

Caving Checklist

Compiled by Norm Berg with material borrowed from Bob Jacobs and others.

Produce for the Central Connecticut Grotto

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Additions to and comments on this list are welcome. Send them to info@ctcavers.org

This list is an overview of the items that should or might be brought along on a beginner-novice caving trip lasting under four hours. What a person takes into the cave is dependent on many factors, such as conditions within the cave, trip length, distance from the vehicle, and the physical condition of the participant. Items in this list reflect the various authors' personal opinions and are by no means comprehensive for all situations. As technology and the science of caves (and the people who visit them) advances, this list will need updating. Items are outlined below followed by details and a caving courtesy section.

OUTLINE

IN-CAVE CLOTHING and PERSONAL GEAR:

- Helmet
- Headlamp
- Flashlight #1
- Undergarments (polypro underwear)
- Knee & elbow pads
- Middleware - shirt and pants
- Coveralls or overalls
- Thick socks
- Boots
- Gloves

IN CAVE PACK:

- Flashlight #2
- Spare batteries
- Food
- Drinking water
- Large garbage bag

IN CAR and OUTSIDE OF CAVE:

- Emergency phone numbers
- Change of clothes
- Road maps
- Cave directions and description
- Garbage bags
- Towel
- Food
- Drinking water
- Water for washing after trip
- Toilet paper
- GPS

OPTIONAL IN CAVE ITEMS:

- Map of cave
- Camera
- Eyeglass retainer
- Compass
- Chemical light stick
- Pencils
- Notebook with waterproof paper
- Duct tape
- Ziplocs
- Pocket knife
- Hand-line

Watch
Candles & waterproof matches
Extra clothing
Bathing suit
First aid kit

DETAILS

CLOTHING and PERSONAL GEAR:

A helmet is a must due to the likelihood of whacking your head against the cave rock. A construction type or bicycle helmet is OK for beginners, though the headlamp might need to be attached with duct tape. Make sure it has a chin strap, and that it does not have a brim. A real climbing or caving helmet is rugged, lightweight, has a good range of sizing adjustments, and designed to accommodate your headlamp.

The basic rule is to have at least three independent light sources. The good headlamp mounted to the helmet is one source. Another source is a flashlight in your cave pack. Another source is a flashlight in a pocket or on a lanyard around your neck. Keeping the light sources in different places (helmet, pack, on lanyard) means that if you get separated from some of your equipment you will not lose all your light sources.

How easily people get cold varies with things like how in-shape you are, body weight, age and metabolism. However, hypothermia is one of the biggest dangers in caving, so make sure you are properly prepared. What you'll need to wear will vary with the latitude of the cave (how cold it is), how long you stay in the cave and how wet you get. The best to invest in clothing made of wool or synthetics like polypropylene.

Good quality "polypro" (polypropylene) long underwear is one of the most important items for comfortable caving. The most important property of synthetic fabrics like polypropylene is that they stay warm when wet.

A middle layer could be loose synthetic jogging pants and a synthetic shirt or sweatshirt.

The outer layer could be a cotton/poly blend coverall, which keeps cave dirt from getting to you where your shirt and pants meet. Avoid cotton for anything but this outermost layer.

Wool or polypropylene/wool blend socks work well. If you're going to walk in water, 1/8" (3mm) neoprene socks are warm and comfortable. Trim your toenails as they will take a beating.

Old or cheap construction or hiking boots with lug (not smooth) soles are fine. Sneakers may be warm enough for short and dry caves, but use high-top lace-ups, so they can't come off accidentally. Some cavers prefer calf high rubber boots.

Most people require knee pads in caves. Elbow pads are also preferred by many when there's a lot of crawling to do. Cheap basketball type knee or elbow pads are soft and flexible and work better than those with hard parts. Wear the knee pads between polypro long underwear and the next layer of clothing. This prevents them from getting snagged while crawling.

You'll probably want to wear a pair of gloves to protect your hands from abrasion. You might opt not to wear gloves when it's warm, but your hands will probably get scratched up. Lightweight synthetic or cotton gloves are usually fine. Bring an extra pair in the cave in case the first pair tears.

