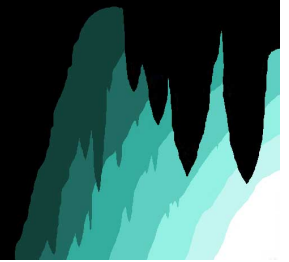


# Western Cave Conservancy

Protecting the West's Last Frontier

Vol 7 No 1 Winter 2010



## Windeler Gated & Reopened

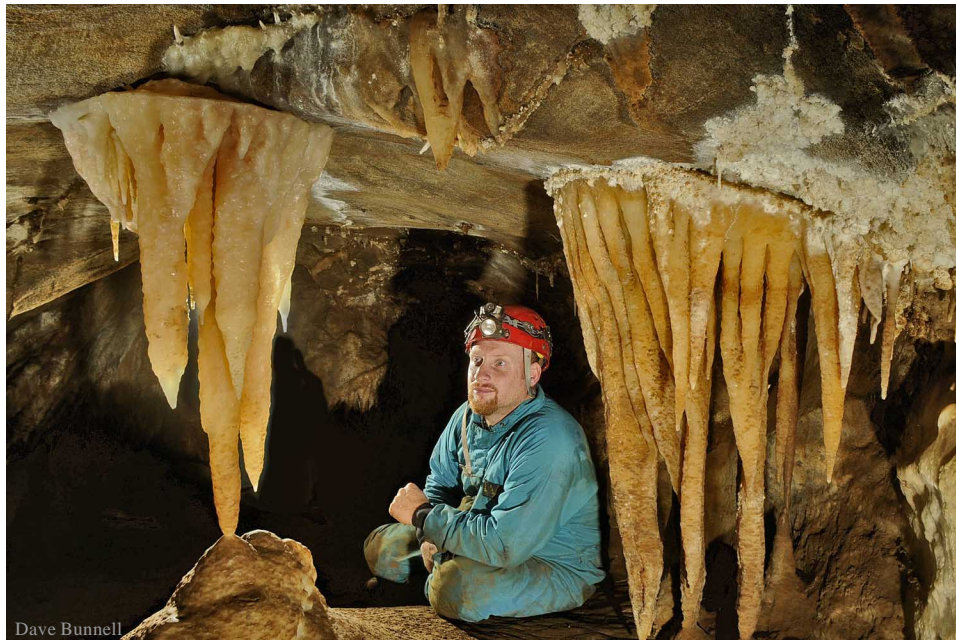
We have exciting news about Windeler Cave: the cave is once again gated (as opposed to plugged with concrete), and WCC is introducing a brand new trustee program. That means for the first time in 12 years there will be regular trips going to the cave! In this article you'll find a brief overview of the cave and WCC's involvement with it, then the story of our recent gating and reopening activities, the people that got it done and how they work together, and finally details of the new trustee program.

### Background

Windeler cave was discovered by gold miners in about 1946. They were blasting a shaft in hopes of reaching the "mother lode", the famous gold-bearing vein in the Sierra Nevada that is, unfortunately for these miners, very far away. However, their shaft intersected an exceedingly beautiful and untouched cave. We now call it "Windeler Cave" after Charlie Windeler, the main miner and also its chief protector in those early years.

Charlie Windeler recognized the value of keeping this cave in its pristine condition. Many similarly beautiful caves in the Mother

caves with concrete paths and walking tours; they're no longer "wild." Windeler kept his cave from suffering either fate; some say he blasted it shut with dynamite to keep it safe. We do know it was buried under tons of rubble for years. The exact location faded from memory and the cave passed into myth.



Members of Diablo Grotto led by Ernie Coffman (who is still involved with managing the cave) heard about Windeler's cave and set out to find it. By dint of research, careful investigation, good luck and a great deal of hard labor they located and reopened the cave in 1972, subsequently forming a committee to manage the cave. They installed a gate and began trips to enjoy, map,

and study the cave. However it was plagued by a series of break-ins, and the committee had to fix and replace the gate several times. The final break-in was in 1997 and the committee just wasn't up to doing yet another gate. So they sealed the cave with concrete and there it sat, buried again for years.

### Gating and Reopening

Recognizing the need for someone to take over active management of the cave, the Diablo committee contacted the WCC and asked if we'd be interested in managing the cave. In 2007 we completed negotiations with the U.S. Forest Service (they own the land) and signed an agreement taking responsibility for the cave.

