Dave Johnston
Bottom: Susi Weston

(Photographs by Charles Kahn)



Swago!

4/28/2007

By Dave Decker



I made my way west fighting the traffic monster growing like cancer from the vehicular tumor of Washington D.C. Finally, after nearly 40 miles, I broke from its grasp and fled toward the setting sun. In a little less than an hour, I was heading deep into the hills, away from cell phones, computers, and the rest of the trappings of modern day life to camp in my truck next to a babbling brook and relax with friends, old and new, at the 2007 Virginia Area Regional in Durbin, West Virginia.

As I pulled into the campground, I heard a familiar voice call my name. Meredith Hall Johnson was waving at me from underneath the BATS tarp, so I slammed on the brakes and backed into an open spot next to one of the tents. A quick round of introductions to Meredith's daughter, Kelsea Johnson, then to Susi Weston and Cheryl Jones, was followed quickly by a round of beer,

and then shortly thereafter by a round of rum and Coke. As the evening progressed, more introductions were made and old friends were caught up with. Before I knew it, I had imbibed a little too much and it was past 2 a.m. I was looking at waking up with one hell of a hangover.

The next morning I got up to find one of the BATS canopies overturned with a broken leg. Susi was already up fixing coffee and informed me there had been quite a windstorm the previous night. I hadn't even noticed while I slumbered peacefully in my steel tent, but the rest of the camp had been holding on to their temporary shelters to keep them from blowing away in the tempest. The canopy leg was quickly and expertly splinted by Dave Johnston and Susi using a twig and Gorilla Tape and we were sitting down to coffee and Motrin under shelter before we knew it.

After a breakfast of yogurt and a Balance Bar, I headed over to registration where I met up with the group of cavers I'd be caving with. Carl Amundson was the trip leader, the rest of the group was rounded out with Cheryl Jones, Leanne Barley, Rick Shortt, John Layman, Cameron Hall, and Carl Cornett. An hour's drive on winding mountain roads (with a quick stop at the Kwik Stop for food and coffee) brought us to the small pull off where we gingerly parked the trucks to keep from blocking the narrow dirt lane. Carl A. and John grabbed a couple of ropes and headed up the draw to rig the entrance drop to the pit.

In the meantime the rest of us kitted up and then waited for Carl A. and John to do the same. A short time later we all made our way up the muddy path and I got my first view of the yawning chasm called Swago. A burbling creek bounced playfully down the grey limestone and leapt indifferently into the dark abyss. A thin thread crept gracefully around the rock and joined the spray in the headlong descent to the depths. Carl was first down the rope, followed quickly by myself. I joined him at the base of the falls and he led me down a narrow passage ankle deep with water and showed me the tight hole leading up into the dome pit where he would be rigging the second drop while the rest of the crew made their way down the 18-meter rappel in the entrance room. I made my way back to the foyer and waited while Cameron, John, Cheryl, Carl C., Leanne, and Rick followed each other down the slender nylon line.



Once all were down safely, I pointed them in the direction of the downstream passage we were to follow to meet up with Carl A. Leanne and Rick decided to take a more challenging upper passage that led directly to the dome pit. It was exceedingly tight with sharp ledges of shale protruding from the narrow wandering walls. The other five of us took the less challenging, but wetter, lower passage and made good time to the edge of the next pit, a 10-meter rappel next to another waterfall. At the base of the drop, we got off rope in a meter of water and then made our way through a water-filled canyon to another dome pit called the "Changing Room," where we dropped our vertical gear. At this point we were all wet up to our knees, some of us up to our waists, depending on whether or not we found the hole in the floor of the passage on the way into the Changing Room. We moved on, trying not to get our

upper bodies wet as we stemmed across the low exit filled with water to make our way into a taller, but narrower, canyon passage called the "Sewer." Once through the constriction the going was easy in a nice keyhole slot filled with calf deep water, leading farther into the mountain.

At this point we were all getting a little cold and we were grateful to be climbing out of the creek a short time later. We made our way up a dry side passage, through a narrow crawl, and into a large borehole passage. Although we were still wet, the amount of energy we were burning at this point was keeping most of us warm enough not to notice. We turned to the left and made our way to the west end of the "Globulite Gallery," concentrating on the strange formations on the wall in front of us. Fingers of directional cave coral coated the west side of many stalactites, the largest nodules of which were easily two to three centimeters in diameter. A Pipestrelle nestled cozily among the formations and we moved on so as not to disturb it.

We turned back to the east and headed toward the long section of the cave called the "Dry Gallery," passing several more odd formations shaped like feet hanging from the ceiling. Comments were made regarding the movie, "The Descent," and the cave creatures featured therein that we were sure had neglected to pull their feet up high enough to keep them from our sight. Of course, none of us had remembered to bring our ice axes for protection, but we continued along the rubble-strewn floor anyway. We made our way over breakdown, avoiding drapery and flowstone along the walls, marveling at the many gypsum flowers tucked along the ledges and admiring the sugar coated popcorn that seemed to grow magically from the underside of sloping blocks of limestone. Cheryl and Leanne were singing the "Grit in my Shoes, Gypsum Dust Flying, Walking in Cold Water Blues," keeping the rest of the group entertained while our illustrious trip leader Carl kept promising us a fantastic dome pit as our final destination in this already incredible cave.



