

Prospecting in the Upstream Maze of Butler Cave

Mark Minton

On Sunday, May 26 of the 2013 BCCS work weekend Tony Canike, Yvonne Droms and I headed into Butler Cave with the intention of finally getting into a ceiling lead near Snake River that we found back in 2010 on our way out from the Grease Rack climb. We had heavy packs with equipment for widening, bolt climbing and surveying.

Since none of us had been to Penn State Lake in nearly three years, we took a few wrong turns along the way. We noticed occasional pools that didn't bode well for the lake being low. Before even reaching the lake, we had to dig through one crawl where gravel had been piled up nearly to the ceiling. There were also sticks and leaves at least 4 feet off the floor in several low spots, indicating that the cave had taken substantial flow.

When we got to Penn State Lake our fears of high water were confirmed. The water was several inches higher than normal, and we would have had to get our chests and packs wet getting through. We weren't prepared for that, so we opted to check leads in the Upstream Maze instead. Since we had the necessary supplies we decided to look at a lead in the Birthday Passage marked "Too Tight, Strong Wind" on the map.

The most direct route would have been through the Cobblestone Crawl, but Tony said there is sometimes a pool of water in the low crawl leading to it. Tony went in to check, and although he didn't see any water, he said it would involve belly crawling in wet mud. So we went via Cathy's Crawl, which was dry, and the Rotunda Room instead. This is a very pleasant part of the cave that Yvonne and I were glad to get a look at.



Tony passing drill down drop to Mark. (Yvonne Droms)



Mark and Tony digging in the wrong spot. (Yvonne Droms)

Leading out of the Rotunda Room is a tight canyon and crawl that soon opens into a short drop. The drop looked marginally climbable, but since we had a rope and bolts we rigged it. A couple of etriers made perfect handholds, so we didn't need our vertical gear. Shortly beyond the drop the passage degenerates into a series of crawls and picks up a small stream. We got temporarily disoriented when we thought the passage had completely filled with cobbles, but then realized that the way on was up a tight canyon overhead.

The canyon had good air and looked out into blackness, but we couldn't fit through the initial squeeze. This was only a minor inconvenience since we had widening supplies with us, so we set to work. The wind was so strong that it carried rock dust from the drill into the squeeze and deposited it in a fine layer all over the passage. After three shots we were in.



Drill in the squeeze. Note rock dust covering passage beyond. (Yvonne Droms)



Tony coming through the squeeze. (Yvonne Droms)

Heading up toward the Birthday Passage is also very nice walking with lots of scallops on the walls. After about 300 feet the passage becomes floored with active flowstone and rimstone dams. Our lead was to the left at a four-way junction. Surprisingly, it involved climbing down a 6-foot drop. Most of the air went into this passage. Straight ahead Yvonne noticed many raccoon tracks in the mud at the bottom of a rimstone pool. To the right is the Towards Boundless Passage, and it also dropped to a lower level. This is a curious situation because the Birthday Passage splits into three apparently independent downstream passages at the junction.

Shortly after the climb-down into our lead, I noticed organic debris on the ceiling in passage 7 feet high. The reason was soon obvious: the passage quickly degenerated into a low, tight bedrock squeeze. Blackness was visible ahead and someone had been through this as indicated by the map, but none of us could fit. So we started enlarging at the squeeze. This is some of the hardest rock I have

ever drilled into. I used up almost an entire battery and many minutes to drill a single 3/8 hole 11-inches deep. All of the rock dust was sucked horizontally into the lead and disappeared.



Raccoon tracks in Towards Boundless Passage. (Yvonne Droms)

While I drilled, Yvonne and Tony took photos of the coon tracks. When the straw was in place we retreated to the junction and set it off. Before going back in, we explored a little of Towards Boundless, which also has some leads and more coon tracks. Back at the lead we found only a modest amount of rock had been removed. Without a proper sledgehammer we were not able to muck it out very effectively. When Yvonne tried to drill another hole, she quickly ran out of electrons. It looked like we were done for the day.

We decided to go out via the Upstream Maze to see how it compared with the gravel crawls on the route to Penn State Lake. Back at the Rotunda Room we gathered our extra gear and took off toward the Duke Dump Section. Some passages in this area have been completely filled with cobbles and then re-eroded, leaving a weird ceiling of cemented cobbles and in one spot a cobble natural bridge.

This section of the cave is not as easy to traverse as it might seem from looking at the map. There are a lot of crawls and squeezes and scrambles up and down. There are also several passages that do not actually go through even though they look like they should on the map. We took a few wrong turns and resorted to pulling out the map at every intersection to figure out where we were. At one spot we noticed a very nice anticline exposed in the bedding. Eventually we made it back out into the main passage near the Natural Bridge.



Yvonne drilling in the Birthday Passage lead. (Mark Minton)

The rest of our trip out was uneventful, but we sure noticed how uphill it is from Sand Canyon back to the entrance at the end of Dave's Gallery. We got out at about 9:30 PM after 10.5 hours underground to a nice party around the fire. We're excited to get back to our lead. It is in a good place at the edge of the map, going downstream with lots of wind. I suspect there are plenty of other places to find leads in the Upstream Maze as well.