TCMA PASSAGES

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Successful work weekend at Deep and Punkin Preserve

Work during a volunteer weekend in late March at the Deep and Punkin Caves Nature Preserve resulted in significant progress toward completing new improvements and renovatiing existing facilities.

Don Arburn, the TCMA preserve's manager, started planning well ahead of the event for site work on a shower house as well as a new location for the bathroom building and toilet facility. On March 27-29, he received help from more than a dozen cavers, including TCMA board members. They divided into crews for digging trenches plus dismantling and relocating the dessicating/composting toilet facility and the bathroom above it – called "Carl's Comfortable Crapper" in honor of Carl Ponebshek, a founding TCMA board member who died in 2009.

Because burying water and drain pipe plus electric lines to serve these facilities requires digging through hard limestone, a rock trencher was on site for the job – along with Gill Ediger and other qualified operators to run the equipment.

Other volunteers included Ryan Monjaras, Crash Kennedy, Dale Barnard, Denise Prendergast, Bennett Lee, Galen Falgout, Ellie Falgout, Jay Jorden, R.D. Milhollin and Robert Bisset. They helped dig rock and move heavy materials.

Gill Ediger with rock trencher

A "loo crew" and water tank-cleaning crew were joined by a team of diggers for the weekend, which also included a break to watch the bat flight at Punkin Cave along with a short trip into Deep Cave.

TCMA preserve reports: New Ezell's Cave gate – and more

From Jim Kennedy, Preserves Management Chair

Ezell's Cave: A new, bat-friendly gate was installed in early March at this San Marcos-area preserve. More than $8,000 in in-kind hours were contributed for this project, which was directed by Ron Ralph, the Ezell's preserve manager, and by me as TCMA Preserves Management Committee chair.

The cupola-style gate was fabricated of angle iron and other metal and welded in place to replace an environmentally unfriendly gate at the cave entrance.

The project received excellent media coverage, including an article in the *San Antonio Express-*

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News.

A designated natural landmark, Ezell's and the 3½ wooded acres surrounding it were purchased by TCMA from The Nature Conservancy in 2004.

Research projects for 2014 included continuing groundwater monitoring by the Edwards Aquifer Authority, a dive trip to inventory trash in the lake and investigate possible underwater leads, and a stratigraphic study of the cave.

Godwin Ranch: This Williamson County preserve has been a focus of biological monitoring by TCMA at Temples of Thor Cave and other karst features on the property for threatened/endangered species, trash pickup, and contracted red imported fire ant (RIFA) mitigation.

For this year, fence repairs are planned along with release of an updated management plan for this preserve. Andrea Croskrey is the new preserve manager.

Galen Falgout (L) and Gregg Williams (R) at Ezell's (San Antonio Express-News photo)

Robber Baron Cave: This extensive maze cave with numerous interconnecting passages is the longest known cave in Bexar County (San Antonio) with 5,340 feet (1627.5 m) of mapped passages.

Joe Mitchell, the preserve manager, reported 912 person-visits for 2014 (47% increase) and 1,018 volunteer hours recorded (a 79% increase). Preserve activities included a sixth public open house by TCMA that set new attendance records. Other activities included recreational trips by scout trips and others, biological survey and collection, digging and exploration, 3D mapping, publicity, atmospheric research, maintenance/monitoring and a work project.

Multiple research projects are currently going on in the cave. They include a 3D modeling project, historical research involving a group that explored the cave in 1961, and a biologi-

Lost Oasis Cave Preserve update

By Chris Vreeland, Preserve Manager

Lost Oasis Cave Preserve had a total of 169 visitors in 2014, on 12 different trips. The trips were mostly educational in nature, led by various youth organizations, including Austin Nature and Science Center and Explore Austin. Most visitors were school-age children and their counselors. Bailey Middle School, which is across the street from the property, had science classes visit on two separate occasions this year.

A clean-up of the property was held in May, attended by 13 area cavers, mostly for the purpose of running dry wood through Terry Raines' chipper. Litter was also collected and disposed of and some cedar (Ashe juniper) saplings were removed by chainsaw. A photo survey of the flowering plants at the preserve was begun and will be an ongoing project over the upcoming year.

In 2014, several of the almost 170 recorded person/visits to the preserve were for various work projects (fire ant control and an in-cave dig). Visits included a well-attended work day that saw a lot of littler pickup and the shredding of all the previously cut brush piles, as well as lots of newly cut juniper.

Most trips were educational/recreational in nature, run mainly through the City of Austin.

TCMA preserves: **Rolling Oaks, Whirlpool, UT Lands**

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cal survey by Saint Mary's University. Endangered species have been collected for the Texas Department of Transportation, and the University of Texas at San Antonio is performing a CO2 sampling project.

Along with this work, TCMA volunteers have been periodically mowing and trimming the grounds, cleaning up trash, removing washed-in fill from the steps and sinkhole, and cleaning up brush dumped in the area.

Ongoing digs inside the cave have unearthed some filled leads and may lead to additional passage. Fill is bagged during digging for later removal.

