

Underwater Speleology

Journal of the Cave Diving Section of the National Speleological Society



Volume 49, No. 4
Winter, 2022



NSSCDS™

Winter Workshop

January 14, 2023
Hart Springs

Lectures * Workshops * Prizes * Guided Dives

Agenda and speakers on p 25
Guided dives for qualified divers

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Underwater Speleology

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Cover: Hart Springs in the Grand Passage, upstream of the Black Lagoon. The diver is Guy Bryant. © Sandra Koster.

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The magazine encourages members to submit news, stories, letters, trip and exploration reports, maps, and photos for consideration. Please contact the Editor for publication guidelines and to avoid duplication of work.

Underwater Speleology (UWS) is published quarterly (four times yearly) by the NSS-CDS, 295 NW Commons Loop, Suite 115-317, Lake City, FL 32005.

UWS is a membership benefit. Information about membership fees and registration can be found at <https://nsscds.org>.

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editor's note



by Barbara Dwyer

Hello, friends and fellow cave divers,

Happy New Year to everyone!

In keeping with our Winter Workshop's venue, this issue of *Underwater Speleology* is the "Hart issue." It features Wes Skiles's story of his original exploration of the Hart/Black Lagoon system, which we published 13 years ago. The printed article had gotten lost, over the years, but I had kept a copy of Wes's manuscript from when we worked together on the story. Whether or not you've ever dived this system, you're sure to appreciate Wes's colorful tale of the exploration. We do not have his original photos, but Sandy Koster, Mark Long, Jill Heinerth, and Wendell Nope generously provided images. They should give you an idea of how diverse and fossil rich this system is. If you've never seen goethite, you're in for a treat.

Some of you remember that Hart was closed to cave diving for many years. It took a long time of building trust with Gilchrist County and careful negotiations to reopen the spring.

Part of generating goodwill involved volunteer work headed up by NSS-CDS members and divers from other organizations. We're reprinting a story from a June 2004 issue of the Gainesville Sun, which describes a massive clean up at Little Hart. Part of a retaining wall had fallen into the spring vent, followed by sand and trash. No boil had been visible from this first-magnitude spring for six years. Volunteer divers removed the debris and restored the boil. The spring reopened for cave diving in 2004.

If you're planning to dive, check out the park's [website](#) and its requirements for diving. You can also download the waiver forms there.

I had hoped to get to Florida for this workshop, but the ongoing California floods have intervened. Enjoy the workshop, and I'll see you all for the May conference if not before.

Best,
Barbara

*It's time to start
thinking about
the NSS-
CDS Board
of Directors'
Elections...*



January 2023 starts the CDS election cycle, and we want to alert the membership.

The nomination committee is forming to solicit people who are interested in running for the board. The only requirement is having been a member in good standing for 1 year.

If you have any questions or wish to make a nomination, please contact [me](#).

To vote in the 2023 election, you will need to have up-to-date membership information, especially an email address.

If you have changed your email or any aspect of your membership in 2022, please contact [Sam Leflore](#).

**Kelly Jessop
Administrator of
Elections
cavedvr@yahoo.com**



***The 2023 International Cave Diving Conference is on!
May 26th - May 28th, 2023 Lake City, FL
Save the dates!***



Getting to the Hart of Things

The Discovery of a Lifetime

by Wes Skiles

In the mid eighties, a small group of local cave divers opened up one of North Florida's most beautiful and significant caves. The core team was Mark Long, Tom Morris, Woody Jasper, Ron Simmons, Lamar Hires, and myself. Each member of this eclectic group brought his own unique set of talents and interest to the team. Together, we would ultimately discover and explore many of North Florida's notable cave systems.

Over one stretch of three years, we managed to explore and survey over 200,000 ft of virgin underwater cave passages in our collective back yards. Hart Springs, along the banks of the Suwannee River in Gilchrist County, would stand above all the rest as the most beautiful, sporting, and extensive cave our team had ever explored.

Spat out

Our first encounters with Hart Springs were humbling. The only known entrance was the small vent with a tight, sandy restriction. This small chamber connected to a fissure too narrow to negotiate with doubles. Our no-mount attempts also proved futile. Our only hope was to wait for a rising river, which would create enough hydrostatic pressure to calm the flow.

Opportunity knocked on December 14, 1986. Woody, Tom, Lamar, and I managed to crack the entrance by removing our double 104s and fighting the stiff flow. It was a challenge, but we pushed our way down the tight fissure to discover booming, beautiful passage.

A surprise awaited us: We weren't the first divers to achieve this feat. We have never discovered

who was first, but Sheck Exley speculated that it was most likely Lewis Holtzendorf.

We navigated the maze of possibilities while laying new survey line. It became obvious early on that whoever had come before us had made only one dive. Our first dive lasted 90 minutes at 80 ft. We laid 800 ft of line in nice-sized, classic phreatic, half-moon braided maze tunnel.