From 2007 to 2009 WCC worked on a new gate, first at a slow pace and then picking up speed. Jim Hildebrand put numerous hours and a lot of his personal resources into the project and for that we are grateful. At the same time we needed to build up a committee of dedicated, conservation-minded people that could

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Lode area have been ruthlessly vandalized and gutted by careless visitors. For example Crystal Palace cave once had numerous gorgeous formations; nearly all are now broken and muddled. Other caves in the area have become show

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sustainably manage the cave. This culminated with a new committee in 2009 followed by installation of the shiny new gate. While so far nobody has attempted another break-in, history tells us to expect it at any time. We are working to build a second gate to keep “in our back pocket.”

Finally having secured the entrance, the committee then engaged in two reconnaissance trips to learn what we’d actually gotten into, and develop ideas of how best to protect the resource while providing for balanced access to careful explorers. We are very happy to report that the cave is in great shape! Charlie Windeler, and the Diablo Grotto after him, did a truly exemplary job of protecting this cave. While there are a few restoration projects we’d like to undertake, it is by and large in the same “underground wilderness” state as it was at the time of its discovery, and WCC means to keep it that way.

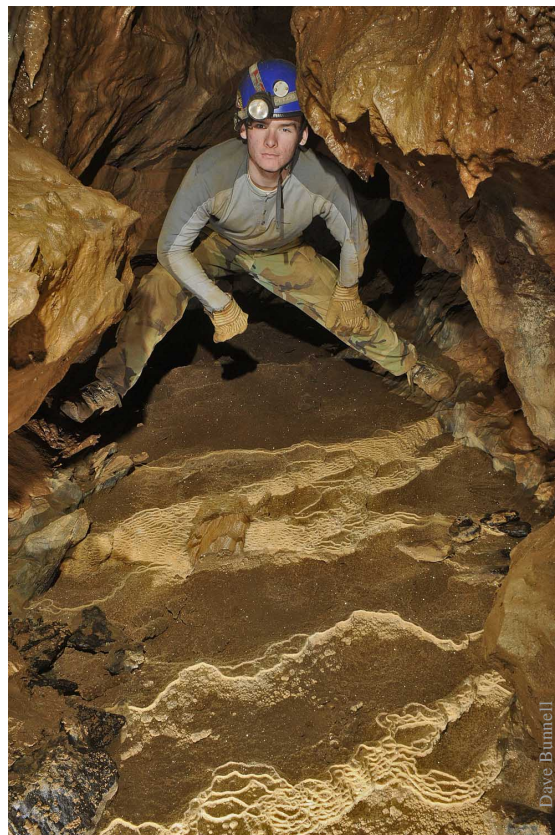
WCC has established an excellent working relationship with the Stanislaus National Forest (Mi-Wuk District) and has their full support of our mission to provide access to and protect this very special resource.

### The New Windeler Committee

When we signed the management agreement, we weren’t really sure how to proceed. What should the new committee look like? How big should it be, who should be on it, and how should decisions be made? These were tricky questions as many people had opinions and a strong desire to see the cave after its long closure.

Stewardship Director Martin Haye formally created the committee at the beginning of 2009, drawing from a list of people who volunteered. The goal has been to achieve a balance of different groups of interested people, make decisions efficiently, and get the work done. The current committee members represent the nearby National Speleological Society chapters (called “grottoes”) as well as cavers unaffiliated with any grotto. They were chosen based on enthusiasm they expressed and their complementary abilities. Membership is not fixed; there is a healthy interchange as new people enter and others step out over time. The current members are:

- ◆ Daniel Hewitt (Stanislaus)
- ◆ Dave Bunnell (Mother Lode and Columbia)
- ◆ Charlie Hotz (Diablo)
- ◆ Chuck Chavdarian (Diablo)
- ◆ Chuck Lee (Diablo)
- ◆ Dale, Sherry, and Greg Hartwig (Mother Lode and Columbia)
- ◆ Dan Snyder (Mother Lode)



- ◆ Ernie Coffman (Diablo)
- ◆ Jef Levin (Diablo)
- ◆ John Tinsley (San Francisco)
- ◆ Kelley Prebil (San Francisco)
- ◆ Martin Haye (WCC director)
- ◆ Mike White (unaffiliated)
- ◆ Scott Redenbaugh (Stanislaus)
- ◆ Tony Williams (unaffiliated)

We devised an innovative system for quickly coming to decisions on all manner of issues from simple to thorny. The committee operates entirely by email, and everyone has a voice in the process and plenty of time to “say their piece.” Here’s how it works: Martin introduces one or two new issues at a time. After a week of email discussion he summarizes the developing consensus; a further week of discussion can be used to hammer out finer points or for people to elaborate or change their minds. At the end of two weeks Martin records the final decision and the process begins anew. In very rare instances consensus isn’t reached and in those situations Martin makes the best decision he can given all the input. Of course all decisions made by the committee are subject to review by the WCC Board of Directors.

