TCMA PASSAGES
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Robber Baron Open House Draws Hundreds

By Joe Mitchell and Allan Cobb

After five years of work, the completion of the Robber Baron restoration project was marked on November 8, 2008 by a public open house. This was the first time since its commercial days in the early 1930's that the cave was open to the general public. The open house was a chance for people to see the completed project, meet cavers, learn about TCMA, and to tour the cave.

During the Open House, a total of 345 people went into the cave and another hundred or so people just came to visit the Preserve. A number of people who had visited the cave in the 1930's and 40's also attended as well as some cavers who were involved in exploration in the 60's and 70's. Neighborhood residents who had visited the cave as children brought their children to see the cave. A table was set up with information about TCMA and to sell T-shirts. A tent with a TV showed images from the restoration project and from inside the cave.

Photo by Kevin McGowan

Visitors enjoying exploring the cave on their own.

Photo by Kevin McGowan

A young visitor exits after touring Robber Baron while Rob Bisset monitors the entrance.

The cave trips were semi-self guided tours. Visitors were outfitted with helmets, lights, kneepads, and gloves and sent into the cave. Caver volunteers manned strategic points in the cave to direct people and answer questions. The self-guided nature of the tours was very popular with attendees since it gave them a chance to explore the cave at their own pace. The number of available helmets and lights controlled the number of people in the cave.

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VIEW FROM THE PALIT

By Linda Palit

We're almost there, Texas Cavers!!! We, Texas Cavers and TCMA, hope to pay off the mortgage on the Deep and Punkin Cave Preserve this year. You are making it possible to complete our first purchase of a major Texas Cave.

So, what does that mean? TCMA and Texas cavers paid the down payment on the preserve in September 2004. Between the donations of committed Texas Cavers, the fundraising through auctions, garage sales, and breakfasts, and the donation of the Texas Speleological Association's Land Fund, we have almost raised the $123, 000 which completes the purchase of 229 acres of West Texas Land with two gorgeous caves.

This year's Spring Auction, Memberships, and Donations will help us reach this goal—completing the purchase of the Deep and Punkin Cave Preserve! We still owe about $8000 and are hoping to raise that before the end of 2009.

Is this the first of many TCMA acquisitions of caves for the preservation of the cave and for the use of the cave by Texas Cavers? I hope so.

2010 will bring changes to TCMA and to me. I have dedicated a great deal of time to TCMA for the last 10 years, and am now stepping down as chairman at the end of 2009. I believe it is time for new leadership, and I am ready to concentrate on a few other projects.

TCMA has enough money for a down payment on another cave when we find one to purchase. We also have operational money saved for two or three years of property maintenance. TCMA has been lucky in that we have had management contracts on certain caves and are paid for that work. With contracts, however, we are never sure we will be awarded the contract in the coming year.

Our biggest expense every year is insurance. Currently we pay over $10,000 a year in insurance. That expense seems to go up yearly, and is a burden that will not disappear. As we grow, we also have to plan for more expenses at our preserves for maintenance. Even so, I believe we will have enough money to put a down payment on another cave and to meet expenses for the next two or three years.

I want you all to help us celebrate the completion of the purchase of Punkin and Deep Cave preserve. I also want you to think about what you see as the present and the future of TCMA. Ask yourself, What role can I play? Who do you think will commit the time and energy to leading the organization, and how can you support them?

TCMA needs the help and support of our volunteers to reach our goals. Support from our members at every level contributes greatly. Supporting TCMA by donating or purchasing at the TSA Convention auction or at the TCR garage sale is an important source of funds. Supporting the TCMA Breakfasts by helping cook and serve or by getting breakfast also helps. Supporting TCMA by volunteering at a work day or learning to lead cave trips keeps our Preserves in good shape and running smoothly.

Texas cavers have been very generous in their support of TCMA over the years. This is evident in our successes in owning caves and the number of people visiting them. I want to thank all Texas cavers for your support!