It would be remiss of me not to mention the theory of gypsum flower formation that was put forth by one of the group, I think it should be looked into more deeply! It seems there is a paste of thixotropic gypsum flowing just below (above?) the surface of the cave ceiling. As trees, bushes, and grass grow larger above the cave, increasing the weight on the rock, it squeezes the paste through pores in the rock similar to toothpaste, causing the interesting curlicue formations we call the gypsum flower. Huh, imagine that!

Eventually we came to the end of the Dry Gallery, which was filled with rubble and looked nearly impenetrable. Carl A. looked around and with Cheryl's help found the small hole leading to "The Squeeze," which then continued to the second part of the large passage we were in called the "Dry Gallery Extension." We each chose our own way through, some feet first, some head first, or even a combination of the two, choosing to turn around in the tight spot just for fun. Shortly thereafter we stopped for lunch, trading recipes for cave food and sharing stories of sandwiches turned to paste and rock hard Power Bars.

After lunch we moved on toward the back of the cave, first dropping into a low passage floored with a sinuous stream and mud banks upon which we ape-walked. The nature of the passage changed and got much narrower, but not much higher. We were soon crawling on hands and knees through several centimeters of mud, trying to avoid eight-centimeter high stalagmites hiding gently in the morass. Shoulder to shoulder with the rock, we moved single file for what seemed like several hundred feet. Eventually we left the mud for a cobble floor and finally got to a place where we could stand up. A hole in the ceiling led to a small room a little over two meters in diameter. As we each crowded in, trying to maintain our footing on the narrow ledge surrounding the hole we had just climbed through and enduring the small waterfall drenching each of us, we slowly realized this was the terminus of the cave. This was the great dome pit Carl had been promising us. While it was impressive in height (38 meters) and interesting in color (orange), it certainly was not what we'd been expecting. At this point we realized that Leanne hadn't joined us. We called for her and discovered that she had found this a good time to visit the ladies' room. As we patiently waited in the freezing cold waterfall, crowded into a small room with a floor slanted toward a two-meter drop into a narrow passage, we described to the absent Leanne the wonders she was missing and tried to encourage her to hurry with her duties. Eventually she joined us and finally realized why we had been goading her, but maybe not fully realizing that we couldn't leave until she got out of the way! There was no way around her in the tight cobble crawl so we were pretty much stuck there while she did her business.



At this point we'd been in Swago for just over three hours. We were due back at the campground by 6 p.m. for dinner and we knew it was an hour drive back. We didn't waste any time making our way out, taking breaks only long enough for the back to catch up to the front. We plunged readily back into the stream and made our way to the Changing Room where the first to get dressed had the privilege of exiting first. We formed a chain, one on rope, one at the base of the rope and one at the top of the rope. Since the roar of the waterfall was deafening, each had to relay to the next when they were on and off rope so the ones behind could make their way to the plunge pool without spending too much time in the cold water. It took us nearly two hours to get back out and into the warm sunshine of an early spring day in West Virginia.

Back at camp, we all enjoyed a baked chicken dinner with macaroni salad and dessert, and then attended the evening program followed by brewskis at the camp fire. I went to bed earlier than most, still feeling some of the effects of being up too late the previous night. The next morning I helped Meredith and Susi pull down the BATS canopies and then headed for home.

making the 250 mile drive in a little less than five hours. Oh yeah, nearly forgot, I had the opportunity to use my brand new Swaygo pack for the first time in Swago cave!



(Photographs by Dave Decker)

Bridge Day 2007 Video

By Steve Bennett (formerly known as "Longhair Steve")

Greetings,

I just uploaded this to You Tube. The sound is a little distorted so I might do it over but for what it's worth.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INseMgQII48>

(Editor's Note: This is from an e-mail Steve sent back in late 2007. I checked the URL in early July and the link still works.)

Greetings From Kentucky

By Lance Mitchell

From: Robin Mitchell

Date: August 14, 2007 1:25:10 PM EDT

Subject: Fwd: greetings from KY

I will have another e-mail from Lance later today, if you would like to post this in the BATS' next newsletter, I am sure Lance would be honored.

Robin Mitchell

Hello friends and family,
I have found a small coffee shop and can find the time on my days off to gain Internet access. At the moment I'm sitting in air conditioning and the luxury is a small piece of heaven in

Mystery BATS Caver

Did you guess that the mystery photo is of April Cantrell?

