

The Butler Wind Dig

Mark Minton

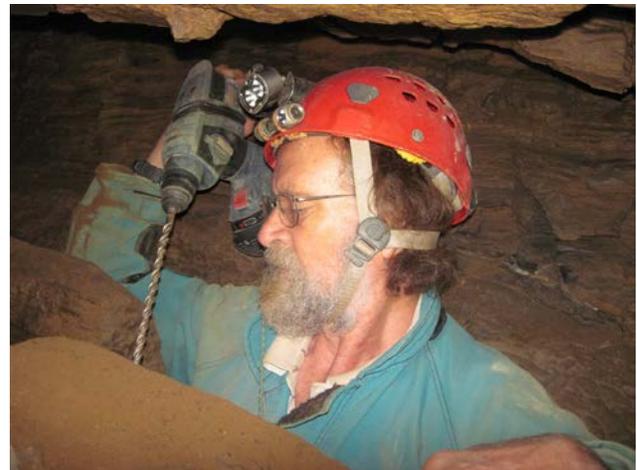
During the July 4, 2013 BCCS Expedition we had two trips into Butler to work on a lead we found (rediscovered, actually) in May. This lead is in the Birthday Passage and is marked “Too Tight, Strong Wind” on the map. It does indeed have strong wind, and it’s on the edge of the known cave and heading downstream off the map. Our previous routes were rather circuitous, but looking at the map suggested that a bypass might be dug between the Upstream Maze and the Rotunda Room. Thus our first order of business was to attempt this bypass.

On Friday, July 5 Tony Canike, Yvonne Droms, Zeb Lilly and I headed in with digging gear. Just past the Natural Bridge I took off into the Maze while the other three proceeded toward Penn State Lake and took Cathy’s Crawl to get to the Rotunda Room. From there they headed northwest to the proposed connection point. I got to the bottom of the dig site about 15 minutes before the others and began removing what fill I could, mindful that I was digging upward through loose breakdown. There was good airflow. I heard them coming before they could hear me, but once we made contact we could immediately see each other’s lights through gaps in the breakdown. It looked promising.

I backed off and Yvonne and Tony started digging from above. They were in an area with loose slabs lodged vertically in a depression in the floor of their passage. Several rocks came down and before long I could see more open space. When Zeb got down into the hole I could see his boots. Before long we had a hole big enough for me to stick my arm through. We could now exchange tools and the digging got easier. Ultimately they passed me the drill and I placed a straw in a large slab wedged in the passage on my side. With it gone we were through! After a bit more clean-up I climbed up and joined the others.



Zeb Lilly in the shortcut with Mark's hand visible from below. (Yvonne Droms)



Mark Minton drilling in the shortcut from the bottom side. (Zeb Lilly)



Tony Canike digging in the shortcut. (Yvonne Droms)



Mark coming through the shortcut. (Yvonne Droms)

There were still several loose rocks around the top of the hole, so we spent some time removing them. Of interest is that there is an anticline visible in the walls of the upper passage, and superimposed on it are many smaller folds. The rock here is very distorted, which may have contributed to the breakdown. The shortcut is now reasonably safe and open for business, although caution is still advised. It cuts off at least 15 minutes and likely more when traveling to the Rotunda Room. In fact, Tony hypothesized that it might now be the preferred route for getting to Penn State Lake as well. It cuts off some nasty low crawls in the traditional route, including one place that frequently has to be dug out after floods.

We packed our bags and headed off to our lead in the Birthday Passage. The rock seemed easier to drill this time and Yvonne and Zeb made good progress enlarging the squeeze just before the dig proper. Meanwhile Tony and I headed up the Towards Boundless Passage to check for leads. We piled up rocks and climbed high enough to see that a “possible high lead” shown on the map muds up and doesn’t go. Near the end of Boundless the situation gets complex, with several small streams converging on the area. One of them seemed to be flowing curiously up dip. We dug into a small room with a 12-foot pit containing a small waterfall that is not shown on the map, but had obviously been visited before. There were no passable leads beyond it though. Further upstream I dug into another side lead and could see into blackness, but it needs enlarging. Even the small stream at the end doesn’t look like a bad dig if you don’t mind lying in the water. None of these areas had much airflow, however.



Yvonne Droms drilling on the squeeze. (Zeb Lilly)



Results of Yvonne's shot. (Yvonne Droms)

