

The Huntsville Grotto

Information for New Cavers



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Photographs:

Some photographs included in this publication were taken by John Van Swearingen IV (JV), a longtime Huntsville Grotto member. JV died in 2001, but his spirit lives on in those who knew and caved with him. His legacy continues through his fabulous photographs. Those photographs © John Van Swearingen IV.

Document:

Updated February 2016. This booklet is based on the original New Caver booklet written in 1965 by Terry Tarkington, William Varnedoe, Jr., and John D. Veitch, of the Huntsville Grotto, and the So You Want to Go Caving booklet.

Please feel free to distribute freely to whoever may be interested to promote safe and conservation-minded caving! However, you do NOT have permission to modify any of the text or photographs contained in this document. Please redistribute as-is.

Welcome to the Huntsville Grotto!

Welcome to the Huntsville Grotto, an official club of the National Speleological Society! We are happy that you found us and hope that you will soon become part of our caving family.



So – you want to go caving!

Whatever your reasons for this decision, your trip should be done safely and intelligently. Caving is often looked upon by the uninitiated as being very dangerous, and inexperienced cavers do expose themselves to danger unnecessarily. While this can be true if attempted by an inexperienced person, going on a caving trip with experienced cavers and following some basic rules of safety ensures caving can be as safe as almost any other outdoor activity.

Most cavers, over a period of time, acquire a vast amount of experience. However, the novice caver needs to understand some basic information before his or her first trip. The purpose of this booklet is to provide that information. It deals with some of the questions you might ask about your first trip and gives you some of the rules and procedures that will make your first trip more enjoyable.

To become a competent caver, however, takes more than information. It takes practice and experience. By going caving with experienced cavers, you will gain experience quickly as these cavers share their caving knowledge with you as an active participant.

We hope this booklet will be helpful and that you will join us on a caving trip soon!

What is the Huntsville Grotto?

The Huntsville Grotto is an official caving club of the National Speleological Society, an organization dedicated to the study, protection, and exploration of caves. We are a group of people with a wide variety of backgrounds and interests, but all agree on one thing: we love caves and caving! The grotto's official mission is to provide interest in and to advance in any and all ways the study and science of speleology, to encourage safe cave exploring techniques, to help conserve cave fauna and natural formations, and to promote fellowship among those interested in caves and caving.



Membership in the grotto costs \$15 a year for individuals and \$20 for a family. Included is access to the member's area of our web site, monthly newsletter, and grotto re-mailer email group.

The Huntsville Grotto motto is:

Take Nothing But Pictures, Leave Nothing But Footprints, Kill Nothing But Time

Grotto Contact and Meeting Information

If you have a question about the grotto, our meeting schedule, or grotto-sponsored trips, please don't hesitate to contact one of the grotto officers. Check out our grotto web site for contact information, meeting and trip schedules, and other useful information:

<http://www.caves.org/huntsville>

Monthly General Membership Meetings

We encourage you to join us for our monthly general meeting at the National Speleological Society Headquarters at 6001 Pulaski Pike, Huntsville, AL. The meetings are the first Wednesday of each month at 7 pm (the meeting may be rescheduled for a holiday).

Monthly Board Meetings

The Huntsville Grotto Board meets once a month to discuss business that may not be appropriate for the general meeting. All grotto members and other interested parties are invited to attend these meetings. Currently the board meets at 6:30 the first Wednesday of the month before the general meeting at the NSS Headquarters.

Monthly Caving Trips

The grotto sponsors one horizontal caving trip and one vertical caving trip each month. Horizontal trips are caves that do not require any rappelling. We recommend you have a helmet and helmet-mounted light to attend a horizontal trip. If you don't have a helmet or light, you can borrow them from the grotto. The vertical trips require rappelling and rope climbing. There are some rules about who may attend these trips. See the Trip Policies on page 17.

Horizontal Trips

The grotto leads a horizontal trip each month, normally on the Saturday following the general meeting. Talk to the trip leader for details about the difficulty level of the cave trip before you plan to attend. If you are new to caving, the grotto offers trips geared for new cavers, classified as "easy" or "beginner" trips. New cavers can expect these beginner trips into fairly easy cave systems to include instruction on equipment, technique, cave manners, and conservation. Talk to the trip leader for details on cave trips you'd like to attend.

Vertical Trips

The vertical trip is normally the third Saturday following the general meeting. These trips are for experienced vertical cavers. See the trip leader for more information. If you are new to vertical caving and you want to learn how to rappel and climb, the Huntsville Cave Rescue Unit (HCRU) offers vertical training classes called SRT for Single Rope Technique twice a year as well as other related classes.