After gaining official permission from Gilchrist County to explore the cave, the gang began to return more frequently. Our efforts were not without significant challenges. Subsequent dives seemed to be "Murphy" challenged, but it was the flow that presented the biggest obstacle.

Attempts to drop stage bottles down the entrance fissure are now comical memories. I thought that a nice, heavy steel bottle would penetrate downward through the entrance fissure, only to witness the tank's being shot like a missile back upward toward my buddies above.

On the same dive, Tom Morris and I made a near-fatal mistake thinking that we could exit the shaft above the fissure head-first. In a fraction of a second, both of us were violently spat upward. One of my hoses caught on an outcrop and was immediately cut in half. Masks were ripped from our faces, and regulators were free flowing full force. Tom and I were blind, losing gas at an alarming rate, and were hopelessly entangled. It took all of our focus and calm to extract ourselves from our predicament.

Upon surfacing we agreed that we would not repeat another attempt until conditions were right. From that point on, we always exited the cave as if we were rock climbing upside down. It proved

Opposite: Forrest Wilson and friends prepare to dive in the Black Lagoon. © Jill Heinerth.

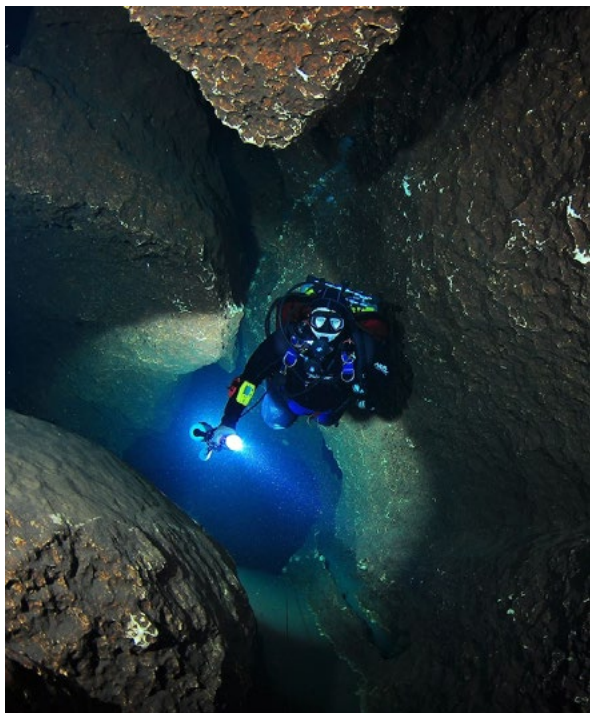
to be an excellent technique that allowed for a controlled ascent in what was quickly becoming a very formidable cave dive.

The Big Discovery

Two weeks later during the Christmas/New Year holidays, Ron Simmons was down on his annual Christmas visit to the Skiles's house. The river was near flood stage, and we decided it was time to give Hart another shot.

Conditions this time were near perfect. Black water covered the spring, but clear water awaited us beneath in the cavern. We easily negotiated the shaft for the first time, and we were off to the races loaded with several reels of line.

Eight hundred feet into the cave, we took a wrong turn into what I immediately knew was an offshoot from the principal flow. A few feet later it ended in a cul-de-sac. After a few minutes of poking around, we returned to the cave's main flow.



Annette Long swims under a crag. © Mark Long.

It was at this point that the cave began to change character. We were leaving the beautiful half-moon phreatic tunnels dominated by bedding planes and entering an entirely different controlling geology of vertical fissures. There was a maze of parallel possibilities, all carrying significant flow. We picked our way through several hundred feet of maze and entered a stretch where the fissures gave way to classic borehole.

It was beautiful. The water was very clear but tinged green, and the cave had that feeling of unlimited possibilities. It reminded me of a grown-up and more complex version of Little River with some Peacock thrown in for good measure.

At this point Ron was running low on air and wanted to call the dive. Figuring that most of his air had been used fighting the flow throughout the cave, I signaled for a little bit more time. It proved to be both a good call and bad one.

About a hundred feet further and 1190 feet from the main entrance, we entered a room with dramatic contrast. Pouring down from the ceiling was 54-degree black water and, ahead, crystal-clear blue water. I knew that this was our cue to turn around, but I had to take just a moment to ascend into the shaft delivering the cold black water. Ron stayed below as I ran our line straight up through a tight series of offset fissures.

At 20 feet, I was rewarded with what I was hoping to find—a clear shot to the surface. We had discovered the Black Lagoon, but more importantly, a bypass to the horrors of negotiating the main Hart Springs entrance.

