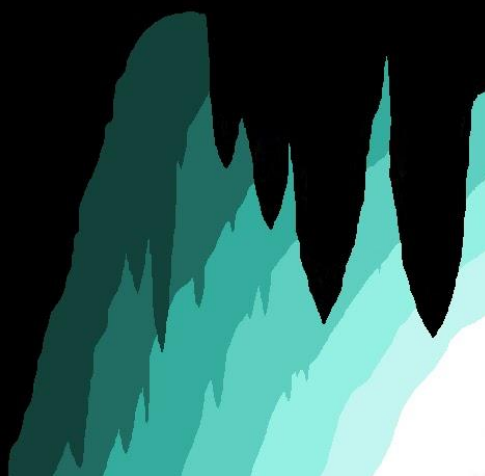


# Western Cave Conservancy



Protecting the West's Last Frontier

Vol 18 No 1 Winter 2025

## The Natural Bridges of Calaveras County

*by Matt Bowers, with research from Dan Snyder and Bruce Rogers*

Good things worth doing are rarely easy.

Just down the road from Moaning Caverns, the Natural Bridges of Calaveras County stand guard over Coyote Creek. Managed by the Bureau of Reclamation, these limestone formations create a beautiful pair of river caves over the creek.

The Calaveras Natural Bridges are truly considered one of California's geologic wonders. Human visitation was first recorded in 1853, although there is some evidence that native American habitation dates back to over 1,400 years ago. The Northern and Central Sierra Mewuk held most caves in great dread, believing them to be the abode of Chehalumche - the people-eating rock giants.

Some historical accounts from the late 1800s describe amazing stalactite and stalagmite formations which are noticeably absent today.

Tragically, decades of thoughtless tourism have led to a degradation of the once pristine beauty of the caves.

During recent Covid years, the bureau closed the site to public visitation - only to find people had parked on the highway and hiked down to the bridges anyway. This spike in unmonitored visitation led to additional degradation of the site... and also resulted in

The Western Cave Conservancy conducted a 4-day clean-up and restoration at the Natural Bridges in Calaveras County from April 25-28, 2024. Working in collaboration with the Bureau of Reclamation's New Melones unit, the WCC recruited nearly 70 volunteers to help restore this popular hiking location. Funding for the project was provided by the Teichert Foundation and the WCC.

*Photos by Pat Sanders, USBR*





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the red no-parking zones that are now painted on the highway.

Three years ago, the Western Cave Conservancy offered our services to the Bureau of Reclamation to clean up this site and help preserve it for future generations. Our primary interest was the removal of extensive graffiti and trash left behind by thousands of careless visitors.

In multiple meetings with the bureau, representatives from the WCC also formed a plan to recreate an interpretive guide to the public trail that leads down to the bridges from Highway 49. Our focus of the guide is to deliver a strong conservation message in line with the mission and ethic of the Western Cave Conservancy.

Two years ago, the WCC was awarded a \$7,500 development grant from the Teichert Foundation to help fund this project. The WCC Board of Directors contributed another \$3,250 in financial support to move the project forward.

Finally, last spring, the WCC staged our first clean-up weekend at the site. Members of the conservancy were joined by a Boy Scout Troop led by Roger Mortimer, and some members from Facebook who shared our conservation goals.

One of the tools in WCC's arsenal is a specialized sand blasting rig designed to remove graffiti in fragile cave environments. WCC board member, Neil Marchington, was able to haul the rig down from Oregon to tackle the graffiti removal. His team worked with the scouts to stage nearly a half mile of compression hose down the hill to power the graffiti efforts.

By using a blast media that was geologically neutral to the location, Neil's team was able to remove graffiti without using any chemicals or abrasives that might impact the natural ecosystem in these fragile cave environments.



Blast removal of graffiti on rock face  
Photo: Neil Marchington, WCC





Defaced wall of Lower Natural Bridge. Photo: Dave Bunnell / Good Earth Graphics

Additional volunteers scoured the trails to clean up as much trash as they could over the three-day operation.

Funding from the Teichert Foundation and the WCC allowed us to feed the seventy volunteers and provide everyone a free t-shirt featuring photography of the bridges donated by Dave Bunnell.