Note! Successful completion of a vertical training class or proven proficiency in single rope techniques and having your own approved gear set are required before going on a grotto vertical cave trip.
Talk to the trip leader or a grotto officer for details.

National Speleological Society (NSS) Information

The grotto encourages its members to also be members of the NSS. This is the national caving organization dedicated to caves and cave study and exploration. Dues are \$40 for a regular and \$24 for basic members. There are lower rates for family and student memberships. Fortunately, the NSS headquarters are located right here in Huntsville. You are welcome to stop by the office, meet the office staff, browse through the NSS Bookstore, and sign up. A friendly office NSS representative usually attends the grotto meetings, and you can sign up anytime! Benefits of NSS membership include a subscription to the monthly magazine the NSS News, discounts on items at the NSS Bookstore, and participation in NSS sections and committees. Visit the NSS Webpage to find all kinds of useful and interesting information about the Society.

NSS Office
6001 Pulaski Pike
Huntsville, AL
256-852-1300
www.caves.org
info@caves.org



Non-Grotto Events

You are lucky to live in one of the most active caving regions in the country. There are all kinds of regional caving events held all over the southeast. Some of the events you may be interested in include the following:

- TAG Fall Cave-In (Columbus Day weekend each October). Large gathering held on top of Lookout Mountain in Georgia.
- SERA Summer Cave Carnival – Annual camp-out each summer. Grottos take turns hosting this event so the date and location changes each year.
- SERA Winter Business Meeting – Held each winter. Grottos also take turns hosting this event, so the date and location is also different each year.
- The Alabama Cave Survey (ACS) annual meeting – A yearly meeting for the group that maintains records of mapped caves in Alabama. See alabamacavesurvey.org for more information on the group and the annual meeting.
- Huntsville Cave Rescue Unit (HCRU) Tyrolean Traverse: An annual fundraiser, usually in July, where participants ride a zip line across Desoto Falls. See www.hcru.org for info.

You will see listings of regional and national events in the grotto newsletter and the NSS News.

Caving in Alabama

In North Alabama, you are in one of the most favored caving areas in the United States. Almost all of Alabama's more than 5,000 recorded caves are in north Alabama. Many of them are within 50 miles of Huntsville. There is truly something for every caver – from large, walk-through caves that can be visited by almost anyone capable of a hike in the woods to pits over 400 feet deep that challenge the most daring and hardy. There are caves with untapped information that excite the interest of historians, archaeologists, geologists, paleontologists, and biologists. Caves can inspire the photographer and sightseer. Most importantly, there are the unexplored and yet undiscovered caves that touch on the central lure of caving – the possibility of going where no other person has gone and seeing what no other person has seen before. All of these things are offered by Alabama caves in an abundance found in few other areas.



Preparations for Caving Trips

People going on their first caving trips are usually concerned about what equipment they will need and what kind of clothes to wear. If you've seen cavers staggering off under a mountain of equipment, you may wonder if you can even afford everything that seems to be needed. There's no need to worry, however. All you actually need is a helmet, three sources of light, a few other things, a pack to put it all in, and some old clothes (see page 9). The helmet and lights can be borrowed from the grotto for your first few trips. The rest of the equipment you will find cavers burdened with is mainly things they *think* they need or equipment for special situations. Commercial cave tours are typically short with stairs and paved walkways. Wild trips can last 4 hours and longer with dirt, mud and/or water to walk, crawl, or swim through and large boulders to climb over and around. Your equipment and clothes are important.

Helmet:

Everyone caving **MUST** have an approved helmet for horizontal or vertical cave trips! Any cave trips which could include any vertical aspects require an approved climbing helmet! **There are no exceptions!** Experienced cavers will insist that everyone accompanying them on a caving trip wear one. You'll find a helmet is actually a convenience since limestone is much harder than your head! You'll remain much happier using all the available head-room and letting the helmet absorb the occasional miscalculation with a harmless clatter, resulting in a snide remark or two from your companions, rather than a cracked head.

Most cavers prefer a plastic or fiberglass, close-fitting helmet. You should get one that is as light as possible, but be sure it is designed for protection against falling objects. Even a pebble, after falling 60 feet, is a bullet and can seriously injure you. To insure that you get this protection, only buy a helmet meeting UIAA (or similar) approval that has a 4-point chin-strap. Substitutes such as bicycle or military helmet liners are not satisfactory.

Make sure your helmet has a good sturdy chinstrap, preferably one with four anchor points. Chin straps help absorb the shock and keep the helmet in place on your head if you take a fall or when you do miscalculate the head-room. A chin strap also keeps your helmet on your head when you look down into a pit, thus protecting the people below from a falling helmet. A helmet isn't any good if it can easily fall off your head!