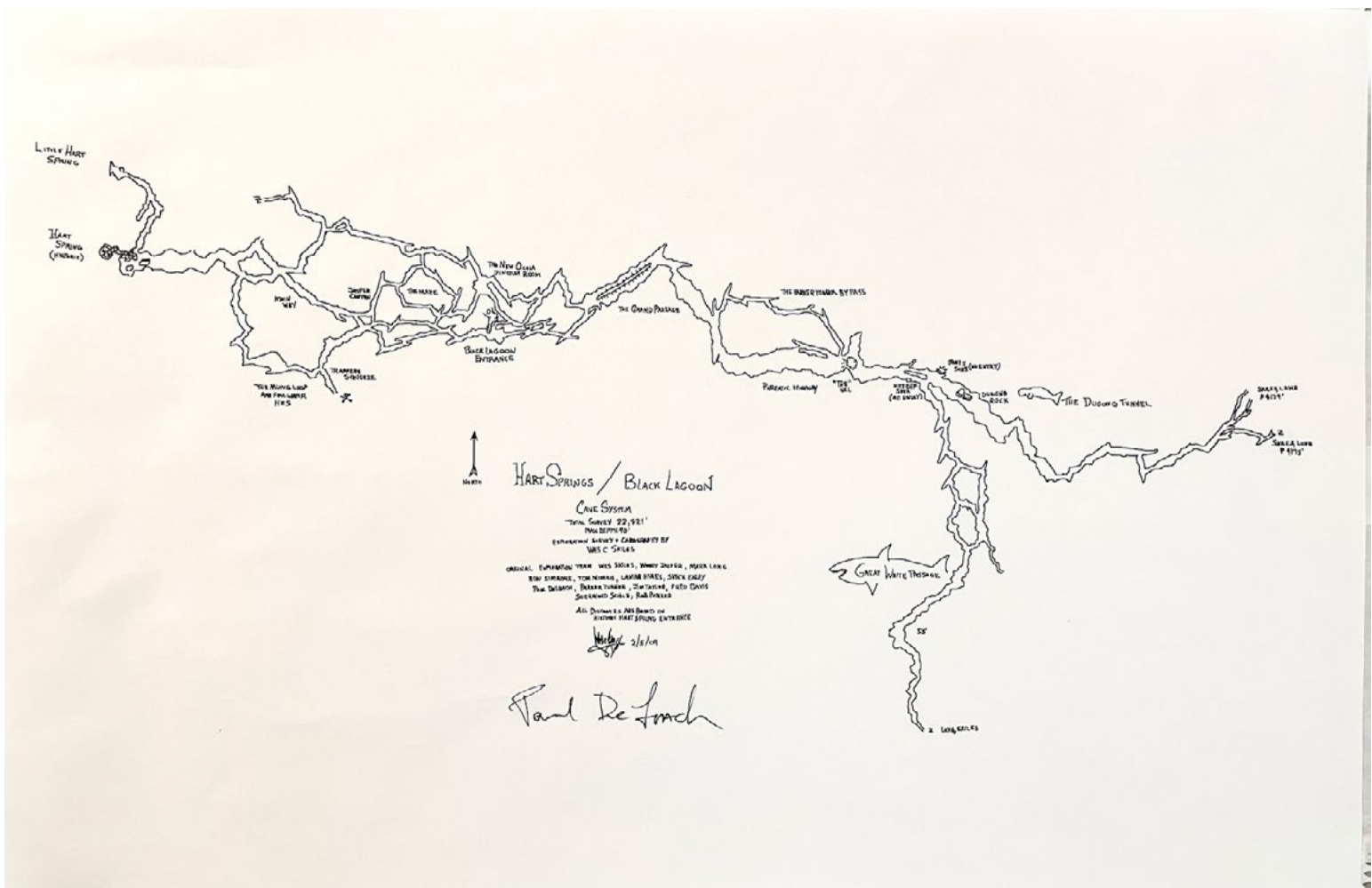
By the time I rejoined Ron, he had that “let’s get the hell out of this place” look in his eyes. We managed to quickly and efficiently both survey and exit the cave. As it turned out, I had wrongly assumed that Ron was breathing hard just because of the flow. We managed to make it to the exit on his back gas but he ended up breathing from my tanks to finish decompression.



Guy Bryant just upstream of the Black Lagoon. Paul Heinerth is back lighting. © Sandra Koster



A diver enjoys the Grand Passage. © Jill Heinerth.



Wes Skiles's original survey of Hart Springs and Black Lagoon systems.

It was an important lesson for both of us. But it was one that ultimately didn't stick with Ron.* Ron often retold the story of how we discovered the Black Lagoon on that chilly December day. It was, in his estimation, the most exciting and significant exploration cave dive of his career.

The discovery of the Black Lagoon would prove to be critical to the successful exploration of this grand system. But the question remained: Where was the entrance located in the swamp?