You might want to wear a bathing suit just to make getting dressed if in a busy area. However, you'll probably take it off at the end of the trip anyway to get rid of the wet bathing suit that's soaked in cave water and mud.

A zip-lock bag to hold your wallet. You may want to put this in a zippered pocket or inside your cave pack. Be sure it can't fall out. Car keys can be put inside your cave pack or left outside near the car under a rock, but be sure to show others in your group where it is in case they get to the car before you and want to get to their clean clothes. Plus, having witnesses makes it more likely to find the keys in the dark when the rocks all look the same.

A small quality flashlight carried on your person in such a way that it will not get lost (by, for example, falling out of your pocket). A lanyard around your neck works well, but be sure to position the lanyard so it won't get snagged in the cave.

YOUR CAVE PACK:

You will need a pack to carry your in-cave gear. The important thing is that you are able to attach it to yourself to free your hands for climbing, and easily remove it when negotiating tight places. It should be very flexible and easy to open and close. A small belt pack (aka fanny pack) usually works. The simpler and stronger the better. What is not needed are outside pockets that don't zip or securely buckle closed as pockets will collect mud, snag on rocks, and items in them will fall out. Be aware that zippers can fail when they get full of mud or sand. Heavy duty nylon packs made for caving, although expensive, are cost effective because of their durability.

THINGS THAT SHOULD BE IN YOUR CAVE PACK:

A quality flashlight using two AA cells is a good choice. LED bulbs are preferred, as they won't break. Do not bring any large flashlight (any using D-cells or more than 2 C-cells). To prevent the lights from going on accidentally, wrap electric tape around the switch.

Spare batteries for lights. Bring enough backup batteries for your headlamp to supply light for twice as long as your planned trip length. Most 4 AA-cell headlamps will last 2 to 3 hours on a set of batteries, so bring one or two sets of spare batteries for your headlamp, and another set or two of your other light sources. On short trips don't worry about getting the spare batteries wet, as this will not noticeably reduce their charge. Bring a spare bulb for your helmet mounted light. Note that cell and battery is used interchangeably here, and they must be a name brand alkaline type (no "heavy duty" or rechargeable).

Food and water for you. Caving is hard work; you burn a lot of energy and often sweat a lot when moving. Always bring something to drink and, unless you know you can go for many hours without food while working hard, bring some snacks. Sixteen ounces of fluid for every 4 hrs caving is a good starting point; some people need more, some less. Plain water is probably the best bet for most people. Some people prefer drinks like Gatorade. Bring snack food that you can open and eat with dirty hands. Put the food in zip-lock bags and put the bags in a hard container, such as a Nalgene bottle or small hard plastic camera/gear case.

A large garbage bag that can be used as emergency tents or fashioned into a makeshift poncho for unexpected waterfalls (just pop one hole for your head and a couple for your arms). They also can be worn just to stay warm. Space blankets are disposable body wraps that retain much of the body's heat when worn. They are small, lightweight and can help prevent hypothermia.

OPTIONAL IN CAVE ITEMS:

Extra clothing may be needed if the cave is colder or wetter than anticipated. Also, if you get tired you usually get colder, so more clothing is often needed at the end of a trip than the beginning. A polypro balaclava (a pullover hood) is compact and can be carried in your cave pack and worn as needed.

A need for a cave map varies from helpful or interesting for small caves to essential for large caves. Expect your trip leader to provide this if needed.

Candles may be used as emergency light and heat sources. Waterproof matches and/or a lighter can be kept in a small plastic bottle with a screw on lid. Do not count candles as one of your three light sources.

A small compass, when used with a map, can help you from getting lost in a cave or on your way to and from the cave. They work underground.

A chemical light stick in a plastic tooth brush case is a robust, waterproof light source that does not depend on carbide or batteries. It can be used as general lighting (to save your other lights) if camped or trapped in a cave. With a reflector fashioned out of aluminum foil, it could be used as a means of getting out of a smaller cave. It should not be considered one of your three light sources. Most burn brightly for 8 hours and dimly for at least 20 hours.