Pay particular attention to the general fit. A heavy light will tend to unbalance your helmet. You'll want it to stay on and in place during the assorted gyrations of caving. A helmet that is uncomfortable or not well fitting will be a continual source of irritation to you. A helmet should not only protect the top of your head but your forehead, back and sides, so be sure it is the right size and doesn't slide around and expose those parts.

Most modern climbing/caving helmets come in varying sizes with completely adjustable suspensions and chin straps. They also come with clips that easily attach most modern headlamps.

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Light is the single most important item for a caver. Without it, you're immobilized and helpless. Consequently, very strict rules have evolved concerning proper lighting. The primary rule is that each caver must carry at least three independent sources of light. The

first should be an electric light, preferably LED, and MUST be attached to your helmet. The second source is usually another headlamp, sometimes already mounted on your helmet for ready use. And the third can be a hand-held flashlight. There are a lot of variety in the small efficient lights available today, primarily LED lights that last for hundreds of hours. If you use a flashlight as a backup, they are easily dropped and can fall into small cracks in the floor that are too small for the flashlight to be retrieved. Therefore, if your second or third light source is a hand-held flashlight, make sure it has a cord attached to it so it can be looped around your wrist so you don't lose it. Remember extra batteries for each light source.



There are numerous types of lights available for your primary light. You can choose from systems that use disposable AA or AAA batteries or rechargeable battery systems. Most cavers have made the switch to LED lights, which are small, lightweight, cheap, and easy to operate. Common LED lights currently seen in caving are manufactured by Princeton Tec, Fenix, Petzl, and many more. Feel free to ask any grotto member for current makes, models, and their preferences.

As for batteries, many choose to use disposable cells. These may seem cheaper, but in the long run they do not last as long in modern LED lights and are actually far more expensive to keep replacing than purchasing good rechargeable batteries (low self-discharge, such as Eneloop or equivalent) and a proper charger (one that charges each battery independently). Again, feel free to talk to grotto members for up-to-date battery information.

Some more advanced, cave-specific headlamps such as StenLight, Scurion, and RudeNora systems have rechargeable batteries that last longer than typical AA or AAA batteries. These systems are much brighter, putting out easily 3-5 times the amount of light. Of course, these systems are also expensive and are usually only purchased by seasoned cavers with the need.

Talk to other cavers when you go on your first trip and see what kinds of lighting systems they use. It seems like everyone uses something slightly different, so you will get some good ideas by talking to other cavers.

Regardless of what lighting system you use, you should have sufficient batteries for your primary light for a minimum of ten hours, or twice the estimated underground time, whichever is greater. Your second light source should be sufficient to get you out of the cave. Your third light is for emergency use only

Clothing:

One of the first things you notice about cavers is their individuality of dress. You're likely to find everything from bright nylon coveralls to tight tattered Levi's. Your own choice is largely up to your preference in appearance and comfort. Caves in the Huntsville area average 57 degrees F, at nearly 100% humidity. People tolerate temperature differently and have different clothing needs. Know your own needs for a more enjoyable caving experience. While a single outer garment may be adequate for some, loose outer clothing such as coveralls or a commercial cave suit with a base layer will keep others warmer. Although cotton jeans and sweatshirts are popular and durable, they are not really a good choice. You can lose body heat very quickly when walking or crawling in water; hypothermia is a real possibility, so dress accordingly. Nylon, polypropylene and wool are good for wet



situations because they tend to drain. Do not wear cotton thermal underwear! Tech t-shirts are better than cotton. Typically commercial cave tours take 45 minutes to an hour. Typical wild cave trips last 2.5 to 4 hours. A grotto trip can be longer and wetter. Caves have varying degrees of dirt, mud and water. Talk with the trip leader to know what you can expect. There may be areas with water crawls or swims where a wet suit is recommended. Clothing suffers severe treatment from sharp rocks and mud that doesn't wash out completely, so choose for both expendability and practicality. An extra shirt, a bandana for you head, and a trash bag are very handy in case of unexpected wetness or waiting. Remember to bring a change of clothes, shoes, and a big plastic bag for your muddy, stinky, wet stuff. The friend you rode with will appreciate this. Cloth car seats are hard to get cave mud out of!

