

# Local spelunkers map Main Drain, Utah's deepest cave

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**A**fter many summers of "jumping down pits" in the Tony Grove area, Ryan Shurtz finally found the big one.

The 25-year-old Clearfield resident had been working for more than two years on the Tony Grove project, which aims to map and GPS all of the caves in this, Utah's most concentrated location, when, in September 2003, he dropped into yet another 200-foot vertical cave.

This September, that cave was certified as the deepest in Utah.

The cave, for years known as Deception Pit, is now named Main Drain Cave. The name comes from the endless hopes of Tony Grove cavers — that they would eventually find a "main drain" that drained the area's countless watery caves and icy sink-holes into one channel that would leave a path large enough to follow to somewhere near the outlet.

The breakthrough came when Shurtz climbed an icy chimney inside the 260-foot pit. He was 60 feet off the bottom (with nothing to break his fall but a few friends on the ground below) when he found the small tunnel that led to the rest of Main Drain.

After the short, small tunnel, the cave opened up. On subsequent visits, the group dropped into several pits as deep as the first, rappelled down a series of waterfalls as tall as 220 feet, wound through tiny slots and spent a lot of time wading through 37-degree water.

Main Drain is 1,173 feet deep, and counting. The surveying was stopped by snow, not by the end of the cave. Based on the estimates of a



David Shurtz (left) and his son, Ryan, both of Clearfield, look at a map of a cave in the Tony Grove area.

MATTHEW HATFIELD/Standard-Examiner

## A NOTE ON SAFETY

Clearfield caver Dave Shurtz notes that not only are "99 percent" of Utah's caves vertical, they are "very cold, very wet and very sharp."

- Main Drain Cave, for instance, is a constant 38 degrees. The water that flows, falls and pools throughout the cave is one degree cooler.

- The dolomite on the walls is "jagged, angular and sharp"; even a minor fall can be deadly.

- In a deep cave, trapped visitors can expect a rescue to be at least a week away.

- Caving requires specialized equipment (your rock climbing set-up won't cut it) and knowledge.

Before attempting any caving, visit the Wasatch Grotto, the local chapter of the National Speleological Society. The Wasatch Grotto meets on the second Monday of every month at 7 p.m. at the Bountiful/Davis Art Center, 754 S. Main St., Bountiful. For contact information for this and other state and national grottoes, visit [www.caves.org](http://www.caves.org).

few cavers who took a brief, unofficial look at the next passage, that passage drops about 200 feet immediately after the last survey point.

Jon Jasper, director of the Tony Grove project and Timpanogos Cave National Monument, said there is a real possibility that the cave could end up deeper than 1,604 feet,

the depth of New Mexico's Lechuguilla Cave, the deepest in the continental United States.

The purpose of the Tony Grove survey is "to find and explore big caves," Jasper said.

"We thought we'd see caves over 400 feet deep," he said. "We never thought we'd see one 1,000 feet deep. So

## LEAVE NO TRACE

The National Speleological Society advises all cavers: "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time." The touch of one hand can stop the growth of stalactites and stalagmites. Just one disturbance can kill a hibernating bat.

1. Avoid touching anything you don't have to touch.
2. Do not sit or lean on anything.
3. Do not wear shoes that leave marks on limestone.
4. Don't disturb bats.
5. Remove all solid and liquid wastes, including urine, feces and spit.

6. To avoid transferring foreign microbes, wash equipment before entering a cave.
7. Use soft, padded cave packs to minimize damage from brushing the walls.

Source: *Minimum Impact Caving Code* by Jim Werker and Val Hildreth-Werker, found on [www.caves.org](http://www.caves.org)

this is cool."

According to a U.S. Geological Survey dye test, the water eventually surfaces at Wood Camp Springs, more than 3,000 feet below the cave's entrance. So the cave could be that deep, but chances are something will stop the cavers long before that.

"It's already almost ended itself a couple of times," Shurtz said.

In fact, if a harsh winter significantly increases the water flow inside the cave, the explorers may never make it to this season's stopping point again. At one point, the water is funneled into a small tunnel, with only a foot of air above the torrent.

"You're basically sticking your lips to the ceiling. If it

(the water level) raises about a foot, then you're done," Shurtz said.

The cave can be compared to some of Zion National Park's best and most difficult narrows: four drops of more than 100 feet. Towering slots; rushing tributaries; a long, winding, wide-open section.

But there are some important differences: There is no light, little life and no escape.

It's "eternally dark," as Dave Shurtz, Ryan's father, puts it. Deep in the cave, there are no bats, no moss and certainly no ferns. While you can count on Zion's narrows ending eventually, in this cave, there is no outlet.

Cavers come out the way they came in, climbing back up the ropes and emerging 12 to 14 hours later.

"You go in in the dark, you're in the dark all day and you come out in the dark," Ryan Shurtz said.

This summer, Shurtz made 10 trips to Main Drain, exploring and carefully measuring the cave's dimensions. Several others have been involved, including Dave Shurtz, Jasper, photographer Brandon Kowalis and Thomas Haskett, Deception Pit's first surveyor.

The trips are brutal. As Kowalis says, "It's amazing once you're out of there, but it can be miserable while you're inside."

If the cave gets much deeper, it may become an overnight trip, Dave Shurtz said.

They've found a nice camping spot — other than the "eternally dark" factor — in a room they call High and Dry. That's the last spot on the journey where Ryan Shurtz still feels "warm and happy." But then the cave drops 178 feet, and they rarely leave the frigid water again.

"The hard part now is finding somebody who'll go back," he said.