The following day, Ron and I returned to go sink hunting. What we discovered was a great number of water-filled swamp ponds that all looked the same. It wasn't until almost dark that we found an ominous cypress- knee-lined black hole that was

** Ron Simmons drowned on February 13, 2007. He failed to reserve sufficient gas to exit a cave that he was exploring and mapping on the Suwannee River.*

bellowing steam in the eerie grey cold afternoon light. By the time we found it, we had no real idea of where the closest road would be.

The entire area above the cave was a wet, cypress-filled swamp, so it became clear that we would still have our challenges getting into the Hart system. The difficulty of swimming into the main entrance was now replaced with a quarter-mile hike through the woods from the closest known road. With a decent path that ran parallel to an ebb-and-flow slough marked with flagging tape, we were ready for the next phase.

Worried he would miss out on a major scoop, Ron talked me into diving again the following day before he had to head back home. Entering Black Lagoon, we discovered that the water was far colder than we had hoped and as black as water can get. We bumped and grinded our way down into the unknown, hoping we would find the line that I had tied off below.



Shark tooth fossil in the vicinity of the Black Lagoon.
© Wendell Nope.

At 40 feet, the water cleared enough to find my line and the way downward. The final 25 feet down was tighter and smaller than I remembered when I had encountered it from below.

After falling out of the cave's ceiling into a beautiful room, we were greeted with water that felt like it was 90 degrees. It was also more clear upstream than anything we had seen so far. We were in virgin cave with unlimited visibility! After taking precautions to make sure there would be no way we would miss the little entrance crack in the ceiling and accidentally wander downstream, we were on our way.

The Grand Passage

Tying off, we left what appeared to be a grand junction room with five possible ways to go. We pointed our noses into the flow and began to pick our way through a mind-bending series of possibilities, truly a cave diver's wet dream. We were now exploring within a series of interconnected parallel fractures. All were wide enough to swim comfortably in, but none behaved like a "main" tunnel. The floors were coated in the most amazing concentrations of

goethite that I had ever seen. The place was nothing short of amazing.

We were now wandering through magic virgin cave of endless possibilities. After picking our way through 350 feet of fissures, the parallel tunnels gave way to one large vertical fissure that shortly afterward intersected with yet another room.

As a rule, we limited ourselves to laying 400 feet of line per dive. This served multiple purposes, the most important of which was how much line could we accurately survey on a given dive. We had long ago learned that for more than 400 feet, we were likely to either mess the survey up, or worse, not finish it. The second reason was more about practical enjoyment. You don't enjoy laying say, 800 feet of line, any more than you do purposely laying 400 feet and coming home with the data. By limiting ourselves to 400 feet of exploration per dive, the survey was always going to get done on the same dive. This real-time data would help guide our future exploration efforts.

With the tunnel size suddenly jumping to ten times the size of almost everything we had seen so far, we risked a short swim upstream to peer at what waited for us next. I'll never forget the moment as long as I live. It was the beginning of the Grand Passage. Most of the time when we stop exploring a tunnel, we have hit some kind of obstacle to be pondered. Rare are the days that we stop at the beginning of one of the finest, most beautiful passages ever discovered.