Footwear:

Footwear is a very important item. Caving is similar to a very rough, wet form of hiking and sturdy, hard-toed boots giving good ankle support are necessary. Heavy socks and a comfortable fit are equally desirable. Most people find that ankle-length hiking boots or hunting boots with heavy lug soles are quite satisfactory. Vibram soles are best for scrambling over rocks and providing good stability in mud. Do not wear a pair of your favorite, expensive hiking boots caving! Your boots will get covered with mud, soaked with water, and possibly rubbed over rough rock surfaces. Don't wear boots you don't want to wear out. Many cavers buy boots from army surplus stores or cheaper hiking boots from local department stores or on-line catalogs. Also important are the socks you choose. Plan on your feet getting wet; wool or neoprene works much better than cotton. If you want to layer your socks for added protection or comfort, be sure there is room in your boots.

Knee and Elbow Pads:

Due to the very nature of the way caves form, cave exploration can involve a good deal of crawling. Knee and elbow pads are a very welcome addition to your caving equipment since most of the places requiring crawling are well littered with small, sharp rocks. The kind of pads used by sports participants are suitable and inexpensive. Try to avoid hard-cap types as those could slip or damage the cave.

Gloves:

Simple and cheap gardening gloves such as polyester gloves dipped in Nitrile (Nitrile-Poly) are effective and desirable. Be careful to purchase the poly version, not cotton, as wet cotton is extremely cold. They protect your hands from scratches from rock and rough cave walls, and they keep your hands cleaner for activities such as photography or eating. For vertical caving, gloves with leather palms are required.

Pack:

You should have some kind of pack that will hold the extra gear you accumulate. The best option is an inexpensive, small backpack (no external frame). Make sure it can be easily opened and closed. Zippers usually jam when they get really muddy, and Velcro doesn't work well in extra muddy situations, so keep that in mind when you're deciding on a pack. For your first few cave trips, something cheap should work just fine. If you decide to continue your caving adventures, you may then want to invest in a more robust, specialized pack.

Other Equipment:

An unbreakable plastic bottle for drinking water is desirable. Although the water in some caves looks quite pure, you should drink water from a cave only in an emergency. You may also want a small first-aid kit and a compass. One thing to include is something to eat. A couple of candy bars or high-energy food bars will be very welcome in the middle of the average caving trip. Remember your backup lights and spare batteries.

Basic Caving Rules

All responsible cavers follow a set of rules and procedures that have evolved through long experience and practice to become part of the basic caving policy. A novice caver soon learns the necessity of these rules and follows them in all caving until they become habit. Almost all difficulties and accidents in caving can be directly related to the violation of these rules. Now, before you go on your first caving trip, is the best time to learn them and begin applying them from the start so that they become an integral part of your caving practices.

Rule 1: Never Cave Alone. This rule has been discussed and the pros and cons debated since organized caving began. There are those in the caving community who do cave alone, but the decision to do so has been made after years of experience. This rule should **NEVER** be broken by the novice caver. The minimum size for a trip should be at least three people. There are unlimited possibilities for minor events to become major difficulties when a caver is not backed up by one or more companions.

Rule 2: Always let someone know where you are going and at what time you plan to be back. This is referred to as a "call-out". More than one group owes its rescue to this rule.

Rule 3: Always carry three independent sources of light. This almost guarantees that you will have light to get you out of the cave. Only one source of light is almost as bad as none.

Rule 4: Always wear a protective helmet with a chin strap. You will find that experienced cavers, without exception, follow this rule.



Rule 5: Know your limitations. Failure to recognize the limitations of your abilities or knowledge is a major reason for a novice coming to grief in a caving situation. If you get into a situation where you're not sure exactly what to do next, say so! Ask for help. Experienced cavers respect those who recognize when they need assistance in a particular situation and gladly provide it. Know your capabilities, and don't trust luck to get you out; remember, the way out is the way you came in.

Rule 6: If it's vertical and requires a rope, don't do it. This rule applies to novices that haven't been instructed in the proper techniques for rope work. Vertical caving is a specialized area that requires specific hands-on instruction for complete understanding and should not be attempted by the novice before attending a training session.

Rule 7: Follow good conservation practices. All responsible cavers recognize the need and desirability of keeping our caves in an unspoiled condition.

Caver Communication Above and Below Ground

BO!

As you participate in activities with members of the Huntsville Grotto, you will hear people yelling BO out in the woods and in caves. If you try to yell to people far away in the woods or in a cave, your words often become unintelligible. To solve this problem, in the early 1960s, the word BO was introduced by Jack Allen and Jim Johnston in complex but logical code for communicating in adverse conditions. After some experimentation, this word was found to be one of the best verbal sounds that would carry through noise and long distances. In practice only a few codes have persisted. The following are the ones still most used:

BO!: This single BO is used to signal a request for recognition. You should respond with a single BO. This is frequently used while ridge-walking to keep track of where everyone is on the mountain. You can usually tell the direction, distance, and identity of the person calling. This is also handy if you get separated from your friends in a cave. You can call BO! to one another to help you zero in on their location.