(Photo by Cynthia Cantrell. Idea for this guessing game by Jonathan



my life. Somerset is a robust town and the people are very nice. It is a "dry town," which means they do not sell any alcohol. The nearest beer store is a two hour drive. Needless to say we are well stocked! I have two full days for rest and recovery, which is very much needed for all of us. The cabins we are staying in are very nice, well stocked, and have a hot tub out back. Between the beer and hot tub we find solace in the grueling conditions we work under. For those who are not up to date with my life, here is a brief up date. (An excuse to sit here as long as possible in A/C!)

I'm in Somerset, Kentucky, cleaning trash out of an 80 foot pit. Currently we are at a depth of 40 feet. This pit has small cave passages in the bottom and used to be mined for saltpeter during the Civil War. Back then saltpeter was used in the production of gunpowder. It is believed they mined it during the Revolutionary War as well. Nearly 70 years ago, the landowners were tired of losing livestock that fell into the

cave. They asked the town to throw trash into the pit to try to fill it. It was recently discovered that an endangered species of a Long-Eared Bat uses the cave passages for winter hibernation and population. (The exact species type slips my mind at the moment.) New law also sets heavy fines for unlawful land dumps as well. Needless to say the landowner is very happy to have this pit cleaned for free with funding provided by grants supported by the American Cave Conservation Association and Bat Conservation International.

The average temperature is 97 degrees and the humidity level is VERY HIGH. While sitting in the shade sweat pours down your face. Every move creates more sweat that attracts all kinds of flying critters that enjoy the taste of your salty skin. The simple movement of scratching these bites only produces more sweat that attracts more bugs. Oh, the relief the hot tub provides from the itching stings! For those working in the pit, well, let's just say that life has its pros and cons. Once in the pit you grow accustomed to the smell after about 20 minutes, until you uncover a decomposed gelatinous mass of unknown substance. Then you are immediately reminded of the reek as it penetrates your nostrils. Your first response is to blame the person next to you for farting! Your next response is to laugh as you hear the reaction of the people above ground as the stench floats upwards. Then they too wonder who farted.

There is a lot of camaraderie among us and it is a necessity to maintain a positive mental state in such an inhumane environment. Every time you step, your praying your boot doesn't come off as a silent sucking sound escapes with each step. As you pull objects from the filth, you resist the desire to wipe splashes from your face for fear of adding more filth to your bug bite-covered skin. All of this drips down your face as you sweat and grunt while pulling debris and rusted metal from a historical waste pile. None of us would have it any other way. Except for the occasional obvious statement of how bad the stench is, there is much laughter and many opportunities to joke on each other. At the end of the day, we sit in exhaustion, and the next morning we're up early. Motivated, excited, and smiling. Deep down in our hearts we are at peace, united as family, because we're making a difference.

There is a steel erection over the top of the pit that allows us to haul the trash out and over the the edge where it is scooped up by a Bob Cat and taken to the dumpster. The speed of the pull is controlled by a rappelling rack. I was chosen as Safety Officer due to my vertical expertise and I'm also required to perform all the rigging. For rigging the rack, I used a weight-distributing tripod technique. I'm very proud of this rig and received much praise from my teammates for it. (In fact, every day someone compliments me for my rope capabilities Thanks, TinY, for getting me on the right track.)

The difficulty of a tripod rig is to make sure all angels are 45 degrees or less and uniform in all three directions. This allows the rack to maintain a steady position both vertically and horizontally while the force of the pull is being distributed

in three directions. This rig is performed with one rope. After tying the primary figure 8 knot that holds the rack in place, the tail is tied into a backup knot around the tip of the tripod, keeping the ropes united and taking pressure off the primary knot by preventing rope separation. This in turn increases the safety factor of the haul system.

The first object removed from the pit was a small Alligator Snapping Turtle. It was deduced that he was washed down during a great rain. If not for us he would have surely died. From my study in Herpetology, I figure him to be four years old, only a baby in turtle years. His shell was five inches wide and he was 10 inches in length from nose to tip of tail. In full maturity they tend to grow to be two feet long and weigh 10 pounds. It's not uncommon for some to grow even larger. Their jaws have the ability to snap off fingers and large sticks inches thick. Further investigation revealed to me a severe laceration on his left front leg that showed tendons and an infected laceration on his tail. I irrigated both wounds with water, applied antibacterial ointment and wished him a healthy life, releasing him near a pond where there was plenty of food and water for him.

On an average we remove 35 bags of trash a day. Next week we hope to hit 50. Each bag holds one cubic yard of trash. We removed an auto bumper dated 1983 that still had the license plate on it. We thought of mailing it to the owner C.O.D., but we are here to help the community and wish not to create hard feelings so with great laughter we added it to the metal pile for recycling. We've removed six hot water heaters, four ovens, and a fridge. The largest item removed has been a flat-bottomed boat that had to be cut in half to be hauled out. There is still a lot of trash to be removed, but we're slowly working on it.