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Punkin Cave Survey Report: Expedition #10

By Jim Kennedy

One the weekend of April 3-5, 2009, 11 cavers converged at TCMA's Carta Valley Fieldhouse to try to unravel a few more of the mysteries of Punkin Cave. Punkin is a wonderful 3-D maze cave formed largely through hypogene processes and modified by collapse. The two entrances are both vertical drops into the huge Entrance Room, a large collapse chamber well-lit by daylight. From there, a wide-sloping area leads to the north, and is used as a major summer roost for a non-maternity colony of Mexican free-tailed bats. From that northern end, and all around the Entrance Room, passages take off in all directions. Nine previous mapping trips pushed the cave to 2116m in length and 63m in depth, and there is still no end in sight.

This time we had 3 teams in the cave. Team one, Team Upper Medusa, consisted of Jim Kennedy, Liza Colucci, and Corrine Wong. They spent about 6 hours mopping up leads above last November's Medusa Maze survey. They surveyed 99.05 meters in 29 shots, for an average of 3.42m per shot. Along the way they closed 5 loops, and found the Pissicle Room, an area of active, dark yellow speleothems apparently stained by urine from overlying bat guano. Much passage remains in this area, particularly at UM10 and UM20.

Team 2, Team East Maze, was the "big boy" team with the token skinny lead-pusher. Geary Schindel, Gary Franklin, Arron Wertheim, and

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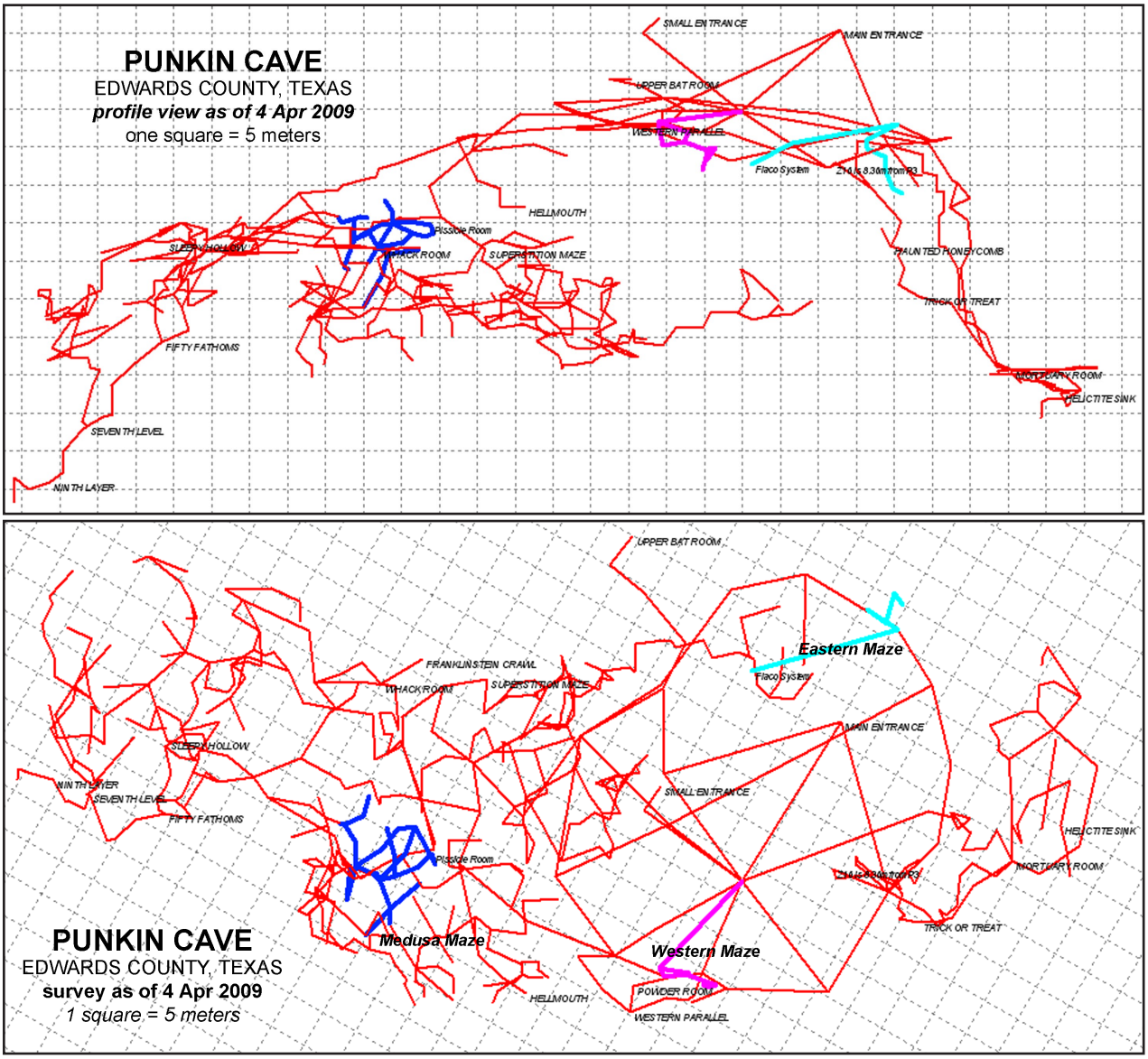