BO BO!: Two BOs mean that I am coming to you, wait for me.

BO BO BO!: Three BOs mean for you to come to me. This is frequently used when people are spread out on a ridge looking for a cave entrance. If you hear this call, usually someone has found the entrance!

BO BO BO! BO BO BO! BO BO BO!: Three sets of three BOs in succession with a pause between each set means someone is in trouble – an emergency. Come immediately.

ROCK!

If you're climbing around in a cave and accidentally dislodge a rock (or anything else that could fall and hurt someone), immediately yell ROCK as loud as you can so those below can protect themselves. Yell ROCK even if you drop something like a flashlight or your pack.

Horizontal and Vertical Caving Awards

After you've been caving for a little while, you will rack up a list of caves you have successfully explored. The grotto likes to recognize your accomplishment! We have two different awards – one for horizontal caving and one for vertical. You must have been an NSS member at the time you visited the caves and you must have followed safe caving practices on the cave trip. Applications for these patches are available on the grotto website.



Horizontal Twelve:

The requirement for the Horizontal 12 is having traversed the major portion of twelve Alabama caves over one mile in length. There are numerous caves you can choose from to fulfill this requirement. There are currently over 50 caves in Alabama over one mile in length.

Vertical Eight:

The requirements for the Vertical Eight patch are:

- Any five Alabama pit caves all of which are more than 100 foot single pitch (in other words, the pit must be at least 100 feet of total depth, not two pits in the same cave that add up to 100 feet total depth).
- Two must be more than 200 feet (single pitch)
- One must be more than 400 feet in total depth (serial multi-drop cave systems count for this depth requirement).
- You must personally rig at least one of the pits.

There are numerous pits that are 100 feet in depth, over 20 pits 200+ feet in depth, and over 20 caves over 400 feet in depth.



Conservation

Conservation is a key part of the Huntsville Grotto. We love caves and want to preserve them for future generations. In their natural state, caves have great beauty and scientific value. Unfortunately, they are easily damaged, and this damage is cumulative. Cave restoration can only take place at the same slow pace, over hundreds of thousands of years, which nature took to form the cave in the first place. Even though a formation is not physically broken, it can actually be destroyed by simply touching or handling it. Mud from a muddy glove or even the oils from your hand can cause a formation to stop growing and die



– remember to look, but don't touch! Nature can restore the beauty of burned forests and polluted streams in a fraction of the time it takes to restore one broken stalactite. Cavers thus have a special responsibility to protect the beauty of caves. Anything they destroy is essentially destroyed forever. The number of caves is limited, but each year finds more and more people participating in caving

activities. As the number grows, each caver is increasingly responsible for the preservation of our caves and educating others about cave conservation. Quite a lot has been written and discussed about the requirements and methods of cave conservation for years. However, none express what should be the guide of every caver as well as the single sentence that has become the watchword of cave conservation:

Take nothing but Pictures, leave nothing but Footprints, kill nothing but Time

If you follow the meaning of this, you will be doing your part of cave conservation. Here are some other conservation rules:

1. Any item carried into the cave **MUST** be carried out. This rule applies to solid human waste on long trips.
2. Anything found in a cave must be left undisturbed except: 1.) Trash (remove it!) 2.) Solid rock or breakdown which blocks a passage or is in a dangerous position.
3. Do not touch any formation and avoid walking in pools of water whenever possible. If unsure how to avoid such contact, ask one of the experienced cavers for assistance.
4. Do not disturb any bats or other creatures found in the cave. If bats are flying, don't panic; they won't harm you. Special effort should be taken to ensure that hibernating bats and maternity colonies are not disturbed. If you see a large group of bats, leave the area.
5. Archaeological and paleontological specimens may be removed only under the direction of an authorized scientist.

6. No markings may be placed in a cave except: 1.) Small survey marks which do not diminish the beauty of the cave 2.) Out arrows fashioned from flagging tape or rock cairns (stacks of small rocks) may be left to point the way where there is a significant possibility of a competent party becoming lost. These must be removed as the party exits the cave. Do NOT draw or paint arrows! If you see arrows on the wall, they are usually not reliable. Please erase them if possible.
7. Information on cave locations may only be given to NSS members or scientists for use in their respective fields.
8. All gear must be clean so as not to contaminate the cave environment, see web site.
9. All members and guests of members must abide by these rules.