Sharing the Wealth

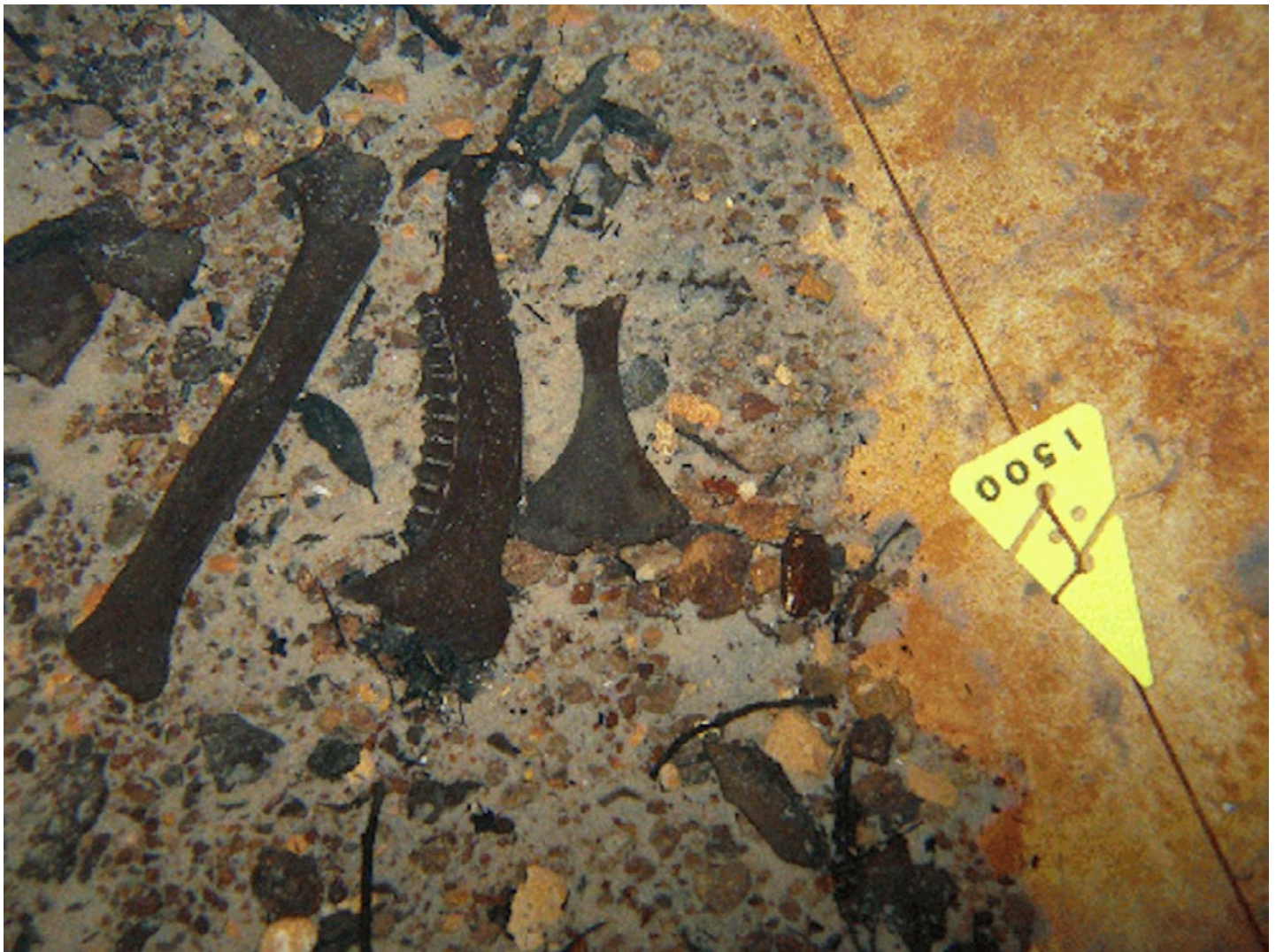
The lure to return to the Grand Passage was too much for me to resist. The system was my baby, and I was excited to share it with others that had been kind and trusting enough to share their virgins with me in the past.

Two of the guys who took me under their wings when I was a cave diver of just sixteen years of age were Paul Deloach and Sheck Exley. It was Paul who took me on my first true big-boy dive. Sheck had over the years taught me how to

recover bodies, explore, survey, and map caves, pretty much in that exact order. It was only right that I shared what awaited us in Hart with two of the guys whom I had always looked up to and greatly admired.

With that said, I told both what Sheck had said to me on multiple occasions: “Okay, I’m going to take you some place really cool, but you can’t tell no one, and you can’t come back alone and scoop me.” The latter point was an insult to Sheck and Paul and should have, in retrospect, gone unsaid. Both were among the most honorable explorers to ever pursue the sport and certainly didn’t need to scoop anyone.

On January 1, 1987, Sheck, Paul, and I returned to Black Lagoon for the fourth major push dive. Four hundred feet upstream, we tied off to the end of the Simmons-Skiles line and forged ahead. What we did not know was that up to this point, all of the flow we had encountered had been separated into braided mazes. Now we were in one single tunnel that represented the combined flow of all of the passages. This was a bit unusual in that caves often do just the opposite—big tunnel eventually breaks down to many tunnels or what we refer to as dendritic passages.



The Hart and Black Lagoon systems are rich with prehistoric fossils. © Wendell Nope.



Guy Bryant at Hart Springs. © Sandra Koster

Here the flow was so strong that “pull and glide” was the only option. It was the first cave passage I had ever seen with absolutely no silt on the floor. For hundreds of feet, it looks like the cave has a full time sweeper keeping the cave clean.

When we had laid 400 feet, I meekly attempted to call the dive, only to be greeted by Paul holding out another full reel of knotted line. I relented on my policy, and off we went for another mind-boggling romp through Hart’s wonderland. Just when I thought the Grand Passage would go on forever, we came to the base of “The Hill” where once again the geology would change and with it the character of the cave. All now at thirds, we called the dive and began our surveying exit.

