



The Western Cave Conservancy

Protecting the West's Last Frontier

Vol 2 No 3 Summer/Fall 2005

Avalanche Surprise

Good news! We just learned that Avalanche Cave in the northern Sierra may be acquired by the U.S. Forest Service, and your support could make a big difference.

Back in 1997, members of the Mother Lode Grotto (a chapter of the National Speleological Society) nominated Avalanche for federal "significant cave" status. Later, the WCC discovered that the land isn't federal, but is owned by Sierra Pacific Industries, while the mineral rights are owned by Newmont Gold. The nomination was disqualified by the Forest Service but retained for their records. Forgotten, we thought; that is, until the Yuba River Ranger District gave us a pleasant surprise...

They have selected the 480-acre property as a candidate for purchase by the Forest Service, under the 2007 Land and Water Conservation Fund program. The WCC has contacted Sierra Pacific about the plan, and they indicated that they would cooperate with the sale. The district ranger anticipates no problem acquiring the mineral rights.

Avalanche Cave is quite significant. With 2,620 feet of mapped passage, it is the largest known Sierra Nevada cave north of Amador County. Notable features include spacious walking passages, an active stream, historic remnants, and formations such as soda straws, helictites, boxwork, and unusual anthodite-like sprays. The cave hosts a rich fauna including wood rats, Townsend's Big-Eared Bats, and numerous invertebrates. At least four smaller caves have been explored on the same property. Complex hydrology is suggested by a pe-



Photo: Matthew Leissring

Above ground (top) near Avalanche Cave. Anthodite-like sprays (lower left) and boxwork (lower right) are among the unique features of Avalanche Cave.



Photo: Matthew Leissring



Photo: Marianne Russo

renial resurgence thousands of feet from the main cave as well as other snowmelt-activated springs and an unusual artesian well.

Last year, the WCC met with Sierra Pacific's forester to acquaint him with the caves. He agreed to adjust the harvest to spare trees around the entrances of the smaller caves, between the creek and the main cave, and a good distance uphill.

In a preliminary assessment by the forest district biologist, this property ranked first among several considered. But since it must compete with other districts' candidates for conservation fund purchases in 2007, we need members of the public to express strong support for this acquisition. The District Ranger wants to hear

from you! Email her at jmasquelier@fs.fed.us or write to:

**Middle Yuba River Acquisition
attn: Jeannie Masquelier
Yuba River Ranger District
15924 Highway 49
Camptonville, CA. 95922**

IN THIS ISSUE	
AVALANCHE SURPRISE.....	1
CONSERVATION EASEMENTS.....	2
CAVE CONSERVATION HEROINE.....	3
WCC PROJECT UPDATE.....	3
CAVE CAPERS IN PACIFIC GROVE...	4

If you've visited the property, emphasize your personal knowledge of the caves and their importance to you. Describe any wildlife you've observed, including bats, salamanders (especially if web-toed), and invertebrates. Be as specific as you can.

Thanks for your help protecting this outstanding California cave!

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WESTERN CAVE CONSERVANCY

What is a Conservation Easement, Anyway?

by Bill Frantz

A conservation easement is a partial interest in a piece of land. In it, the landowner agrees to provide certain kinds of public benefit, for example, limiting development, and another organization agrees to enforce the restriction. Easements written according to certain guidelines of federal and state law may enjoy significant tax benefits. The actual benefits will depend, among other things, on the owner's tax situation, the details of the easement, and the ever-changing tax laws. Federal law provides tax advantages for perpetual easements protecting public recreation, wildlife habitats, public views, and historic sites. In all cases, the public benefit must be significant, which can be achieved by implementing local, state, or national policies.

A sample easement can illustrate some of these points. Consider the owner of a 100-acre wood lot. The area is developing and the value of the property has risen. Being "land rich, and cash poor," the owner is concerned that his children may have to sell the land to pay the inheritance taxes. By working with a local land conservancy, he can grant an easement that preserves his right to harvest timber, but forbids subdivision and building. By agreeing to limit future development, he reduces the market value of the property, thereby reducing his real estate taxes and the eventual inheritance taxes.

In order to qualify for tax relief, significant public benefit must be shown. Since the wood lot contains trails that may be used by the public, provides habitat for local wildlife, and borders a public highway, the easement emphasizes recreational benefits, habitat preservation, and view preservation to demonstrate public benefit.