Even though it is hot and humid, my daily Wu Shu training eases my sore muscles and my daily phone calls with my wife eases my sore heart. I miss home very much. I miss my weekly rope training with my Team Cave peeps, I miss my Wu Shu family, and I miss the wagging tail of my puppy. But most of all, I miss the hugs of my lovely wife, for without her support, I would not be here now. I love you, Robin.

Lance Mitchell
aka-Budo Caver

From: Lance and Robin Mitchell
Date: August 23, 2007
Subject: Fwd: KY Saltpeter Clean up

Hello everybody,

Week 2 brought with it misery. The team was being attacked by a virus; day by day one of us fell to the intruder. The sun continued to assault us eight hours a day. The front loader we were using had turned the dirt to a soft powder. With every bag of trash that was loaded to the dumpster came a dust

cloud. The dust cloud blanketed everything and everyone. Small mechanical problems started to occur like flat tires and broken pulleys. And people were getting cranky!

The Week 2 volunteers were an actual hindrance to the work team and tended to slow down production. The volunteers complained constantly, were quick to throw an attitude, and spent more time chatting than paying attention. Morale was low and tempers ran amuck. We also lost a few days of work so that we could babysit film crews and take them into the pit. Thankfully Week 2 ended quickly.

We had two days off and everyone disappeared. A few who lived in the area went home, a few went kayaking, and the few who stayed around mostly spent time in isolation. It was rest and solitude that seemed to be the key. When Week 3 started we were like new friends all over again.

Apologies were made, beer was drunk, and laughs were shared once again. And with Week 3 came new volunteers. Men of good character and great humor brought beer and whiskey. Attractive, intelligent woman brought food, rum, and

bourbon. The team worked again with a zest for the cave. The new volunteers dug in right beside the team, getting dirty, nasty, and sweaty. As fast as the pit team could fill the bags, the haul team was moving them. In the last few days we had left, we managed to clean nearly all the trash out of the pit. The local paper did an article on us and gave us front page. The local news channel did a wonderful story on us and we represented well.

The job is over, I now have returned home. I try to share with my wife the experiences I shared with amazing people. Words do not do memory justice. We made a difference! I finally had the chance to chase the cave on Sunday, and wow, what a beautiful cave! Walking passage, some climbing, belly crawling, canyons, breakdown—this cave has it all. I'm so lucky to have had the opportunity to be on this team. I can only hope that I represented myself well and will be called back for another opportunity to work with this wonderful team again.

Lance

OTR 2006 Pics

By Meredith Hall Johnson

Susi Weston, Steve Bennett, and Bob Handley serve beer

Susi Weston and Steve Bennett on the Brew Crew

Josh Babcock, Mike Hill, and Kevin Martin look over some new gear (I think it's new!)



The Devil's Den Cavern

By Kurt Waldron and Gordon Birkhimer

Gordon Birkhimer and I had been doing daily ocean dives for most of a week in the Florida Keys. It seemed like every time that the boat left the dock we were on it. We observed the beauty of the coral reefs and even bagged seven lobsters (Figure 1). Our stop at the Devil's Den was the last



dive that we did on that trip, as we visited Gordon's father in Ocala. There were a number of reasons to do this trip, but the most important reasons were that it was close to his father's house, fresh water to clean off our salty dive gear, and something very different from what we had been doing up to that point. As we drove out on December 31, 2006, Gordon assured me that I was going to like this dive. It turned out that he was right.

The weather was overcast but warm on this New Year's Eve. We headed toward Williston, which is about 40 miles northwest of Ocala. The drive out was uneventful, other than the fact that the directions as they were written in the guide book were not exactly clear at one point. Gordon's local map of the area was enough to overcome this uncertainty and a stop at a local convenience store were all we needed to find the place.

The dive site does not appear to be much from the road. You do not see anything more than a parking lot and a trailer and what looks like a small pond of some sort in the background. We had read that there was a resort of some kind associated with this property but neither of us ever saw it. Inside of the trailer we found a typical dive shop with two women with British accents behind the desk. They were polite, friendly, and as usual, fun to chat with. The women encouraged us to have a look around before we filled out the required paperwork, which we did. What I saw was most interesting.

The Devil's Den is a fresh water sinkhole with a large cavern-like diving area. There is a walk-in entrance, through a door with steps (Figure 2) that go down to a large platform at the bottom of the cavern (Figure 3). It is at this point that



the final preparations are made before one enters the water. The ceiling is approximately 60 feet high and the room is at least 200 feet across and generally circular in shape. In the center of the room, the ceiling has collapsed so one can see blue sky and cypress trees up above (Figure 4). The diameter of the hole up above is approximately 40 feet (Figure 5). It is truly spectacular. The water is absolutely crystal clear. I would estimate that the visibilities were on the order of 60 to 100 feet. I am sure that I have never observed that much visibility before.

Gordon and I went back to pay our required dive fees and do all the paperwork required for the dive. The interesting thing about the Devil's Den is that while it is a true cavern dive all that is needed to dive at this location is an open water dive certification. There are underwater caves at this site which could be dived (in theory), but they are off limits and you are not supposed to go in them.