The Human Side of Caving - Landowner Relations

Once you get involved in caving, you'll be amazed at how many fantastic caves are all around us. In Alabama alone, there are over 4,000 caves. Over 15,000 caves are in the region we call TAG (Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia), many a relatively short drive for those of us in Huntsville. But before you start going out and finding caves to explore, be sure that you understand landowner relations and how important landowner relations are to all cavers.

What Does "Landowner Relations" Mean?

It's simple. Respect landowners and respect their land. Just because you see a hill covered in trees and without any obvious houses, that doesn't mean you can just park your car on the side of the road and run through the forest looking for caves. Many, many amazing caves have been closed across the TAG region as a direct result of rude and irresponsible cavers. Here are a few examples. Megawell is a cave in rural Jackson County that features a spectacularly beautiful 310-foot deep pit. For years, it was considered one of the very best caves in the southeast to visit. Then, a couple of groups of cavers started to drive through the owner's fields, tearing up his fields and ruining some of his crops. The landowner got so mad that he closed the cave, and it has remained closed for almost 20 years. Another really nice cave was closed after the landowner caught the same caver sneaking onto his land more than once. Before closing that particular cave, the landowner only wanted people to ask for permission to visit his property, but that caver didn't think rules applied to him. Another cave was closed when a group of cavers changed clothes in the landowner's driveway. When the landowner's wife looked out the window and saw half-naked people in her yard she decided she didn't want any cavers visiting her property ever again. These are just a few examples of how one or two rude cavers ruined access for everyone else. They are also examples of what you should not do.

So what should you do?

1. When you start to think about visiting a specific a cave, the very first thing you should do is consult the TAG Closed Cave List:

<http://dogwoodcitygrotto.com/files/closedcavelist.pdf>

If the cave you're interested in is on this list, forget about it and go somewhere else. Be sure to search the entire document. Some caves are not entirely closed, but have restrictions that you need to know about.

2. Even if the cave you're interested in is not included on the Closed Cave list, that doesn't mean it's open. You need to find out who owns the cave and ask for permission to visit the property. Start with your fellow Grotto members. Send an email to the Grotto remailer or post a question on our Facebook page asking if anyone is familiar with access for that cave. You can also eventually join the Alabama Cave Survey for access to the cave database, but you can't join until you've been a member of the NSS for one year.

3. If nobody in the Grotto has information about the cave, expand your search. Post a question on the regional discussion board Tag-Net or post a question on the NSS Forum Cave Chat. If the cave is in another state or far from Huntsville, also try directly contacting people in other Grottos closer to the cave that interests you.

4. If you still can't find out any information about the cave, you can try to track down the landowner yourself. If you know approximately where the cave is located, drive out to the area, stop at some houses, introduce yourself, and ask who owns the land you'd like to visit. Often, people living close to the cave will know who owns the property. Sometimes you'll find out that the landowner lives out of state and visiting the property is fine. Other times, you may meet the actual landowner.

And a quick note about visiting people who live way out in the country. Park in the driveway and wait a few minutes before getting out of the car and knocking on the door. This gives the people in the house time to get ready to talk to visitors. Also, be ready to chat. Don't just run up to the door, ask "who owns that land?" and plan to immediately leave. Be friendly. Ask about their property and how long they've lived there. Tell them you're interested in caves and describe some of the nearby caves you've visited. Chat. Many times, when people realize you're interested in them and their property, they usually end up telling you about other caves on their property or nearby mountains that they know about. Some of our best caves were found after landowners tipped off curious cavers. And whatever you do, don't go up to the door with your caving gear expecting to dart off into the woods the second you get the "ok".

5. If you manage to find the landowner, find out how he or she would like to be contacted for permission in the future. Get their phone number and email address for future use.

6. If you can't get permission, or the landowner says no, please don't visit the cave. There are thousands more you can visit.

After all of this legwork, let's say you get permission to visit the cave. Great! So what now? When you actually plan a trip, follow the landowner's instructions. Some landowners want you to stop by their house to tell them you're visiting the cave and also want you to stop by to let them know when you're out of the cave. Others don't want to be bothered at all. Be courteous and follow directions.

Some additional things you can do to build up goodwill with landowners is to pick up trash on the way to and from the cave, and in the cave itself. Also, stay in touch after your trip. If you took pictures in the cave, send the landowner copies. If you map a cave, send the landowner a map. Add the landowner to your Christmas card list and send a note just to say hello and to thank them for allowing you to visit their property.



Hopefully, everyone also knows to follow many common-sense rules. Don't park in a place that blocks a road or driveway. If you're going to park in someone's driveway, ask first. If you open a gate, close it after you drive through. If you find a gate open, leave it open. Don't litter. Be discrete while changing clothes, especially if you're anywhere near houses or a busy road.