Needs for 2015 include sinkhole wall stabilization issues; additional electrical work, including installation of a motion-activated security light and conduit in the cave.

Rolling Oaks: This San Antonio-area preserve has been the focus of several work projects, digs and cleanups. In 2014, volunteers picked up trash, checked on the property's general condition and continued the dig and cleanup at Niche Cave.

Several large, unstable rocks were removed from the entrance. Volunteers cleared more than one ton of rocks and large boulders from the sloping surface around the Niche Cave entrance.

Niche Cave still has one lead that is totally filled with boulders, and the cave will provide many more trips of enjoyment for diggers. Other activities have included biological sampling of the caves.

For 2015, plans include installing an educational kiosk, walking the boundaries and installing preserve boundary signs.

Volunteers are continuing the cleanout of Niche Cave. A draft management plan will also be presented to the board before the end of the year.

Whirlpool Cave: Additional work days will be scheduled to this Travis County cave, which remains one of TCMA's most visited preserves. Visitation increased 18% in 2014 from the previous year. There were 1,345 documented person-visits, or an average of 3.77 people per day, with many visits purely recreational or educational. Dig trips, training, and maintenance trips accounted for 622 volunteer hours. One cleanup day was scheduled, with a lot of trash picked up. Along with additional volunteer work days this year, faunal surveys have started on a bimonthly basis, in cooperation with the city and county.

The preserve has ongoing issues with crazy ants, although they have been greatly minimized. Future needs include helping to manage an expected increase in area traffic from the opening of a new segment of the Violet Crown Trail near Whirlpool.

Periodic flooding of the cave will also remain an issue. This may require active monitoring along with completion of a draft management plan.

Calendar

Rolling Oaks work day	May 9
Whirlpool Cave work day	May 17
Punkin Cave survey project	June 26
TCMA Board meeting	June 28

University of Texas Lands: Through a written agreement with the UT System, TCMA manages cave access on these lands. Currently, our efforts are focused on two well-known and popular caves, O-9 Well Cave in Crockett County and Amazing Maze Cave in Pecos County. Inquires for access to these two caves or any other caves on UT Lands should be directed to David Ochel, TCMA's UT Lands liaison.

In 2014, there were six trips to O-9 Well and one to Amazing Maze. Two O-9 Well trips were survey trips, and four were recreational/educational.

New maps of both these caves are being prepared. Andrea Croskey is drafting the Amazing Maze map from the survey efforts led by Peter Sprouse. David will assist. David is also working on completion of the new O-9 Well map. One more small side lead remains to be surveyed.

The Texas Water Development Board has also performed water quality analysis on the O-9 Well water.

Summary: Total volunteer hours recorded on all preserves for 2014 were 2,676.75, an increase of 38%. This translates to a value of $35,547.24, more than $10,000 higher than last year. Other contributions, both cash and in-kind, documented in this report add up to $11,681.60. These contributions are very significant, and everyone who participated can be proud of what we accomplished!

Robber Baron Cave open house sets records!

from Joe Mitchell, Preserve Manager

Saturday, November 1, 2014 was the fifth Robber Baron Open House, and it ended up being the biggest and most successful yet, by every measure! Check out these stats:

Visitors Entering the Cave: 439
Visitors Signed In: 457

The previous attendee record was 370 entering the cave in 2011, and we blew that out of the water. The sign-in/ticketing system continues to work pretty well. However, there were moderately long wait times by afternoon and we chose to cut off sign-ins at 2:30 p.m. to ensure everything got done by a reasonable time. We probably could have the gearing process faster by giving out kneepads only upon request. We might want to rearrange things in the cave a bit (like move the photo location and the position of some volunteers) to make things move a bit more efficiently. However, I think things ran pretty smoothly considering how many people went through the cave. More stats:

Volunteers: 72
Volunteer Hours: 483.75 hrs (only includes hours on Nov. 1)

A huge thank-you to everyone who turned out to help! The previous record number of volunteers was 69. We had volunteers from Austin, Houston, and Waco, though I think John and Jill Brooks came the farthest from DFW.

Also, Evelynn rounded up a number of students from St. Mary's University who helped out in various capacities on the surface.

Deep & Punkin crew: Ryan Monjaras (top, L), Dale Barnard, Aaron, Don Arburn, Jay Jorden, R.D. Milhollin, Gill Ediger, Crash Kennedy (bottom L), Denise Prendergast, Galen Falgout, Ellie Falgout, Bennett Lee and Robert Bisset **[photo © Bennett Lee]**

Texas Cave Management Association - a 501(c)3 nonprofit since 1986

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Membership information

Membership Fees:
Regular - $15.00
Associate (Students under 21) - $10.00
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Life (Regular Rate) - $500.00

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Ezell's Cave – Ron Ralph
Godwin Ranch – Andrea Croskey
Lost Oasis – Chris Vreeland
Robber Baron - Joe Mitchell
Rolling Oaks - Ellie Falgout
UT Lands (Amazing Maze, O-9 Well) - David Ochel
Whirlpool - Matt Turner

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