

GROUNDHOG CAVE

by Peter Sprouse

Frank Hall of Austin invited me to help with the survey of a new extension in a cave near Bandera. He and Ron Rutherford had dug through rubble in the floor of Groundhog Cave, opening up a pit which dropped into large passage. This cave originally had been surveyed by Mike Warton and others in 1986 during a TSA project at Hill Country State Natural Area. They had explored about 50 meters to a pinch at the bottom of an 8 meter drop. The breakthrough was only about 15 meters in from the entrance. Frank had arranged with park superintendant Shaun Heavey for us to map the new section on 11 January. I pulled together a crew and we met out at the park that Saturday morning.

A month of heavy rains resulted in swampy roads getting to the base of the cave ridge. As we prepared our gear at the roadhead the county constable rode up on his horse to check our caving permit. His vigilance was impressive. We wondered if unauthorized caving was indeed a pressing law enforcement problem in Bandera County. We hiked of the grassy hill and Ron, Barbara, Holly, and Nico Hauwert headed in to rig the drop. Meanwhile Frank, Mack Pitchford, Michael Crawford and I began mapping from the entrance. We went down a couple of free-climbs to the rigpoint, with Shaun following with a flashlight to have a look. The rope feeds into a very narrow rift where care must be taken not to jam your descender. This rift emerges as a ceiling meander in a large borehole passage, a 17 meter drop.



Lower borehole in Groundhog Cave. Peter Sprouse photo

When I arrived on bottom Nico was already grappling the virgin waterfall climb that Frank had described. The rock looked dubious but he hooked something at the top of the falls which held the weight of three pullers, so Nico bravely ascended. The rest of us watched as he struggled over the crumbly, gooey lip. He made it, and secured the rope

for a few of us to come up to map. A very short section of streamway led to another waterfall, which actually came out of an extension of the same ceiling meander we'd rappelled out of. On this level it was only a mantle move to get into it. Once through the ceiling the stream could be seen to originate from a tight horizontal bedding plane. A passable dome continued up, but soon pinched. So we rappelled the 7 meters back down Grapple Falls into the main borehole and mapped to the west.



Nico climbs Grapple Falls. Peter Sprouse photo

The passage enlarged from 15 meters across into a large room, Bandera Hall. This room is triangular, about 40 meters on a side. It has some very nice formations at the

southwest corner. At the north end is a waterfall inlet, which comes out of another tight horizontal bed at ceiling level. This was maybe Doug Allen-sized, and we all agreed that we would be willing to boost him up and watch him try to squeeze in. Too bad he wasn't there.

Along the northeast wall of Bandera Hall was a short drop into a lower room which Ron and Frank had checked, but couldn't find a continuation. A more interesting area was back in the borehole near the rope. We rigged an 8 meter pitch to a lower level where we regained the stream. It appeared through breakdown and cascaded down into a rubble fill, not to be seen again. Frank checked a crawl going west under the borehole, but it had no breeze and seemed to just wind around the base of the boulders which make up the borehole floor.