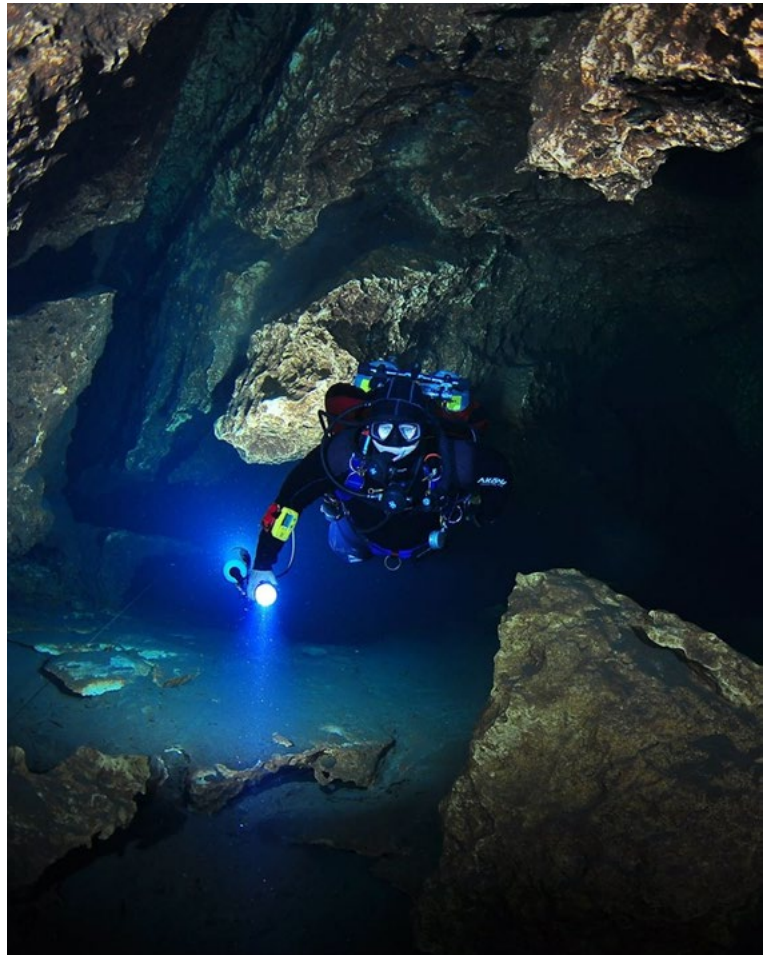
Over the next three months, a rotating cast of superb exploration divers joined me on individual dives as we continued to rack up thousands of feet of new survey. Parker Turner, Mary Ellen Eckhoff, Bill Main, Jim Taylor, Fred Davis, and Rob Parker were just a few.

The main cast however, continued to be the core team of Woody Jasper, Mark Long, Ron Simmons, and Lamar Hires. During the summer of 1987, we began to truly get a sense of the braided maze nature of the downstream Black Lagoon system. Ultimately we would discover four major parallel braids that traversed from 500 feet upstream of Black Lagoon all the way downstream to Hart Major.

Ancient fossil beds

It was during these dives that the cave began to reveal its secrets. Formed within the upper unit of the Ocala Formation, this particular area of Eocene limestone is rich in megafauna fossils. Every dive revealed new discoveries, including enormous *Carcharodon* shark teeth, archaeocete whale vertebrae, dugong ribs and skulls, entire alligator skeletons, mastodon, and many other mammal and marine fossils common to the Ocala unit.

The shark, whale, dugong, and marine fossils all were found within the matrix of limestone. The other fossils were found in the alluvial sediments of the cave floor, most likely having come from younger units including the Miocene, Pliocene, Pleistocene, and Holocene epochs.



© Mark Long.



Annette Long swimming through one of Hart's unique tunnels. © Mark Long.

During the fall and winter of 1987, Mark Long, Woody Jasper, and Lamar Hires began a series of major push dives upstream. Several thousand feet upstream of Black Lagoon, we discovered a new series of three sinkholes. None of these would allow surface access despite our best efforts.

Just beyond the sinks, the cave split into two major tributaries. The eastern source was cobalt-blue water, while the southeast source had greenish, more surface-influenced characteristics. We found new fossil deposits at the mouth of each tributary. The eastern source contained a large portion of a dugong skeleton and the southeastern source a treasure trove of great white shark teeth. These unique passages would from that point on become known as the Great White Passage and the Dugong Tunnel. Ultimately, Mark Long and I would push both of the main tributaries out past 3400' from the Black Lagoon.

As of today,** the Hart Springs/Black Lagoon System stands at 22,721 feet of explored and surveyed tunnel. I'm proud to say that I was on every single exploration dive that took place, although greedy is likely a more apt term. Perhaps in time the cave will reveal even more fantastic discoveries. When it does, I certainly have full intention of continuing my role as chief booty scooper in what I feel is certainly one of the premier underwater caves on earth.

Wes Skiles
** February, 2009



Wes Skiles wrote this story for *Underwater Speleology* two years before his death. Wes was a world-renowned videographer, cave explorer, and storyteller. His passion for protecting the springs lives on in his work.

At an April 8, 2019 meeting of the Gilchrist County Board of County Commissioners, the Board voted unanimously to place a plaque remembering Wes Skiles.





Florida banded water snake at the surface-water interface. © Sandra Koster.