Holding an easement entails many responsibilities. The conservancy must, "in perpetuity," monitor for violations of the easement. While the original owner is unlikely to want to violate the terms of the ease-

ment, subsequent owners may want to profit from development that the easement prevents. The ensuing legal battles will require a defense fund. The regular monitoring will also cost money. Frequently, the landowner will contribute to a monitoring fund as part of donating the easement.

How do conservation easements apply to caves?

Public recreation is fairly obvious. If the public can freely visit the cave, limited only by policies needed to protect the cave, the public is getting a significant recreational value.

Masonic Cave in Volcano is a good example of a case where an easement could be written for public recreation.

An easement can also be written to protect a listed or endangered species. However, the usual practice is to write such



Photo: Heather McDonald

easements to protect the habitat, rather than the species, so the easement can remain in force even if the species no longer inhabits the property.

Easements can also be written for historically significant caves. Having the cave on a national or state list of historic places is probably necessary to show this type of public benefit. Writing an easement for a cave like Cave City Cave, with its history of Gold Rush era use, should be possible.

In addition to holding easements on lands that belong to others, the Western Cave Conservancy may want to grant an easement on land it owns. For instance, we could give an easement to a forest conservancy for the forest over a cave, thereby reducing the value of the land, and our attraction as "deep pockets" in a lawsuit.

In summary, easements are a very flexible way of protecting conservation values. Carefully written, they can provide tax benefits for the property owner, and allow a conservancy to protect conservation values at much less cost than outright purchase of the property.

Cave Conservation Heroine

Mary Roberts

by Peri Frantz

Not all Cave Conservation Heroes are big name cavers. As is the case with this season's hero, heroes don't even need to go caving. Sometimes working quietly behind the scenes and making it possible for others to do great deeds is what it takes.

For many years, the annual Crystal Sequoia Restoration Camp has been a major Western Region conservation activity. Tons of debris, much of it from inappropriate modifications of prior years, have been removed from the cave. Vast stretches of formations have been cleaned. Trails have been improved. For the past two years, the Restoration Camp has expanded to a weeklong effort bracketed by two weekends. This makes more complex projects possible. Last year the trail through the Organ Room was removed and a pre-fabricated bridge installed, to keep tourists away from the Organ formation while at the same time providing a better view. Deconstruction of the long disused in-cave toilets was also begun. This year removal of the bathrooms was completed, and major strides were made in returning the service area to a natural cave habitat. Deeper in the cave, the trail past the Ephemeral Pools was narrowed, and flowstone long buried was uncovered to begin the slow process of regeneration.

And where does our heroine come into this picture? For two years in a row, for nine straight days, Mary Roberts has provided the Restoration Camp volunteers with three hot meals a day. She has been up long before dawn scrambling eggs, cooking cereal, and mixing up orange juice. She has provided bag lunch makings and hot soups and entrees for lunch. She has prepared scrumptious dinners for the hungry maws of cavers with the appetites of firefighters. And after it has all been eaten, though others have pitched in, she has done most of the cleanup. Last year she cooked through a week of sleet and snow. A wandering bear used her bear-proof food storage box as a football, and although he never got the box open, by the time he was bored with the game, it's contents were unusable. Mary found other things to cook. This year the weather was more cooperative, but the cooking was still non-stop. Vegetarians? Yes, she had food for them. Lactose intolerant? Yes, again.

Mary's efforts begin long before the camp. She does all the planning and all the shopping. When she and her husband, "Big Bill" Roberts, arrive at Crystal Cave, they're in two separate vehicles, one towing a house trailer with a kitchen, and the other, a utility trailer with food and other supplies. Out come the portable dishwashing set-up, multiple bear boxes, tables, dishes, awnings, and countless quantities of other equipment. Ten days later, when it's all over, she and Bill pack it all up, haul it back to Oxnard, and clean it all up to be ready for next year. All this for \$10 per day, which doesn't even cover the food.

Mary is most certainly my Cave Conservation Heroine. She makes it all possible. Joel Despain, Cave Specialist for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks agrees. When asked to comment, he replied, "Mary has kept the cost low and the quantity high, which has been great. We have been much more productive because of her. Her very mellow demeanor is also just great." Mary, we can't thank you enough.



Photo: Peri Frantz

WCC Project Update

Over the past several months WCC volunteers have been working to secure protection for caves in several states. Here's a closer look at what we've been up to.

On May 14, 2005, ten WCC members braved the mosquitoes and poison oak to help Jim Hildebrand, chair of Diablo Grotto's **Windeler Cave Management**



Photo: Peri Frantz

Dale Hartwig uses a chainsaw to remove a downed snag from the trail near Windeler Cave.