### Trustee Program

A very important but complex area of discussion was how to allow reasonable visitation to the cave. The committee has decided on a trustee system inspired



by those used by the National Park Service. Six trustees are selected by the committee, serving for about two years. Each trustee is allowed to lead one trip to the cave per year, starting this year. Here are the current trustees and who they are expected to represent:

Jef Levin (Diablo)

- ◆ Kelley Prebil (San Francisco)
- ◆ Dave Bunnell (Mother Lode and Columbia)
- ◆ Dale Hartwig (Mother Lode and Columbia)
- ◆ Mike White (unaffiliated cavers, plus out-of-area cavers on occasion)
- ◆ Martin Haye (Stanislaus and San Joaquin, plus out-of-area cavers on occasion)



Each trip consists of between 4 and 6 cavers (including the trustee). Typically the trustee will lead at the front of the group, and designate an especially experienced “caboose” from the participants to bring up the rear. Between them the trustee and caboose can monitor everyone in the group, though all participants should of course be looking out for one another. The cave often requires very care-

ful movement so having everyone watch each others’ heads and feet avoids damage to delicate cave formations.

Many trustee trips will include some restoration work. For instance some places have mud left by former explorers that should

be cleaned off. Larger maintenance projects, along with a baseline inventory, will be conducted by the committee separately from the trustee trips.

### The Future

We’re very excited! WCC has made great progress by opening and securing Windeler cave, establishing a sustainable process for making decisions, and putting a trustee system in place. Those who want to visit the cave are encouraged

to contact a trustee. Due to the small trip size it may take a while to get in, but the wait is worth it. We must all follow (literally and figuratively) in the careful footsteps of those who came before us, and stay true to their legacy of keeping and enjoying Windeler’s underground wilderness.

## Interested in making a difference?

### Want to get more involved in the WCC and keep up with what is going on?

We are looking for you! The WCC Advisory Board might be a good fit. Advisory Board members are individuals who are interested in seeing the WCC succeed and interested in learning more about how they can help. They are appointed for two-year terms, renewable indefinitely, and are welcome, but not required, to attend the quarterly board meetings and are included on the board email list where we discuss project, issues, plans and upcoming meetings and events. Members will receive copies of meeting agendas, minutes and reports to keep them up-to-date on WCC decisions, news and needs. What the WCC is looking for from the Advisory Board members can vary widely. It could be the expectation that we will have a local representative who knows what is going on and can “talk us up” with cavers in their local area and bring back questions and ideas from these folks to us. Or perhaps a member might have some special expertise that can be contributed occasionally (legal, real estate, insurance, accounting, procurement, building, etc.). We are also looking for a few people willing and able to take on roles of real responsibility by becoming Directors of the organization.

**Joining the Advisory Board is a big statement of your concern and commitment to the WCC but NOT a big commitment of time unless you choose to give it.**

**Interested? Email or call Marianne Russo: [mrusso@westerncaves.org](mailto:mrusso@westerncaves.org) (916) 663-2571 (until 11:30 pm).**



# *Letter from the President*

Dear Friends:

Well, this will be my last letter to you as President of the Western Cave Conservancy. As of January 30, I will be stepping down. I won't be going far however, just moving over a seat or two, to become the Director of Public Relations. This office has been open for a while and I was eager for a change of responsibilities and a chance to accomplish some different things for the organization.

I have enjoyed being President since we began the WCC over eight years ago. It has been an interesting and rewarding experience, sometimes exciting, sometimes frustrating, but always worthwhile. We have not reached all of the goals we thought we would by this time; but what we have done, I think we have done well. We persisted through the long and sometimes disheartening efforts of trying to buy Rippled Cave and trying to sign an M.O.U. (Memorandum of Understanding) with the Stanislaus National Forest for the management of Windeler Cave. Now we have owned Rippled Cave and the 15-acre Weller Preserve for almost four years and have built a multi-purpose field house there. Windeler Cave has now been reopened, gated and a new management plan is well underway. These are accomplishments I am very proud to have been part of. This was a wonderful time to have an opportunity to lead an organization and be a voice to the great community of cavers.