Graciously, the Bureau of Reclamation closed the parking area to the public for the weekend and allowed most of our volunteers to camp on-site at the trailhead. This saved a tremendous amount of time we would have needed to pack up the gear each night.

Later in the year, during our second work weekend, several volunteers hiked the public trail to identify locations of interest for the interpretive guide that we will be writing over the next several months.

The WCC is working with Calaveras County Visitors Bureau to develop the new interpretive guide, with a strong conservation message for future hikers.

This is definitely going to be a long-term effort on our part. Working with the Bureau, we hope to eventually get this site back to a pristine condition. Graffiti continues to be a problem and additional resources will need to be considered to stop the vandalism. Over the long term, our goal is to instill a new appreciation for the natural beauty of these caves.

Most casual visitors do not realize that these rare geological formations take hundreds, even thousands of years to



Entrance of Upper Natural Bridge. Photo: Neil Marchington, WCC



form. Once damaged, they will never recover in our lifetimes. With the help of the Bureau of Reclamation, we're hoping to stop that careless vandalism.

Perhaps, in the meantime, the people-eating rock giants will help stand guard.

## National Cave & Karst Management Symposium

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*By Matt Bowers*

For over 20 years, the Western Cave Conservancy has been dedicated to securing the permanent protection of threatened caves for cavers across the Western United States. To further our mission, we are pleased to host the 50th anniversary of the National Cave & Karst Management Symposium (NCKMS) in Ely, Nevada from October 4 through 10. All WCC members are welcome to join us!

Responsible stewardship of our fragile underground ecosystems necessitates a broad-spectrum approach to both problems and solutions - and a constant need to remain current in our management strategies. This conference will bring over 200 experts in cave and karst science from across North America to our region.

Since 1975, NCKMS has been the preeminent event in the United States for promoting, advancing and sharing concepts in the effective management of cave and karst resources. These week-long symposia provide an opportunity for practical synergy between cavers, scientists, and management professionals from diverse backgrounds, working in various fields and with interests spanning a broad range of cave and karst management issues.

The week-long event will include workshops, social events, science presentations, cave trips, an orientation to cave rescue, and a geology-themed ride on a 100-year-old steam train! The conference is being held at the Bristlecone Convention Center in Ely, Nevada.

Each NCKMS conference is advised by a steering committee of 12 representatives from governmental and NGO agencies. All federal agencies with cave resources are represented, including the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, and the USGS. Additionally, the National Speleological Society, the Cave Research Foundation, Karst Waters Institute and the National Cave & Karst Research Institute are expected to attend.



Photo: Dr. Jean K. Krejca, Zara Environmental LLC



Photo: Dr. Jean K. Krejca, Zara Environmental LLC



Photo: Dr. Jean K. Krejca, Zara Environmental LLC

## *Hidden Waters. Hidden Life.*

Concealed beneath the many landscapes of North America lies a world of hidden waters and hidden life - trapped within the intricate labyrinth of cave and karst systems. These subterranean environments, often overlooked, play a vital role in sustaining life and maintaining ecological balance in regions characterized by water scarcity and changing climatic conditions.

Our theme for the 2025 NCKMS is "Hidden Waters, Hidden Life". We felt this captures the essence of the thriving ecosystems that exist beneath the surface of the arid west. In

a region where surface water is a scarce commodity, these hidden waters become critical reservoirs. The management and conservation of these ecosystems are paramount for ensuring a sustainable and resilient water supply for both the environment and human communities.

Moreover, the theme extends beyond water resources to encompass the diverse and often unique life forms dwelling in these subterranean realms. From threatened bat species to endemic invertebrates with specialized ecological niches, the hidden life in cave and karst systems represents a fascinating tapestry of biodiversity.

"Hidden Waters, Hidden Life" also underscores the cultural and historical significance of these underground environments. Archaeological discoveries in caves provide a window into the past, offering insights into ancient civilizations and the ways they interacted with these subterranean landscapes.

Many caves in this region reveal paleoclimate and paleontological deposits, providing insights into the history of past environments and ancient climates. In the recent past, the most complete fossilized skeleton ever found of a giant short-faced bear (*Arctodus simus*) was discovered only 30 miles from Ely, Nevada. This creature was the largest North American meat-eater of the Ice Age.