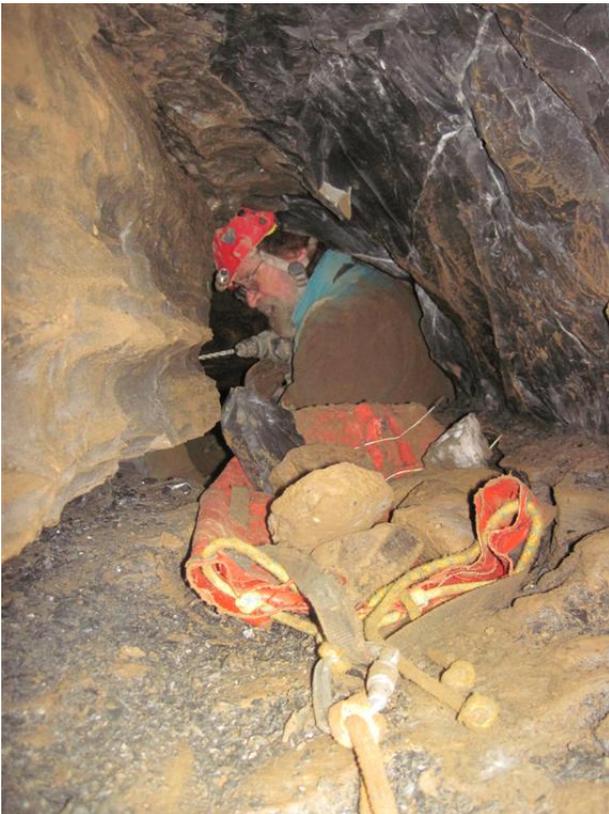


Zeb drilling in the squeeze. (Yvonne Droms)

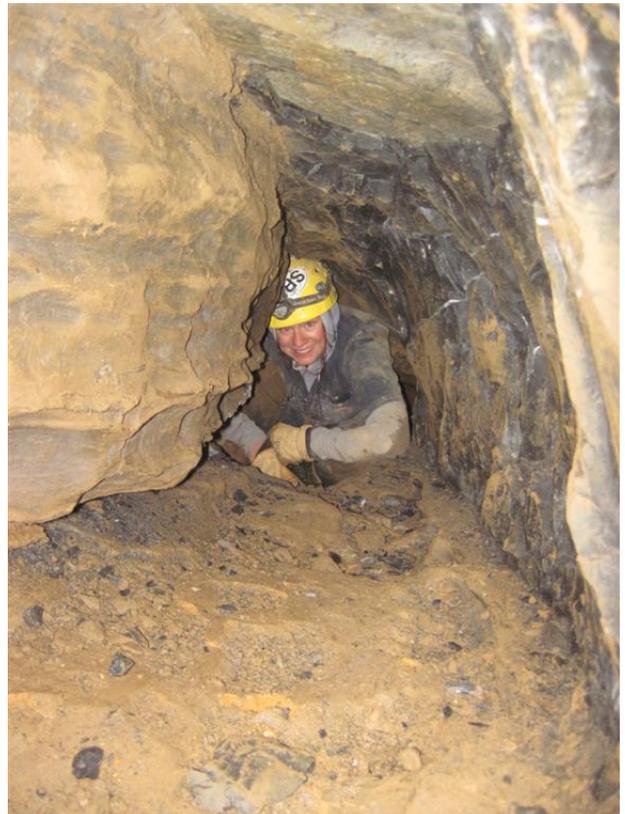


Yvonne working the squeeze from the inside. (Mark Minton)

When Tony and I got back to the lead, Yvonne and Zeb were through and finishing off the squeeze from the inside. We all then tackled the lead itself, which was even smaller. There were a few puddles in a low, tight canyon heading downstream. The air was howling through. The rock was very responsive to our efforts and we shaved off large slabs. In fact, some were too large to remove from the dig site and pass back through the squeeze, so we had to spend time reducing them further by hand. We rigged haul lines to Yvonne's pack and used it as a sled to pull spoils out of the constricted dig area. After a couple of rounds we called it a day and left. We stashed tools for a return trip on Saturday.



Mark working beyond the squeeze. Pack is for pulling out rocks. (Yvonne Droms)



Kiya looking out through the completed squeeze. (Yvonne Droms)

Our trip out went smoothly and all appreciated the bypass. Back in Sand Canyon we noticed several pools that had not been there on our way in. It rained hard the evening before, so apparently it takes about 24 hours for the water to make its way into this part of the cave. We got out at about 8 PM just in time for Jeff and Nancy's luau. The food was great and there was more than we could eat. Thanks, guys!