We had most of the equipment that was needed to do the dive and we rented the few things that we did not have



(tanks, regulator, and a spare light). We geared up above ground and made the walk down the stairs to the platform below. We were told that the water was unusually low and that in the past it had been up nearly to the edge of the platform. On this day the water was down about one and a half steps. Gordon and I walked into the water and began our dives. It was at this time that I realized that I had finally made it underground for the month of December (on the last day of the month and the year!).

If you have never been cavern diving before, the key ideas are that you can always see daylight but you are in what divers call an “overhead” environment. In this respect the Devil’s Den is a great cavern dive. Gordon and I tooled around at depths ranging from about 30 to 40 feet, checking out the formations and the rocks (Figure 6). You do want to have at least one flashlight and I think you will be quite happy with two sources of light, just in case. Speaking of which, there is enough light and enough other divers in the cavern (the place was busy on the day that we were there) that if you had a problem, you will most likely have no difficulty being able to get out safely. Someone should notice your troubles quickly and be able to help you out. But the reality is that if you want to see what you are looking at a flashlight is a must. If you don’t want to call the dive because you’re light goes out for some reason, then two are essential.

I quickly concluded that cavern diving will be a “must do” when I get old and decrepit because I have never moved over breakdown so effortlessly before. I followed Gordon through a number of holes, learning how to gauge my new size and trying to get a feel for what I could and could not fit through. In cavern diving the saying “how low can you go”

and the idea of a squeeze box take on new meaning. It was an interesting experience to stick my head into a hole and then hear a metallic “clink” as you hit your tank on something. Initially I wondered if I was going to knock my valve off and lose all of my air while I was stuck in a hole, but I gradually realized that this does not seem to happen. This experience gave me more confidence in my skills as a diver and a better understanding of how my gear works as well. Gordon and I had a great time and we were out of air long before we were ready to leave. The Devil’s Den was a great way to end an otherwise excellent Florida Dive trip (Figure 7). I am looking forward to going back again. It is a “must do” if you are a caver and a diver in Florida.



IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Devil’s Den has one of the most dramatic topside settings of any dive site in Florida. A circular opening, approximately 40 feet across, allows sunlight to illuminate a large pool of crystal clear water 60 feet below. The cavern pool is reached by descending wooden steps through a

narrow rock tunnel and then to a floating dock. Once underground the dry cave mushrooms to nearly 100 feet and extends even farther under the water’s surface. Depths average 25 to 45 feet with a maximum of 60 feet under the ledges. Two cave tunnels have been grated to prevent entry.

The site is not only famous for its spectacular setting, but also for the many fossils that have been recovered from the cave. The remains of giant sloths, saber toothed tigers, and mastodons dating to the Pleistocene Age have been recovered from the ancient cave. Many fossils can still be seen in the limestone walls

The early settlers named the cave Devil’s Den because on cold winter mornings you can see steam, like smoke, rising from the chimney or 40 foot diameter collapsed skylight ceiling. The crystal clear water, year-round 72 degree temperatures, and ancient rock formations with stalactites and fossil beds make Devil’s Den a true a natural wonder.



El Capitan 2007

By Nikky "Princess Butterfly" LaBranche

Wednesday afternoon, June 20, 2007, we headed to the airport to catch our flight from Birmingham to Atlanta. We met up with Tymme Laun and Cherie McCurdy in Atlanta for our flight to Sacramento. I had bought first class tickets for Mike "TinY" Manke and me and it was great to stretch out with free drinks on such a long flight. We were supposed to meet Lance and Robin Mitchell there that night as well, but due to flight issues, they didn't get in until the next afternoon. So we bought all the food and last minute supplies we needed that morning and picked them up that afternoon to head out to Yosemite.



Cherie McCurdy, Lance and Robin Mitchell, Nikky and TinY at the airport

That was the first time I had been to Yosemite National Park so all of that part of California was new to me. The drive was very pretty, but the road got twisty and windy as we got into the mountain. Once in the park we decided to camp up at the Bridalveil Falls Campground, which is about the same elevation as the top of El Capitan (El Cap). This was a great place to camp; we had our own fire circle and bear box in our campsite and were just across from the bathrooms. We stopped at several of the overlook sites while we were there to get pictures of us with El Cap and Half Dome in the background.



Nikky and TinY with El Cap and Half Dome from one of the overlooks

Nikky and Tymme Laun organizing the Bear Box

TinY, Nikky, and Robin Mitchell sitting around the campfire

Friday we headed down to Curry Village to meet up with the other members of the team and go through gear. There were 300 pounds of team gear that needed to be carried to the top of El Cap by the rigging team. This included all the ropes and accessories needed for the actual rigging as well and food and sleeping gear for the crew. All the team gear



Peter Hertl and Nicole Buscha sorting team gear

Mike Phelps, Peter, Nicole, and Savannah Snyder sorting team gear

Mike Phelps weighing out team loads with John Cadle and Nikky helping distribute it

was weighed out into 20-pound piles to distribute it as evenly as possible among the team members hiking up. I ended up with a rope and one of the edge rollers in my pack. Tymme was not scheduled to be on the advanced team, but since we already had a member down, he stepped up and hiked in with us.