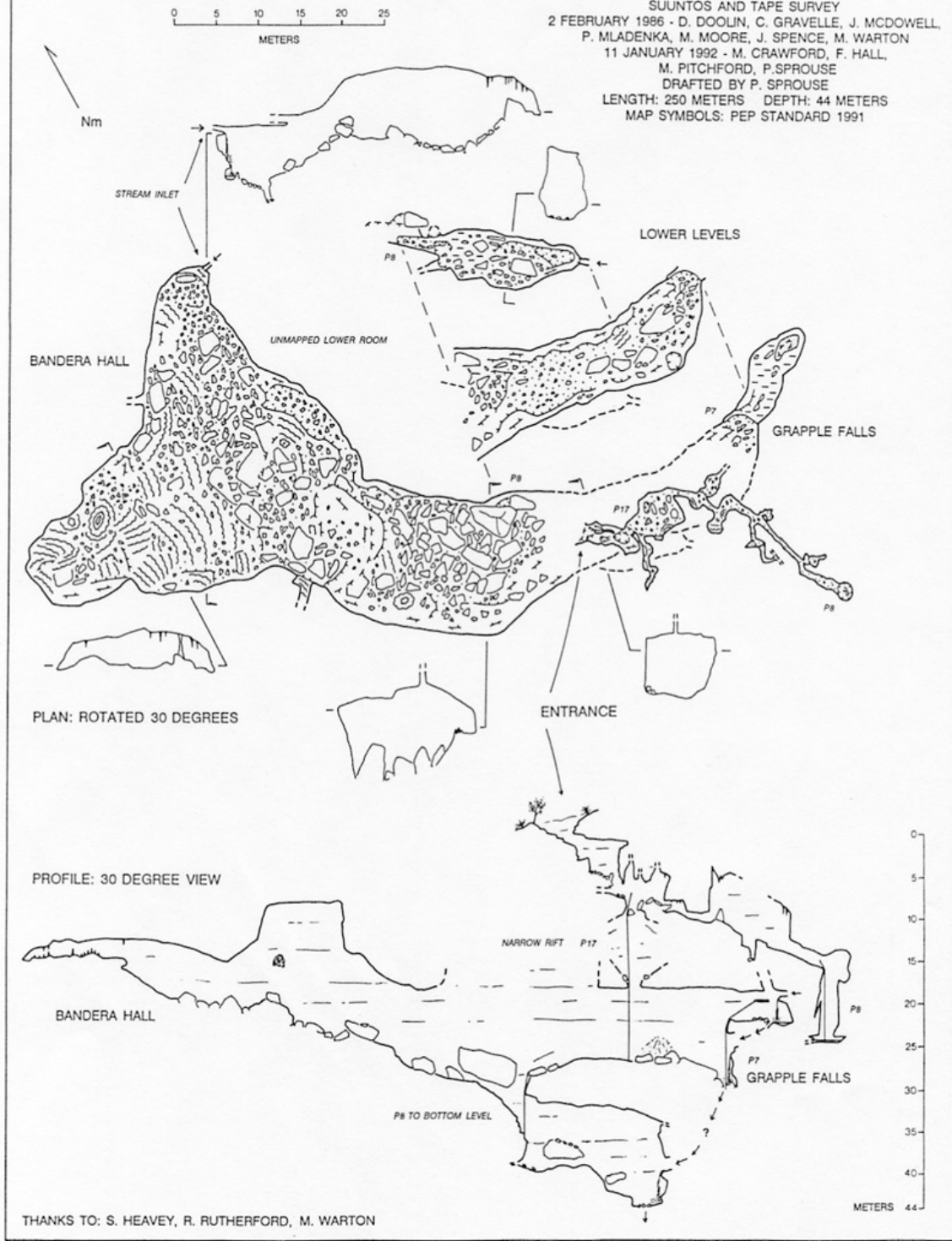
Michael admires the formations in Bandera Hall. Peter Sprouse photo

We shot photos in the borehole while Ron, Barbara, and Holly headed out. Quite a few rocks crashed down from the rift, reminding us that it was still a fresh dig. While they headed on back to Wimberley, the rest of us took advantage of Shaun's offer to use an old ranch house nearby for the night. Michael's truck got stuck in the swamp and had to be pulled out by Nico's 4WD Subaru. We passed an enjoyable evening in the old ranch house and the next day drove west to see the dinosaur tracks outside the park.

Groundhog Cave is quite nice, certainly the best cave found in the park up to that time. The sources of the two streams remain an interesting puzzle, and it is possible that the stream disappearance could be pushed at the bottom too. Although access is currently restricted, it is hoped that TPWD will develop a permit policy which will allow sport trips into the cave.

GROUNDHOG CAVE BANDERA COUNTY, TEXAS

SUUNTOS AND TAPE SURVEY
 2 FEBRUARY 1986 - D. DOOLIN, C. GRAVELLE, J. MCDOWELL,
 P. MLADENKA, M. MOORE, J. SPENCE, M. WARTON
 11 JANUARY 1992 - M. CRAWFORD, F. HALL,
 M. PITCHFORD, P. SPROUSE
 DRAFTED BY P. SPROUSE
 LENGTH: 250 METERS DEPTH: 44 METERS
 MAP SYMBOLS: PEP STANDARD 1991



THANKS TO: S. HEAVEY, R. RUTHERFORD, M. WARTON