You might want to bring a small roll of Duct Tape into the cave for emergency repairs such as keeping a light attached to a helmet.

Ziploc baggies are handy for storing all sorts of things; keeping them separate, clean and semi-dry. Quart, gallon and two gallon sizes all have their uses. Smaller ones for your wallet, food, extra batteries, cave map, odds 'n ends; larger ones for stuff like extra clothes. Double bag anything you don't want to get wet (still won't be guaranteed waterproof).

A small pocket knife is helpful for cutting rope and making general repairs.

A hand-line and single carabineer (to aid in rigging) are useful for safely negotiating small drops. One-half or one inch tubular webbing or accessory cord make good hand-line material, and 30 feet is the minimum practical length.

A shockproof/waterproof watch will ensure you start back when you planned to. Check the time before you go in.

A disposable flash camera can take reasonably good pictures. If you bring a real camera into a cave, make sure to protect it in a water/shock proof case, plus a clean cloth to wipe the mud and water that will get on it. Consider how easy you can get to the camera, if you have to spend more than 10 seconds to get it out or put it back, you might not have time to get that quick shot and stay with your group.

If you wear glasses, a retaining strap such as "Croakies" is recommended. Anti-fog treatment is also helpful, as glasses will fog up in most caves. Use your own judgment when it comes to contact lenses.

THINGS YOU MAY WANT TO BRING TO THE CAVE (BUT NOT IN):

These items can usually be left in a bag next to the cave entrance or just inside the cave.

Toilet paper. Better now than in the cave.

Water, snacks. A nice treat when you get out and provide energy for the walk to the car.

A poncho or warm jacket. The trip from the cave to the car may be wet and/or cold. And you might be waiting by the entrance for everyone to get out.

Sunglasses, sunscreen, bug and tick repellent.

A large garbage bag to stand on when changing clothes, to hold these items during the time you are in the cave, and to put your really wet clothes into when you get out.

A powerful flashlight if you might be walking back to the car in the dark.

FRS radio – to talk to anyone at the cars should an emergency arise.

IN THE CAR:

It is a good idea to have the numbers of a local cave rescue organization or local cavers. In case someone is injured, all parties should have access to these numbers and the car keys. What to do in case of emergency should be discussed prior to entering the cave. Depending on the situation, you might want to bring a copy of the phone numbers with you to the cave.

Garbage bags to stow all your wet and muddy stuff for the ride home. A gallon of water to wash-up with, plus towels.

You'll need clean clothes when you get back to the car. If the cave is some distance from the car, you'll probably want to pack your gear in and change at the cave.

Road maps and topo maps, for getting there and getting back, and the overall area in case a detour is needed. Any written cave descriptions can be brought along for passengers to read during the car ride.

A disposable flash camera can take reasonably good pictures and won't break your heart if they get wrecked. If you bring a real camera into a cave, make sure to protect it in a water/shock proof case. Consider how easy you can get to the camera, if you have to spend more than 5 seconds to get it out or put it back, you might not have time to get that quick shot.

At least one person in your party should carry a small first aid kit into the cave on any but the shortest trips. This should be designed primarily to treat cuts and stop bleeding.

FRS radios are useful when in a car caravan and while looking for a cave parking area.

Extra food and water, in case you have a long wait for everyone to get to the cars from the cave, or find you have to go back to the cave to get gear or otherwise assist.

CAVING COURTESY

Be very flexible in the time the trip will end. Planning an evening activity that causes others on the trip to leave the cave early, or skip a group pizza stop so you can get home, won't go over well.

Shop for fuel, food, batteries before the trip, not while driving to the meeting place, or (really bad...) between the meeting place and the cave.

Prepare food in advance. Make sandwiches at home before the trip

Bring more food and water than you expect to use.

Before the day of the trip, contact the trip leader and provide your full name and phone numbers.

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