Saturday, we started our 12.5 mile hike along the Yosemite Creek trail as part of the advance rig team to get the rope rigged so we could start rappelling and climbing El Cap. Once we got all of my vertical gear packed along with my team gear and personal food, I was carrying a little over 60 pounds on my back. The trail followed the creek for the first half of the journey, and we stopped where the trail split from the creek to eat dinner and take a much-needed bath. The second half of the hike was a lot harder than the first, which was either steeply uphill or steeply downhill. It was after midnight when we got to camp at the top of El Cap after 13 hours on the trail. The whole mountain is sloped and there was not enough flat space to set up a tent. We did find a spot where the tent would fit and filled the edges with rocks to stake it down.



Advance Rig Team members

Nikky and TinY on the trail

Marc Midgley, Nikky, TinY, Tymme, and Kellie Teller finally arrive at the top

Sunday morning we awoke bright and early to start rigging. I helped with the haul cord while TinY went over the lip to get the edge rollers, rope pads, and lip area set up. Ron and I managed to find enough dirt to fill two sand bags, one of which we used to lower the 5 mm haul cord to the bottom of the drop. Once it reached the bottom, the team there attached the rope to the haul cord and we started hauling it up. The team had contracted with two climbers to bring the haul cord up the static ropes on the climber route so that we would not have to hike up and it was definitely easier than hiking the rope up. The bottom team had to carry the rope over the 20-minute uphill hike to the bottom of the drop. Pulling this rope wasn't like Golindrinas, where it gets lighter the more you have derigged; this just got heavier and heavier until we were pulling the full 180 pounds.

Several rappellers were able to rappel the first day. TinY and I were scheduled for later in the day, so I ended up getting the sunset rappel, and the view was absolutely gorgeous. I was also thankful for no wind for my first rappel; I had heard stories about the wind from TinY. TinY rappelled right after me and had the one and only night rappel of the trip.



TinY over the Flake setting up the lip area

Captain Ron working with me to with the haul cord

Mike Phelps and Peter Hertl padding a rigging tree

A haul system is in place to haul the rope weight to make it easier to get over the edge roller. Once you are over the lip and the edge roller, you can call for "drop some bars" and call for rope weight. They then release the haul system and you

have to pass the Jumar before you can start your rappel. I was amazed at how long it took to rappel the 2,650 feet and how sensitive the rack was to changes in friction due to rope movement. To keep a constant speed, it seemed like I was moving bars a lot more than usual.

I decided to keep my French Wrap on my hip for these rappels, where most people will go to a center wrap when dealing with this much rope weight. When I did the triple rappel of Golindrinas with TinY and Lance Mitchell, I used the center wrap, but feel much more comfortable with a side wrap because my shorter torso length puts my fingers on the French Wrap closer to my rack than I wanted them. TinY made me a little pad out of fire hose to go over my harness so my leg wouldn't get hot from the friction. Even at the full 180 pounds, it was not too much weight on my leg. After the first few hundred feet, I discovered that I could pin the French Wrap to my hip with the weight of the rope so I didn't have to keep my hand on it and could just kick my right leg out to get the French Wrap to set.

I started my first rappel on six bars, but found that once I was over the lip and had rope weight that I couldn't move on six, so with full rope weight I was able to drop to five bars and start my rappel. I discovered that with about 1000 feet to go, I was still moving at a good clip on five bars jammed, so I had to add a sixth bar on all the rappels. There was a blue climber's rope across the wall at about this point that made an easy landmark to know when the switch was coming up.



Josh Babcock as Edge Attendant as Nikky changes to the main line

Nikky going over the edge roller

Nikky below the edge roller rappelling down the lip

It was very late when we got back to camp and we still had to find our cabin, shower, and eat. After a nice long shower, it was about 1:30 a.m. when we were finally putting all our stuff back in the bear box to go to bed. Everything on the trip had to go in the bear box, food, toiletries, and anything with any kind of smell. While I was bent over in the bear box putting the final items away, TinY heard footsteps. He looked at me and saw that my feet were not moving and then looked up, he shouted "Nikky, turn around! Bear!" By the time I looked up, the bear was close enough that I could have reached out and touched him. TinY began growling at him and yelling at him and he took a step back. At that point TinY stopped talking and the bear took another step at me. TinY growled deeper and told the bear, "You don't want to mess with us, we're rappellers, go eat a tourist!" At that, the bear ducked between the bear boxes and ran off into the tent cabin area where the tourists sleep.