I am really looking forward to my new PR duties and have a lot of ideas I am anxious to implement. One of my most important goals will be to increase WCC membership and get news and information out to as many cavers and cave lovers as possible. A more frequent newsletter, a reactivated email list and an updated website are all part of this plan. Personally, I see the WCC as being much more than just an organization that owns and manages caves. I also see us facilitating cave education and conservation in many different ways. Any event, activity, or information source that fosters these goals can be an appropriate avenue for WCC involvement.

Thank you all for your support over the last nine years—both to the WCC and to me personally. This has truly been a great experience and I have been honored to have the trust of my fellow directors and the opportunity to grow as a leader.

Cave Softly,

Marianne Russo  
President, Western Cave Conservancy

# Why Are We Called the Western Cave Conservancy?

by Marianne Russo

Last summer at the International Congress of Speleology (ICS), held concurrently with the NSS National Convention, I attended an informal roundtable discussion with several other American cave conservancies. Among many other topics of shared interest the subject of a conservancy's name, what it means to the founders and how it is interpreted by those outside of the organization. The WCC was picked as an example of one whose name seemed to far exceed their logical area of influence. This was interpreted to be a potentially negative name choice for the following reason. Most of the eastern cave conservancies have a name which clearly

defines the territory they acquire caves in, and for the most part they do not seem to overlap with other conservancies' regions. The choice of such a broad and indistinct name like "Western" seemed to some of the attendees to imply that we wanted to be the only conservancy in the west, and were by the choice of that name actively discouraging the creation of any other conservancies in "our" area.

Nothing could be further from the truth! Our goal is to foster, promote and facilitate cave conservation and protection through any means possible. One outstanding way to do this is to assist other groups of cavers to

create local conservancies in their own state or region. However, until there are other conservancies available, we want everyone to feel that there is an organization that they can turn to for help. We can provide help in a variety of ways. For instance we have a board of advisors, many of whom have a wealth of experience in project caving, conservation efforts, cave management, survey, inventory and science. These folks are linked by email and can provide a lot of useful input on short notice. We have funds which we are willing to use as matching grants for deserving projects such as cave gating, restoration, or inventory. We would be happy to assist local cavers in raising money to purchase a cave and develop their own conservancy organization to own and manage it.

We aren't just focusing on private land and cavers either. We are currently working with government agencies like the US Forest Service to provide cave management expertise and with the National Park Service to assist with a gating and restoration project by organizing volunteer labor. Throughout the west, agencies such as these, own many caves and karst regions. There is seldom enough money or personnel to adequately manage and protect these many resources as they deserve. Western cavers have an outstanding tradition of volunteering to help with these efforts and the WCC organization can now provide additional services that individuals are not really equipped to.

Folks, the bottom line is this: Caves are special places, we love them, you love them. We want to see them protected and preserved for their own sake and wherever possible for our appreciation and enjoyment also. Preservation and access, two goals very precious to all of us. It will take everyone's commitment and cooperation to make sure we protect as much as we can. The Western Cave Conservancy is *not* about how many caves are under the control of the WCC Board of Directors. It is about promoting the protection of caves in the west in any way possible.

## WCC Annual Public Meeting 2010

The Western Cave Conservancy held its 8th annual public meeting on January 30, 2010 in Redding, California.

This year the Board of Directors has gotten some new blood and a change of officers: Martin Haye resigned as

Treasurer and was elected to the post of

P r e s i d e n t .

M a r i a n n e

Russo resigned as

President and was

elected to fill the office of Vice

President, from which

Rolf Aalbu resigned (Rolf

continues as the

Director of Research).

