

## Lost Deer Cave

### Rockcastle County, Kentucky

by John Agnew

The entrance to this cave was discovered by Jerry Nichols in the early spring of 1988, in an obscure tributary of Crooked Creek in Rockcastle County. The triangular-shaped pit looked a little too slimy to free-climb safely, so he returned later with me and my rope. Jerry was the first to rappel into the 14' pit, and once on bottom he yelled up that it looked promising. I followed him down.

The pit dropped through the ceiling of a wide tube that branched in several directions. A short passage near the entrance led to a small dome. Upstream in the main line of this fossil passage, the tube widened and pinched out. Numerous anastomoses tubes are visible in this area. Downstream from the entrance we crossed a 15' deep canyon, which acts as a drain for the entrance pit. Beyond was a 20' wide stoopwalk, floored with shattered thin plates of flowstone.

We passed an intersection with a lower level, and at this junction the level we were on became an 8' high walking passage. We continued on the upper level, passing by massive flowstone, curtains and some delicate rimstone. Future visitors should take care not to step on these intricate little pools. The upper level continued for 300' until it ended in collapse, apparently at an intersection with the valley wall.

We returned to the intersection with the lower level and climbed down about 10' into a canyon about 8' high and 5' to 10' wide. We traveled upstream and the passage widened out and began to lower to a stoopwalk after another 300'. It then rapidly degraded into a belly crawl through rat shit.

After a serious squeeze under a piece of breakdown that spanned the 20' wide passage, we emerged into a breakdown room about 20' in diameter and 12' high. A waterfall was audible nearby, and Jerry quickly located the source of the sound: a 50' high dome. Numerous small passages intersected the dome, but they were either too tight or required climbs that we weren't prepared for. We drank deeply from the clear pool, and returned to the main trunk.

We didn't see much more than that on our first trip, but we soon returned to survey, this time accompanied by Doug Stecko. We surveyed about 500', and then talked Doug into pushing a tight squeeze in the floor of the breakdown room near the dome. We thought it would be just another shitty lead, but to our chagrin, he discovered a going stream passage that eventually netted over a thousand feet of survey. However, it is mostly crawlway and stoopwalks. In fact, it is yet to be fully explored, as we grew weary of bellycrawl over sharp cobbles through pools of water.

With the notable exception of the upper and lower ends of the stream passage, the cave is pretty much fully explored. The survey totals 2731', and would easily top 3000 if we were ambitious enough to mop up side leads. Who knows how much lies downstream, but it probably ends at a spring entrance, which is located about 2000' down the valley from the entrance pit. This spring could be entered if one could persuade the piano-sized rock blocking the entrance to move aside.

The cave appeared to be entirely virgin, although it is possible that it had been entered a long time ago. The entrance is in an obvious sinkhole not far above the valley floor. The valley has an old road and signs of an old homestead, and the entrance pit doesn't seem formidable enough to deter a casual visitor or someone looking for a source of saltpeter.

Jerry named the cave for some tracks discovered in what would seem to be a very unlikely place for a deer.