The next night we were scheduled for the fourth climb of the evening. One of the earlier teams had gear issues, so we had spent seven and a half hours at the bottom of the drop waiting to climb. I did get a little bit of sleep during that time, but TinY spent most of the night throwing fist-sized stones at animal noises he heard in the woods that night. It was 9 a.m. the following day when it was actually our turn on rope. We had planned on a 4 a.m. climb, so we left our sunscreen up top in the bear can. So we climbed in the full sun and heat. We did get a chance to talk to some of the climbers who were along the wall. We met a couple from Poland named Kaisia Sampson and Christopher and we took pictures of each other while we were on rope. We were on rope every day, so we got to see them a lot during the week. We took the first climb easy and we made it to the top in 3 hours and 2 minutes. We were hot and sunburned when we got to the top, but I still had a ton of adrenaline left. I just climbed El Cap!! We both rapped off again later that afternoon on our second rappels.

All the other climbers for the next night had cancelled out, and it was just down to us. We decided to get some much needed rest and start the climb at 4 a.m. Well, the rest must really have been needed because we both slept through the alarm and did not get up until 6 a.m. So it was about 9 a.m. the next morning when we got to the bottom of the drop. We radioed up and asked the guys at the top if they still wanted us to climb and they said let them get one



*Nikky and TinY about 1000 feet up the face on their climb
Christopher and Kaisia enjoy their morning on the portaledge
Nikky climbing from TinY's perspective*

rappeller off and then they would need us and Peter Hertl to climb, so that there were enough people to get them rapp'd off since there were no other climbers last night. It takes three people to run the edge, haul system, and camera.

This time we brought sunscreen for our climb. It was a little later in the day when we got on rope and we were hoping for a breeze because it was so hot. I guess you have to be careful what you wish for, because breeze was an understatement. About a thousand feet up, the winds really picked up and we were being blown all around. We discovered that it's best not to try to hold onto the rock because when you finally do let go it will wall-slam you. So we tried our best to climb in between gusts of wind. I could feel the rope rolling over contact points above us, which was not a nice feeling. At one point I thought I was going to have to cross a lip, but a cycle before I got there, we blew a hundred feet in the other direction away from it. There were times when I was sitting still and I was moving against the rock and there were times when I was moving, but still against the same piece of rock due to the wind lifting us and the rope.

We had to climb with one hand out to keep us away from the wall. It's a little harder to fight the rock on a climb than it is a rappel because your feet are basically pinned to the rope. I was glad to get over the last contact point so I would stop feeling the harmonic from the rope rolling over the rock. But when we cleared it, I realized that we were now at the end of a 1,300-foot pendulum and we really started swinging. We were told there were people watching us from the Valley yelling "They're falling, they're falling!" because they could see our shadows come down the rock face as the wind blew us away from the rock. I think we got to see more of the face of El Cap that day than most climbers do and we made it close to the nose.

Mark Seyfang did an excellent job of keeping tension on the rope, and without it we would probably have had to bail from the climb. I ended up with only one good wall slam to the knee and a few scrapes on my arms. By the time we reached the last 600 feet the sun had gotten high enough in the sky that the top of the rope was in shade and the wind had stopped. This made the last couple hundred feet of the climb a little nicer. With the high winds it was a very exciting climb but we still topped out in 3 hours and 9 minutes on our second climb of the trip. We then had a very short break, a whole 67 minutes, while we waited for Peter to climb before rappelling off the other rappellers. TinY ran the haul system, Peter ran the edge, and I sat down there by Peter with my feet dangling over the edge, videoing the rappellers as they got on rope. I discovered on the second climb that I had worn through the sheath on my bungee so TinY sewed me a new one that night on top of El Cap.

The next morning the first thing on the agenda was our World Record-setting tandem rappel. I was going to be the first female to tandem-rappel El Cap. At this point I had about 9,000 feet of tandem-rappel experience under my belt on drops as deep as Golindrin and was ready to take it to the next level at El Cap. TinY and Lance got a haul team



Peter after his 67-minute climb

TinY replacing my bungee on top of El Cap while Tymme Laun watches

Nikky filming rappellers at the Edge

together and Lance had them practice a few hauls with a release on a Mnter hitch. They put this into the system to give a smoother lower. This was the first year they had used this new haul system; the one used the previous trip had slipped with Gordon's weight and the weight of the rope, so this was definitely a test of the new system. I got on rope, crossed the lip, called for rope weight, passed the Jumar, and then got to hang out while TinY did the same.

It was an interesting experience sitting there in midair 2,650 feet above the ground, waiting for them to haul me and the rope weight. But I just set my French Wrap and hung out; it's not like I could have picked up the 180 pounds of rope weight to lock off. The first haul did not produce enough slack, so I rappelled down a few more feet, which gave Tiny enough clearance to get on rope. Once TinY was down past the Jumar, we started our World Record-setting tandem rappel. A tandem rappel of El Cap had only ever been done once before, by TinY and Gordon Birkhimer in 2004, and now I was the first female to ever tandem rappel El Capitan. We had a slight bit of wind on the rappel and some rock contact, which didn't bother me a bit after yesterday's climb. When you're on a tandem any sudden movement will cause a change in friction for the top person, so I was very careful to tiptoe down the rock when I was in contact and not to bounce off of it. The whole rappel took a little over 20 minutes. After that we went back to camp for a little bit to get a shower and get ready to climb that night, our third climb in three days.