Make it a point to improve the cave or route to the cave if possible. Carry trash bags and pick up trash both in the cave and along the way. Move loose rocks, sticks or logs along the edge of the trail. Stay on the established trail if there is one. If you notice a broken fence, gate, or other anomaly, make a detailed note and take a picture to accurately report it to the landowner. Do not perform "permanent" work or changes without proper permission.

Think of how you would want a guest in your house to act if they were left alone without you. This land and cave may have significant sentimental value. The land itself holds intrinsic value and may actually be the owner's very livelihood or recreational activity other than caving. They will wish to preserve that above their willingness or desire to share. There is also a real worry about liability or negative publicity should someone get hurt on their property or in the cave. We are guests of the landowners and need to act accordingly to be allowed return visits.

Be grateful to landowners, make sure they know how much you appreciate them, and never take access to caves for granted!

This is also true for public, state, and federally owned caves. Work with managers, rangers, or officials as you would private a land owner. They are people too and take their work seriously.

You will meet spelunkers along the way. Help them become responsible, safe cavers gently.

Huntsville Grotto Policies

While each caving trip is an individual situation, requiring decisions based on the judgment of those present, there are certain well-established rules of good caving conduct and safety necessary for the continued safe and efficient function of grotto-sponsored trips. It is expected that each grotto member will sincerely attempt to follow these rules and procedures and to ensure that others with him or her follow these rules on all caving trips.

General Rules:

1. Establish a Call-Out: Notify a responsible person that you are going caving and leave the following information:
 - Name and location of the cave
 - Section of cave to be visited if it is a large system
 - Name of person in your party who is familiar with the cave
 - Make, model, year, and tag number of the vehicle you will take to the cave
 - Approximate return time
 - Time a rescue should be initiated
 - Who to call. (In Huntsville area: 911 and ask MedCom to notify HCRU)
2. Leave some sign of your group's presence at the cave entrance. This will help ensure that if a rescue call-out is necessary, the rescue team will know that you actually did enter the cave.
3. All members of the group are expected to use courtesy, common sense, and respect in dealing with both property and property landowners or residents.
4. On a grotto-sponsored caving trip, there will be one person who is responsible for leading the trip through the cave. This person will be very experienced, and during the caving activities, this person will be the ultimate authority. Before entry into the cave, the trip leader may appoint several assistants (depending on group size) to aid him or her during the trip. Novice cavers should identify themselves to these assistants or the trip leader before entering the cave.
5. The Grotto Conservation policy must be followed.
6. A trip coordinator, whose duties and responsibilities are specified below, will be provided for each grotto-sponsored trip.

Horizontal Trip Policy:

Attendance for grotto horizontal trips is left to the discretion of the trip leader. Talk to the trip leader to find out whether the scheduled cave trip is right for your level of experience. New cavers are strongly encouraged to take grotto trips specifically geared for new cavers before attending a more advanced grotto cave trip. This may consist of one or more trips into fairly easy cave systems with instruction on technique, cave manners, and conservation by the trip leader or his designee. At this point, you will still be considered a novice caver, but you will better understand the caving environment and be better prepared to deal with the additional length and complexity of a more advanced horizontal trip. A current grotto member may bring a friend along on a caving trip, subject to the approval of the trip leader. That member must attend the trip or arrange for a sponsor for that guest that will attend.

Each child under the age of sixteen years must be accompanied by a parent or other responsible adult over the age of 21 during all cave trips. If a parent brings more than one

child, the parent must provide an additional responsible adult to accompany each additional child. The parent must be willing to control the activities of the child and ensure that the directions of the trip leader and the assistants are followed.

Permission of the Projects Vice-Chair is required for children 11 and younger on grotto trips.

Every person participating in a grotto cave trip will be required to sign and maintain a current “WAIVER OF LIABILITY” with the grotto. Anyone eighteen years or older may sign his or her own waiver. Anyone under eighteen years old must have a waiver signed by their parent or guardian before **EACH** cave trip, specific for that cave system.

Vertical Caving Policy

The policy for attending vertical cave trips is much more stringent. If you are new to vertical caving, you **MUST** first obtain proper training from qualified vertical cavers. The HCRU provides a training course, and it is highly recommended. Even after training, the trip leader has the final say on who is qualified to attend that specific grotto-sponsored trip. In order to attend a vertical trip, you must have your own vertical gear, including a mechanical QAS for frog/mitchel, 2 QASs for rope-walker, and be very familiar with its use.

For detailed information about vertical training or how to learn vertical caving techniques, talk to a grotto trip leader or other grotto officer.