The Blue Boil is Back!

Volunteers help clean out Hart Springs's main vent

More than two dozen volunteers—cave divers and dry cavers, Boy Scouts from Clermont and park personnel—spent a weekend unclogging the main spring at Hart Springs County Park.

This restored the spring to clear blue water with a strong boil. And because of the volunteers's work, after five years of being illegal, there will once again be cave diving at Hart Springs on a guided basis.

The Hart Springs basin, which is fed by the cool, crystal clear waters of the Floridan Aquifer, has become one of Gilchrist County's favorite swimming holes. Unfortunately, it was loved a little too much.

Over the past several years, improvements have been made to the area, including sand brought in and spread around the edge of the spring basin, which has created an inviting beach for swimmers and sunbathers. The park's visitors have enthusiastically responded by coming here by the hundreds every weekend in the summer.

Some of that sand was pulled down into the main spring vent when the springs reverse their flow during river floods. In addition, swimmers' activities have caused some of that sand to fall into the spring vent, which caused the flow to be blocked.

Years ago, a retaining wall with a metal reinforcing bar collapsed into the main spring and down into the vent opening. The combination of the concrete wall and excess sand completely blocked off the flow of water through the main spring vent. Only a lesser amount of water was able to enter the spring basin via a smaller, satellite vent further downstream.

Enter the Florida caving community. Cavers and cave divers have long made their restoration services available to the state of Florida, various counties, and private landowners. They have cleaned out numerous trashed-filled or silted-in cave entrances, springs, and sinkholes in Florida and elsewhere.

For instance, Florida cave divers built a stairway and platform at the edge of Peacock Spring and Orange Grove Sink at Peacock Springs State Park to reduce erosion.

More recently, they cleaned over a ton of trash from Vampire Sink in High Springs and from a trash-filled sinkhole near Manatee Springs.

Amos Philmon, Hart Springs County Park manager, contacted well-known Florida cave divers Cynthia Butler and Brian Williams to discuss the spring vent problem. They readily volunteered to donate time and people to staff a restoration effort at the spring.

Philmon was able to obtain a grant from the Suwannee River Water Management District to pay for the use of a hydraulic dredge pump. The cave divers provided divers and surface support to remove the sand from the spring vent and to remove the pieces of the old concrete wall.

The pump was used to remove more than six feet of sand and debris from the spring head. Divers also removed several tons of rock and old concrete by using lift bags attached to wire baskets. Surface support from the dry cavers and the Boy Scouts helped get these rocks up and out of the spring area. Divers were in the water in teams of four all day Saturday and Sunday, working up to 10 hours each day.



Hart Springs at night, illuminated. © Jill Heinerth.





By Saturday afternoon, volunteers had removed enough debris to allow flow to resume from the spring head. By Sunday afternoon, the basin was running again with clear blue water and a good boil on the surface.

Hart Springs has not had a boil for over six years. Kids were swimming and enjoying the beautiful new area by the end of the weekend.

Cave diving ban is overturned

Another objective of the cleanup was to show Gilchrist County how much cave divers can help with volunteer efforts to restore and maintain the springs that they love to dive in.

Gilchrist County prohibited cave diving more than five years ago because of liability concerns. Butler has been working since then on a proposal to overturn the law. In fact, she had to have a special two-day injunction just to allow the Hart Springs cleanup work to take place.

After that weekend, Butler, Philmon, Pete Butt, Rob Anderson, and others attended a Gilchrist County Commission meeting and presented a plan to rescind the cave diving ban and to allow for Hart Springs to return to a guided dive system. The commission voted 4-1 to overturn the ban. A guided cave diving system will bring a year-round source of revenue to the park. The guides will be volunteers who will not receive payment for their services. The guides will also spend time each month maintaining the trails, parking areas, and springs.

The guide system will help to protect the cave system's fragile nature. Dive requirement information will be posted on the Hart Springs website. All divers will go through the guide system, and the park will not incur any training or expense to allow the dives. All divers will be expected to sign release waivers and abide by all park rules.

This story appeared in the Gainesville Sun , June 10, 2004. The story was unattributed, and it is reproduced here without changes.



Hart Springs. © Mark Long. Used with permission.

Hart Springs is open to diving with a few requirements:

- Divers must show proof of full cave certification and Abe Davis award (or proof of 100 post-certification cave dives).
- DAN insurance or equivalent is required.
- Guide is required for the Black Lagoon system (not for Little Hart).

Registration forms, waivers, guide information, and more are available at [Hart Springs Park website](https://www.hartspringspark.com/).

On-site ticket sales and tee shirts will be subject to availability.