That night we hiked back to the bottom of the rope to get ready for round three. I was carrying up an extra duffel bag so we had enough for derig the next morning. This was our first night climb and we had a gorgeous full moon to do it by. It was so nice to climb in the cool night air, much nicer than with the wind and the sun. There were several controlled burns going on in the park and we could see the fires from those as we were climbing. We paced the climb like that last two, but realized we were 230 feet from the top and had about 10 minutes to go. I wanted a climb in under three hours, so we decided to sprint the last 230 feet and we reached the top in 2 hours and 55 minutes.

When we got to the lip I realized that the edge line was around the flake and not in the edge roller where it should have been. I tried to radio to the top to see if someone could free the edgeline, but got no answer. So I decided I was going to have to cross the roller, not an easy task with TinY and 180 pound of rope weight under me. I jumped my top ascender and safety over the roller and found that from this position if I stretched I could grab the edge-tender line. I got a hold of it and clipped my safety to it so I wouldn't lose it. From there I removed my knee cam, moved my foot cam closer to the roller, and performed an interesting pirouette-type maneuver and was able to swing around and get my butt up on the ledge. From there I transferred totally to the edge-tender line and walked over to the other side of the flake to free the rope so TinY could come up that line.

The next morning was derig and the week was coming to end. I helped take down the tent and get camp packed up into duffel bags. The goal was to rappel off as much gear as possible so the crew hiking out would have as little gear as possible to carry out. I rappelled off with a backpack and one duffel bag. I had more bulk than weight, so once I got past the lip it was very easy to manage. With the different weight I ended up starting on five bars but was on seven by the end of the rappel. I had a great ride with just a slight bit of wind, which was a great end to my fabulous week of rappelling El Cap. TinY came down a short while after me and used all eight bars to manage the 200 pounds of gear that he was rappelling with. It was definitely a great week and I had been on rope every day the rope was rigged. I figured that if I could match climbing and rappelling schedules with TinY and Peter Hertl, I wasn't doing that bad.

That night after derig, the group had a party at a house outside the park. We all had a great time talking about the week and sharing stories and pictures. It was nice to relax and unwind after such a hard week and great to spend time with the people that we'd trusted our lives to all week. Some of them we'd known for years and some of them we just met at the start of the trip, but there was definitely a sense of camaraderie now and we had all grown much closer during our week on top of El Cap.



*Vince Harcourt, Lisa Lorenzin, Mike Broome, and Captain Ron Koontz enjoying some their meals
Nikky, Mike Hrizuk, and Peter Hertl at the table*

Kellie Teller, Gudrin Hrizuk, Josh Babcock, and Mark Seyfang in line for food

The derig hike team got to the party later that night and they were still pretty worn out from the trail. Lance Mitchell did a great job stepping up to be on the derig hiking team due to shifts in the personnel schedule.



Lance Mitchell, Todd Handley, and Terry (TZ) Zornes after a hard days derig hike on the trail

Several of the group members left later that night for the airport but our carload was staying an extra day. We had thought about doing the 14-mile hike to Half Dome, but that seemed a little ambitious for our day off. So instead we decided to go see the Redwood Groves. We started out at the Tuolumne Grove and hiked the mile to see the trees there.



Nikky and TinY at the entrance to the Tuolumne Grove of Giant Sequoias

TinY at the Tunnel Tree

Robin and Lance Mitchell and Nikky resting on a fallen sequoia

After touring the Tuolumne Grove we went to the much bigger and more extensive Mariposa Grove. We decided to take the tram to do the seven mile tour around the grove that highlighted some of the great trees the Mariposa Grove contained and the audio added some interesting background that we otherwise would not have known.



Nikky realizing that if the bears aren't bad enough, there are mountain lions here too!!

The Clothespin Tree, burned through the center by forest fires

Lance Mitchell and TinY pose at a big tree in the Mariposa Grove

That evening we headed back up the mountain to the Bridal Veil Falls Campground to spend our last night. That morning was the last time we would spend at the now legendary bear box, where my bear incident occurred. We did all our cooking at the bear box throughout the week so that there was no food near the cabin to attract bears. TinY even had the forethought to bring some chairs so we would be comfortable sitting at the bear boxes cooking meals.



Lance Mitchell and Tymme Laun sitting at the Bear Box

The next day we headed out of the park back to the airport in Sacramento. We turned in both rental cars and checked all of our luggage. Lance and Robin Mitchell had plane trouble again and ended up spending the night in Sacramento while the other four of us boarded our red-eye flight back to Atlanta.

Random Photographs

By Sarah Richards