Lastly, all cave and karst regions are interconnected with surface ecosystems through complex



Photo: Dr. Jean K. Krejca, Zara Environmental LLC

hydrological and ecological processes. Effective management requires a holistic approach that considers the entire ecosystem, addressing both surface and underground components. This integrated approach is vital for maintaining the ecological balance of the arid western United States, ensuring the resilience and sustainability of these unique geological formations for future generations.

At the 2025 NCKMS conference in Ely, Nevada, our presentations, workshops, and field trips aim to explore the interconnections of these subterranean ecosystems and deliver a deeper understanding of the intricate web of life that contributes to the ecological richness and resilience of cave and karst systems across North America.

October 4-10, 2025

Bristlecone Convention Center

<https://ely2025.nckms.org/>

Current members of the Western Cave Conservancy are eligible for a 10% registration discount for the 2025 National Cave and Karst Management Symposium. Use code "wccgrba25" when you register online. The online system should be active in the next few weeks. The discount code will expire on Thursday, July 31, so be sure to register early at <https://ely2025.nckms.org>

## NCKMS Scholarships

*By Matt Bowers*

The Dr. George N. Huppert Scholarship Program is open to all those involved in cave and karst management, and may be used to encourage papers as well as attendance to the National Cave & Karst Management Symposium.

For example, students, people new to cave management, cave and land conservancy members, federal and state employees involved in cave management, and individuals with limited financial resources are all eligible for scholarships.

Priority is given to applicants who will be attending the full symposium, and applications for day passes may not be considered appropriate. Applicants will be ranked as follows:

- Student presenting a paper
- Student not presenting a paper
- Non-student presenting a paper
- Non-student not presenting a paper

Scholarship funding for recipients covers lodging or registration costs, or both. Each scholarship recipient is responsible for additional expenses, including transportation and food. The deadline for submitting scholarship applications is September 20, 2025. Applicants who submit their requests before the deadline will be notified. To apply for a scholarship to the upcoming symposium this October in Ely, Nevada, please visit <https://ely2025.nckms.org/symposium/scholarships.php>





Photo: Dr. Jean K. Krejca, Zara Environmental LLC



[ely2025.nckms.org](http://ely2025.nckms.org)



## Meet The New WCC Directors!

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### *Mark Balcom - Land Research Director*

Mark was first intrigued by caving on a walking tour of Lewis and Clark Cave when he was 12 years old. He didn't visit any wild caves until he joined the San Joaquin Valley Grotto 40 years later. He greatly enjoys recreational caving and the teamwork of everybody working together. Mark enjoys many other outdoor sports including cross country skiing, climbing, canyoneering, bicycling, and backpacking.



He has had the opportunity to see how recreational caving can lead to scientific discoveries. When a photo of an unusual looking salamander in a grotto newsletter came to the attention of a herpetologist, Mark had the privilege of introducing that herpetologist to the cave where the salamander was found. It was identified as being a new variant of the Mt. Lyell Salamander.

Mark sees that caves play an important role in our environment. He believes that many in the conservation community are ignorant of that role. He would like to help make land trusts and others involved in land conservation more aware of the importance of caves and ideally inspire partnerships in the future. To assist with these goals, he brings to the WCC experience working on the board of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy and the Sierra Unified School District.

### *CJ McKinley – PR Director*

Hey everyone, I am the new public relations director of the WCC. I started caving with my husband, Kit McKinley, at Lava Beds National Monument over 18 years ago. I am now officially addicted to any type of cave but have a special love for lava tubes. I joined the Shasta Area Grotto back in 2018 and am now the Co-Secretary of the grotto along with Liz Wolff who is my mentor and idol. I have since began teaching vertical caving, became a constant trip leader, am attempting to learn surveying, and absolutely love cave clean ups of any type. I belong to the Hawaii Grotto, Mother Lode Grotto, and Out of Bounds Grotto as well as SAG.



I quickly learned that conservation and the dichotomy of caver access is my passion. It's such a complicated and important issue. You can't get people to care about the unique environments and ecosystems within caves without allowing people to see and experience them. The Western Cave Conservancy has this very goal in mind when tackling this problem. How to save and protect these precious resources and keep traffic to a reasonable amount remains the ideal objective.

I am hoping that through education, participation, and active listening, I can help local grottoes with special projects and larger issues to improve the caving experience for everyone.