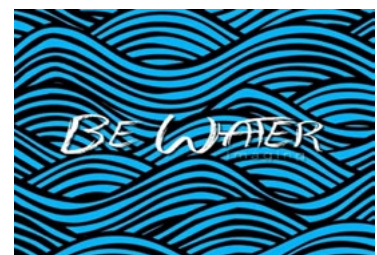
Members \$15.00, nonmembers \$50.00

Workshop Agenda

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity/Topic</i>	<i>Speaker</i>
9:30	Welcome and remarks	Paul Heinerth, Master of Ceremonies
9:45	Tribute to Forrest Wilson	Terry DeRouin
10:00	Mysteries of the Floridan Aquifer	Thomas Sawicki, PhD
10:30	Break	
10:45	Dive Safety; Just Culture	Panel: Christine Tamburri, moderator Charlie Roberson, Jared Hires
11:15	Recognition and prizes	Paul Heinerth
11:30	Water Quality in the Floridan Aquifer	Patricia Spellman, PhD
12:00	Prizes	Paul Heinerth
12:15	Lunch	
	Cave diving antiquities display <i>Education of a Cave Diver</i> -book signing by Guy Bryant <i>Wildlife of the Florida Springs</i> - book signing by Sandra Poucher	
1:15-4:15	Breakout sections: Concurrent workshops	
	Vertical workshop Cave diving photography CPR-AED Rescue	Andy Pitkin, Matt Vinzant, and more Fan Ping James Chandler, Emergency First Response Instructor Trainer, and Lee Ann Waggener, RN
4:15	Wrap up, 2023 International Conference Preview, The Florida Springs Institute	Adam Hughes, Bob Knight
4:30	End	

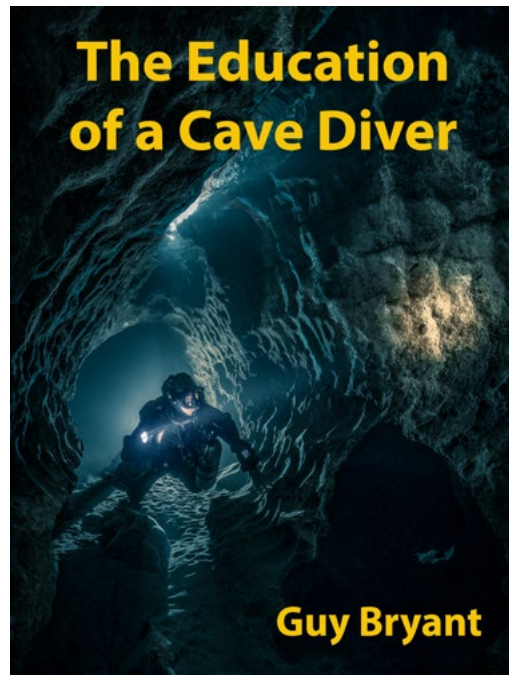
Thanks to Our Hart Springs Winter Workshop Sponsors

January 14, 2023



Book Signings at the Hart Springs Winter Workshop

Guy Bryant and Sandra Poucher both will be signing copies of their books. Bring your copy or get one there.

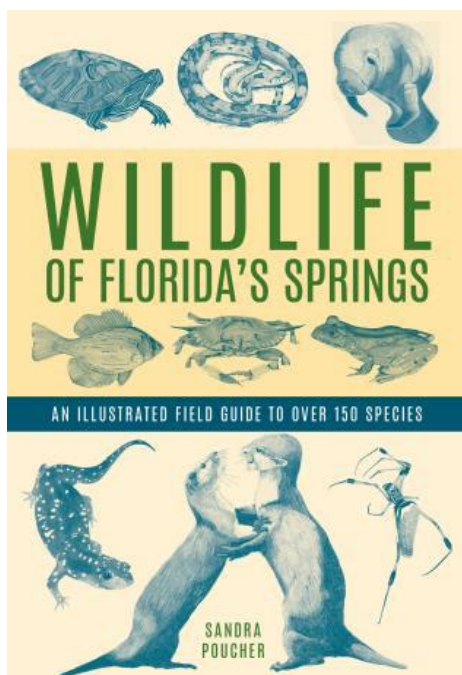


The Education of a Cave Diver

a book by Guy Bryant

Longtime NSS-CDS member Guy Bryant takes you through his early ventures into caves, scuba and, eventually, cave diving. There were no formal cave diving courses in the 1970s. One learned from others, figured things out, or survived mistakes. Guy recounts his adventures—good, bad, and dangerous—and about the mentorship of friends and more experienced cave divers he met along his journey.

The Education of a Cave Diver was published in October, 2022, and is available on Amazon.



WILDLIFE OF FLORIDA'S SPRINGS An Illustrated Field Guide to Over 150 Species

by SANDRA POUCHER

New for 2022, this book describes the life found in Florida's springs, spring runs, rivers, and even underwater cave systems. It features over 150 species and more than 130 original illustrations.

Available in the [NSS-CDS bookstore](#)

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