Affiliated Non-Profit Organizations

Southeastern Cave Conservancy (SCCi):

Each year, more and more caves are closed to cavers. The SCCi, founded in the early 90s, purchases or leases caves to permanently preserve them for cavers. Currently, the SCCi owns or leases over twenty fabulous caves, many of which are classics. If you become a serious caver, consider supporting this organization with your time and/or money to ensure more caves are preserved for us to visit. For details, see <http://www.scci.org>

Southeastern Regional Association (SERA):

The Southeastern Regional Association (SERA) of the National Speleological Society (NSS) is an organization made up of all the NSS organizations (grottos and surveys) in the Southeastern portion of the United States of America. The SERA region includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The purpose of SERA is to further the aims of the NSS in the Southeast. For details, see <http://www.caves.org/region/sera/index.html>

SERA Events:

- Winter Business Meeting
- Summer Cave Carnival
- Map Salon
- Photo Salon

Alabama Cave Survey (ACS)

The Alabama Cave Survey systematically collects, maintains, indexes, and publishes information of all kinds on the caves and speleological features of Alabama. You must be a member of the ACS to receive their publications. You must be a member of the NSS for 2 years to join the ACS. They have an annual meeting. See website: alabamacavesurvey.org

For details about joining the ACS, contact:

Julie Schenck Brown
E-mail: jeschenck@hotmail.com

For submitting caves or questions about caves contact Caves Files Director:

Lin Guy
610 Little Ridge Road NW
Fort Payne, AL 35961-8255
E-mail: elinguy@charter.net

Huntsville Cave Rescue Unit (HCRU)

The HCRU is based in Huntsville, AL. It is an organization, comprised entirely of volunteers, specializing in cave, cliff, high-angle, rough terrain search and rescue operations. Visitors are welcome. Meetings are held on the third Tuesday of the Month. Meeting times and locations vary, see below. See web site or most grotto members for more information.

<http://www.hcru.org/>
E-mail: info@HCRU.org
256-763-0073

Times and Locations of HCRU meetings:
May through September at 6 pm at Three Caves
October through April at 7 pm at the NSS HQ

Where to Buy Cave Gear

After you've gone on a few cave trips and decide you really like it, you will want to buy your own helmet and helmet light(s). You may also want to invest in some good caving boots, kneepads, and other related gear. It can be confusing at first to find this type of equipment. Here is a list of a few local stores where you can find caving gear and some companies where you can go on-line or phone-order gear (this is usually a lot cheaper). If you have any questions about what to get, ask about it at the grotto meeting. Cavers love talking about gear and will give you all kinds of advice.

A good time to buy cave gear is regional events such as SERA and TAG. Many different cave gear vendors attend these events with a wide assortment of gear – pretty much anything you'd ever want or need to buy! This is a great time to try on things, compare prices, and really get a chance to look things over before you buy.

The following list is by no means a complete list of the places you can buy gear. It's simply some places we are familiar with.

Local stores:

- Mountain High Outfitters: Located at Bridge Street in Huntsville, AL, they carry helmets, LED lights, some Petzl ascenders, webbing, cordage, and carabineers. They do offer a discount for HCRU members.
- On Rope 1: Located in Harrison, TN (just outside Chattanooga), this is the closest physical store for any and all your caving needs or desires.
- Pangaea Vertical Caving Systems: Located in Vinemont, AL (near Cullman), they offer high-end, often custom-designed harnesses and climbing systems for vertical cavers. Hours are by appointment: (256) 736-3286.
- Thrift Mart: Located on the corner of University and Sparkman, they often have a good supply of poly clothing at cheap prices in their active wear sections.

On-Line Orders:

Pigeon Mountain Industries, Inc. (Rope)

<http://www.pmirope.com>
Phone: 1-800-282-7673
Email: custserv@pmirope.com

Speleobooks (Caving Books and Gifts)

<http://www.speleobooks.com>
Phone: 1-518-295-7978 call before 9 pm EDT
Email: speleobooks@speleobooks.com

Inner Mountain Outfitters

<http://www.innermountainoutfitters.com>
Phone: 1-770-307-4686
Email: imo@caves.org

BC Wunderwear (Clothes & Packs)

<http://www.bcwunderwear.com>
Phone: 1-434-528-2303 8-11 pm EST
Email: cecile@bcwunderwear.com

Karst Sports

<http://www.karstsports.com>
Phone: 1-800-734-2851
Email: info@karstsports.com

Petzl

<http://www.petzl.com>
Phone: 1-877-807-3805
Email: info@petzl.com

On Rope 1

<http://www.onrope1.com>
Phone: 1-866-441-7673
Email: info@petzl.com

And many, many more.