Committee, clear the road and trail to the cave. This extraordinarily sensitive central California cave, located on national forest land but managed since its re-discovery by the committee, was sealed nearly

a decade ago following a break-in that destroyed the gate. It will remain closed until a more secure gate design and management strategy can be implemented. Pending approval from the national forest, these are processes in which the WCC has been invited to participate. Our work on the road will facilitate continued monitoring of the cave entrance, and demonstrates that the Conservancy can field the volunteers needed to reopen and steward one of California's most outstanding and fragile caves.

Our thanks everyone who worked that day: John Tinsley; Marianne Russo; Scott and Rosalie Redenbaugh, Dale, Sherry, and Greg Hartwig; Peri Frantz; Martin Hays; and Dave Bunnell.

We never expected it to take so long to get **Rippled Cave**, but we have to play the cards we're dealt. The owner has been doing careful estate and tax planning (something many of us could benefit from doing ourselves) and it's taking a while to resolve all the legal details and locate a suitable property for a 1031 exchange. He is still committed to the deal and we'll conclude it as soon as we can.

As reported on our email list, negotiations have broken down in our efforts to protect **M2 Cave** in Southern Oregon. We explored many options (including a federal land swap, splitting the property,

continued on page 4

Project Update, continued from page 3

and various gating/management scenarios) but nothing panned out. Essentially, the current owners won't commit to anything that might make it more difficult for them to market the entire property. We'll maintain contact with the owners in case the situation changes, and would be happy to place any conservation-minded person or group with the resources to purchase the entire 642 acres in touch with them. Saddened as we are by this situation, it does free up resources to pursue other projects in the Northwest. If you know of an endangered cave that is, or might be, on private land, the WCC wants to hear from you. We are aware of several important caves on privately-owned land in Oregon and Washington, but are poorly informed about potential threats facing them or whether local cavers would support their acquisition by the WCC or the government.

The ever-energetic Tom Gilleland has been



Tom Gilleland

talking to landowners public and private in **Arizona**, passing on information about the WCC and cave conservation in general. He's planting seeds and building relationships, and we're confident

these will bloom in time to the benefit of Arizona caves and those who love them.

the WCC is also lucky to have Mike White, chairperson of the Columbia Grotto, NSS and a fireball of energy who is developing relationships with several cave owners in **Calaveras County**, California. A native son of Calaveras, Mike has known many key landowners since he was a boy. His local perspective, straightforward and candid approach, and the help he gives area ranchers and public land managers have opened doors to better cave protection in the Stanislaus River area and may even lead to an acquisition.

Our thanks go out to Tom, Mike, and all the volunteers that make our work a joy. And **you** are important too. Thanks for putting your support behind us!

Cave Capers at the Pacific Grove Natural History Museum



Education is a major component of the Western Cave Conservancy's efforts to inform the public about the importance and fragility of the subterranean world. On Saturday, December 3, the WCC, in concert with the Western Region of the National Speleological Society (NSS), seized an opportunity to deliver this message. Since late October, the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History <<http://www.pgmuseum.org/>> has been exhibiting "Caves: A Fragile Wilderness," a series of

photographs by NSS members, being circulated by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). NSS News editor and WCC member Dave Bunnell helped launch this exhibit with a public lecture titled "California's Sea Caves: Adventures in the Intertidal Zone." December 3rd was the Museum's Family Fun Day, a day of "storytelling, crafts, cave critters, and spelunking." The WCC and Western Region were among the numerous organizations offering informational displays and a variety of learning activities. Other organizations

included the California Native Bat Conservancy, the Ventana Wilderness Sanctuary Condor Release Program, and Pinnacles National Monument.

The WCC exhibit featured photographs of endangered western caves and the NSS traveling Cave Conservation Display. A "mini-cave," created by throwing blankets and plastic sheeting over several adjacent tables invited participants to don helmets and lights and crawl through the dark. For some of the smaller children, the darkness was intimidating, so their parents just *had* to crawl in with them. On loan from the Oakland Museum, the Stalactite



A kid slithers into the Stalactite Crawl box.

Crawl box challenged people to slither carefully below a ceiling of plastic pipe stalactites without "breaking" any. Many chose to experience both "caves" over and over again. Throughout it all, volunteers Matt Bowers, Bill Frantz, Peri Frantz, Mindy Goldberg, and Dan Snyder had the opportunity to talk, talk, talk. We told people about the Conservancy, about California's wonderful commercial caves, about the NSS, and the challenges facing the cave owners and managers. All in all, it was a

wonderful chance to get out our message and to meet the public. We thank the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History for asking us to participate.