Marianne was also elected

to fill the empty post of Director of

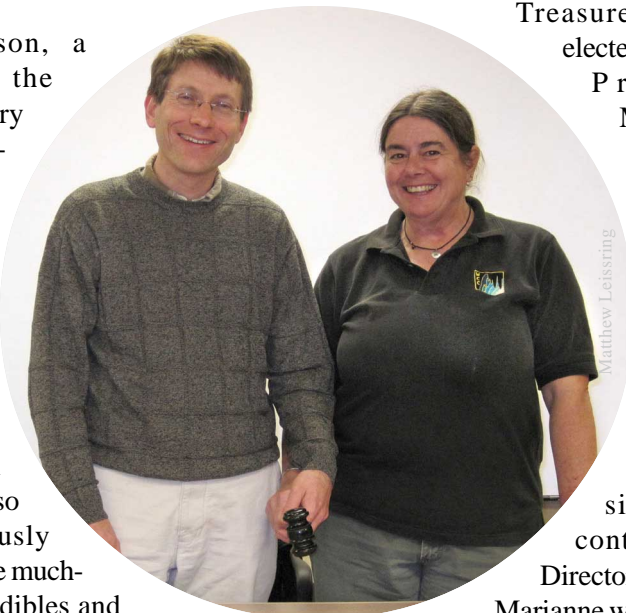
Public Relations and Fund Raising.

Michael Spiess was elected as a new director and will fill the office of Treasurer.

Everyone is eager to get started with their new duties and transition out of the old ones. With such an enthusiastic crew, the WCC is sure to have a productive year ahead.

Steve Hobson, a member of the WCC Advisory Board, arranged for the use of a great conference room at the headquarters of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. He also very generously provided some much-appreciated edibles and beverages. The Shasta Area

Grotto (SAG) was well represented at the meeting, and several other members of the Advisory Board also attended either in person or by conference phone. And if that weren't enough, Steve also led a cave trip on Sunday for several of the attendees to an outstanding northern California cave. A huge thank you goes to Steve Hobson and SAG!





# Heads Up for Clough Cave Restoration 2011

We just got word from Joel Despain, Cave Specialist at Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks and former WCC Director, that funding for the Clough Cave Restoration has been approved for spring 2011. Marianne Russo and Mike Spiess, representing the WCC, will meet with Joel this coming April to scope out the project and begin the planning process. The project will entail reinforcing the gate in several different ways and doing a variety of restoration tasks within the cave itself. Unfortunately this cave has been broken into dozens of times over the last few decades and very heavy damage has occurred inside. However, there are still pockets of intact speleothems and nice aragonite as well as a floor of crystalline white rimstone, where it is not walked on. The funding will hopefully allow us to install a gate that will resist future attempts to break in. Joel has asked the WCC to provide volunteers to assist with the gate installation and to do the restoration work. Tentatively three weekends next spring are being scheduled to accomplish this work: February 26–27, March 26–27 and April 23–24, 2011. These are *tentative* so watch for updates this coming fall when plans are firmed up.



Part of what makes Clough Cave important is its cave-life biodiversity. *Calcina cloughensis*, a troglobitic harvestman, endemic to the caves of the area, was first seen in Clough.

Work on the gate will include replacing a gate bar that was sawn off by vandals, refacing the gate bars with jail grade high magnesium steel welded in place, increasing the number of attachment points between the gate and the entrance walls, and filling the bars with concrete. The park plans to hire a welder as well as use WCC volunteers for this effort. Work inside the cave will include an inventory and evaluation of the graffiti, and then removal of any that is not historically significant, to the extent possible. Of course any trash, candle wax and other foreign materials will be removed and some flowstone areas will be washed clean. Some actual repairs to broken formations, such as the rimstone dams, may be undertaken, as will the designation and flagging of trails. We may also install a small bridge over the rimstone area.

We will keep everyone posted on plans as they develop. I hope to see many of you next year in Clough Cave. It sounds like there will be enough work to keep quite a bunch of volunteers very busy.

## Rippled Cave and Weller Natural Preserve Dedication and Open House

The WCC proudly invites you to the Dedication of the Weller Natural Preserve and its centerpiece, Rippled Cave on May 1st 2010. All WCC members and donors who helped us acquire this wonderful property are welcome to attend. We will be holding an Open House with tours of the field house constructed in 2009, a walking tour through portions of the preserve to see our ongoing surface management projects and opportunities to visit the cave too. For experienced cavers the cave will be open all day, for non-cavers we will have some loaner equipment and caver guides to show them around. A complimentary lunch and beverages will be available.

**Please RSVP to [mrusso@westerncaves.org](mailto:mrusso@westerncaves.org) if you are interested in possibly attending and want further information. We need an accurate count of attendees to plan for parking, food, equipment, etc.**