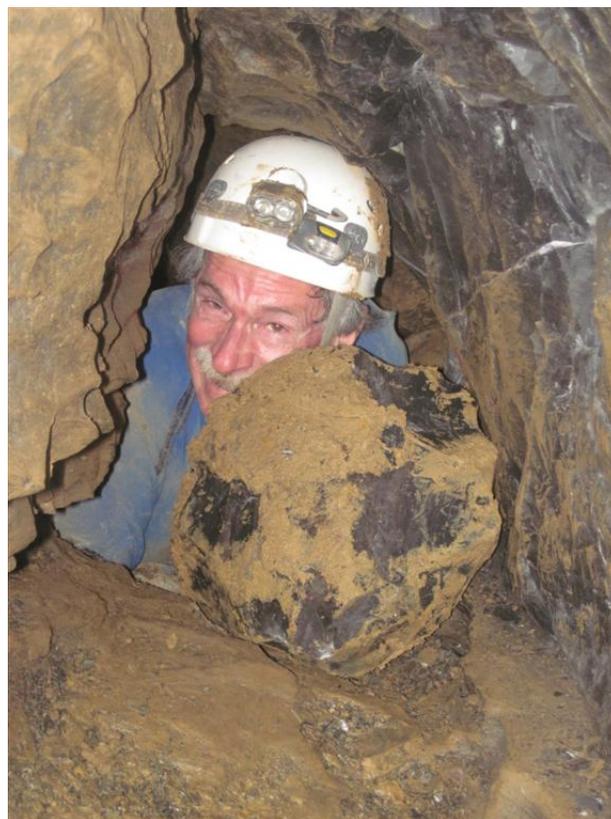
On Saturday, Bob Alderson and Kiya Riverman joined Yvonne and me for a return trip. With no chores along the way we made rapid time to the dig face, utilizing our new shortcut. As I unpacked my supplies I realized I had forgotten to bring drill bits. Arghh!! I left the others to work with the one extra hole we had drilled on Friday and soloed out. I got 2 bits from our van and headed back into the cave. I saw no one around the homestead and spent less than 5 minutes on the surface. I was back at the lead in only 1.5 hours total. It's fast traveling without a companion or a pack!

As it happened I got there in plenty of time. Their first straw had malfunctioned, and they spent a long time extracting it from the hole. The next one worked but they were still dealing with the spoils when I arrived. In what became a common scenario for the day, the rock again broke off in large chunks, often too big to maneuver and send out through the squeeze to our spoil pile in larger passage. We spent considerable time reducing these pieces with a hammer before sending them out, often by pushing with our legs. The rock also broke cleanly along a bed in the ceiling, so it was easy to maintain a comfortable working height.

We rotated time at the front, and Bob and I did a little recon in our down time. I dug open a mud-filled crawl Yvonne had seen in Towards Boundless, but it mudded up completely just out of sight. Bob checked out further upstream in the Birthday Passage, but he turned back at a low spot where he would have had to get his chest wet crawling through pools. Kiya got her first opportunity to drill holes and set straws, and she did great.



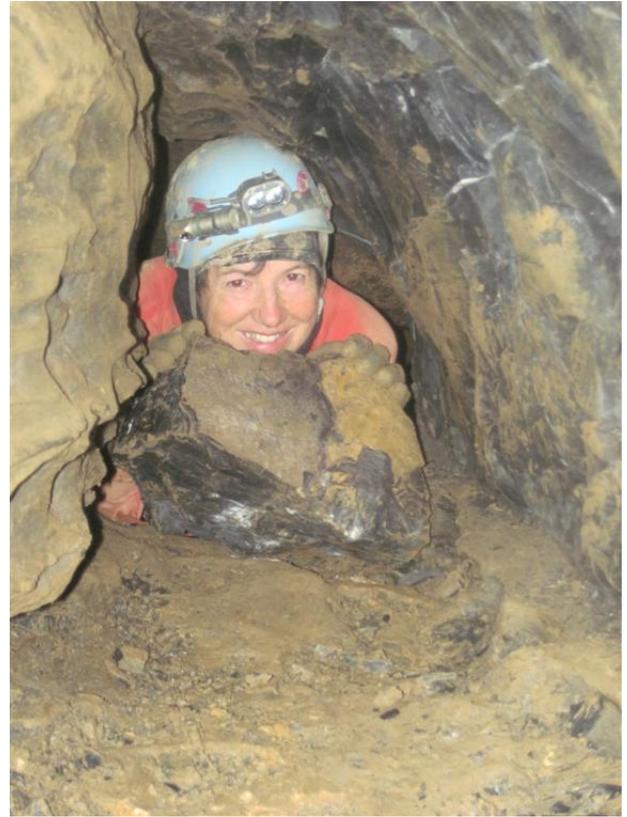
One of the large spoils. (Yvonne Droms)



Bob Alderson pushing a big rock through the squeeze. (Yvonne Droms)



Not bad for a straw! (Yvonne Droms)



Yvonne pushing a big rock through the squeeze.
(Mark Minton)

We used up all of our electrons and opened about 8 feet of the lead. We can see about 15 feet further ahead, and it looks like the passage bottoms out and then begins to rise slightly ahead. It looks to my untrained eye like we are at the base of a shallow syncline. Ahead the floor goes from clean-washed bedrock to being covered with either small cobbles or mud balls. I'm hoping that when we get back up to the level where we started digging, the passage will open up. This is a great lead, possibly one of the best in Butler. We'll be back for sure!

On the way out we were surprised to see that the small stream we cross between the Rotunda Room and the Birthday Passage had almost completely stopped flowing. It has always been flowing every other time we've seen it. The cave in general was still relatively wet, as the pools in Sand Canyon were still present. It doesn't seem likely that our digging activities could have had any effect, so the change remains a mystery.

Back on the surface after 9 hours, we enjoyed warm showers and dinner. After two days of digging we weren't up for much partying and turned in early. It was a great weekend!