PUNKIN (from p. 3)

Andy "Flaco" Zenker started pushing the most obvious vent holes on the east side of the Entrance Room. They spent about 4 hours or so and got 39.10m of survey in 8 shots, for 4.89m per shot. There are still leads left for a skinny team at the end of the survey, and other holes on the east side remain to be mapped.

Team 3, Team West Maze, consisted of Lee Jay Graves, Bonnie Longley, and George-Paul Richmann. They started mapping down the numerous holes on the western side of the Entrance Room, near the Western Parallel. After a delay where they went back out of the cave for another rope only to find a way to freeclimb a pit, they surveyed 38.18m of passage in 11 shots, for a 3.47m per shot average. Time spent was about 7 hours. They explored ahead in large passage that they plan to return to next trip. This is a complex area with many large air-flow corrosion vents, and hopefully will lead to something great.

While we were all having fun in the cave, Rick Corbell plumbed the new water pump, allowing us to have showers. Some other folks headed into Deep Cave on Sunday with Geary for some trip leader training while the rest of us worked on various projects around the cabin.

In summary, three survey teams in Punkin Cave put in another 48 shots of survey and added another 140.67m of passage to the length of the cave (after some splay shots were removed from the totals). The new length of the cave is now 2257.1m. It is still in the #20 spot on the Texas Long Cave list, only needing another 134.1m to hit #19 (displacing Stowers Cave), 304.9m to hit #18 (displacing River Styx Cave), and 314.9m to hit #17 (displacing Rocket River Cave System). Deep Cave is still 473.3m longer and 14.6m deeper. The depth has not changed, and the cave remains at #28 on the Texas Deep Cave list. The next trip will be sometime after ICS, and after the bats are gone for the year. Punkin survey veterans ("Punkinheads"), stay tuned!

ROBBER BARON (from p. 1)

The open house was primarily advertised in the neighborhood around the cave as a way to thank people for their support, but ended up getting wider publicity from the San Antonio Express-News. Two articles were published in the Express-News—one the morning of the Open House, describing the cave and the restoration project, and a full page article the following day about the Open House with interviews of attendees.

The restoration project and the open house were well received by the neighborhood. Unfortunately, many had to be turned away when the waiting time to enter the cave reached over 2 hours! The popularity of the event and the interest in the cave will certainly mean more events like this in the future. TCMA would like to thank the 45 volunteers who helped make the event a great success!

Photo by Mimi Jasek

Ron Ralph sells T-shirts and answers questions. The line of visitors waiting to tour the cave is seen stretching across the property.

TCMA is a proud sponsor of the 15th International Congress of Speleology to be held in Kerrville, TX, July 19-26, 2009. Visit us or volunteer to help us at our booth and look for a special ICS issue of the PASSAGES.