



The author in Hellhole Cave, WVA

Hello NSS Members,

My name is Kurt Waldron and I recently accepted responsibility for performing the duties of Chairman of the NSS Safety and Techniques Committee. My beginnings in caving were rather humble, with a good friend in the Virginia Area Region (VAR) about 7 years ago. Over time I have done some interesting stuff and learned some interesting things. I am a National Speleological Society (NSS) Vertical Section Member currently teaching the NSS Vertical Section's Basic Vertical Training. I have also successfully completed Level 2 National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC) training. In the past few years I have been actively involved in the Germany Valley Karst Survey Hellhole and Schoolhouse Explorations. Finally, I have performed long rappels at Sotano Golondrinas and El Culabra in Mexico, and tandem rappels at Whitesides Mountain and Bridge Day at New River Gorge Bridge. I hope my caving experience and training have prepared me to serve the NSS and its members as I chair this important committee. What follows is the first of what I hope are many articles about how you and I can be the safest and smartest cavers out there. Your feedback and input to this vital topic will always be appreciated. I can be reached at cave_safe@hotmail.com.

Kurt Waldron

As you prepare to go on a cave trip, there are several things you should include in your pre-trip planning. Taking a moment to think about these things will help you have a safe trip and will give you some amount of protection against the many things that can go wrong while you are underground. Most of the things I suggest are optional and not required. Not doing them does not mean that sirens, bells and whistles are going to go off and the authorities will be called. But it does mean that if something does go wrong the odds are in your favor and you are more likely to experience a happy ending.

The mere fact that you are a caver implies that you are probably comfortable with some level of risk and with the unknown. This is good, but as you prepare for your upcoming trip you should anticipate potential problems and unknowns. You do not want to have a problem while you are underground, so you should never go into the cave without at least taking a few minutes to think about the things which can go wrong on your trip.

The two articles in this series discuss some things that I have found to be an effective way to prepare for your cave trip.

BEFORE YOU GET TO THE CAVE:

A- GROUP SIZE

The first thing you need to think about is the size of your group. NEVER CAVE ALONE. It is dangerous and foolhardy and is a sure recipe for a disaster if you were to have any problems. The smallest group that should ever go underground is 3 people. If someone becomes injured, you can leave someone with this person and send the other member of your team out to get help.

The upper limit for the number of people on a trip depends on the cave and the trip objectives. Two things to think about are caver experience and cave difficulty. You should also consider the speed of your group. There will be times when you will want to limit the size of the group going on your trip.

B- CAVE ACCESS

Make sure that the cave that you are planning on visiting is actually open. If you are unsure about the status of a cave, check with other cavers, your grotto or the NSS. There is never any reason to go into a closed cave! If you need to contact the land owner or the organization which controls access, do it and be sure to get the required permission beforehand. Parking and changing areas are also potential issues. There is nothing worse than an angry land owner who has seen yet another car load of naked cavers changing down the street from his house, in full view of his 3 year old daughter.

C- ESTABLISH A TIME TO BE OUT OF THE CAVE AND A PERSON WHO KNOWS THIS INFORMATION

Make sure at least one person who is not going on your trip knows approximately when you are starting, how many people are going with you, where you are planning on going in the cave and approximately when you expect to be out. Make sure that

person has a list of phone numbers for the local cave rescue groups. This person should understand that he/she is expected to call for help if you have not called by a predetermined time. If local cavers can't be contacted, and other options have failed, the 911 operator would probably be as good a start as anything else. This gets things started sooner, rather than later.

D- DOES EVERYONE HAVE THE SKILLS REQUIRED?

Everyone going on the trip should be physically and mentally up to the challenges associated with that trip. Is everyone vertically competent? If the trip is going to be seriously wet, do you need wet suits? Does someone have a limiting medical condition? The bottom line is if you think that you or someone else on the trip is not up to challenges that you will be encountering, it is far better to bring it up before it is a serious problem when you are in the cave.

2- IF YOU ARE A TRIP LEADER TAKING PEOPLE UNDERGROUND FOR THE FIRST TIME

There are several things that should be discussed with people who have never been underground before. Discussing these things with them will help them be safer and have a better experience.

A- They should always have 3 points of contact when moving over uneven ground.

B- The group needs to stay together. The only reasons to not stay together will involve either someone with an injury or an emergency.

C- They should never exert themselves beyond the limits of their endurance and they should never do anything that they are not comfortable with. Remember, discretion is the better part of valor. If they have any questions or concerns, they should make them known.

D- They need to be made aware of the importance of cave conservation and what it means to them on this trip.

E- Finally, they need to know that if something fails or goes wrong they need to wait for instructions from you, the trip leader. What should be done in a life-threatening situation will be addressed in future articles.

In part two of this article, I will discuss the considerations associated with respect to what to wear and what equipment to take underground with you on a horizontal cave trip.