

Ranchers, Rattlers and Recharge

Caving on the Phillips Ranch in Crockett County, West Texas

By Sofia Casini

Photos by Goeff Hoesé and Peter Sprouse



Participants: Don Arburn, Peter Sprouse, Ryan Reid, Geoff Hoesé, Sofia Casini, Jacqui LaRue Thomas

A Texas gas and sheep rancher, Toby Carlton, contacted Peter Sprouse about coming to check out a cave unearthed on his land in November 2009 when the gas company ripped open the earth with a bulldozer. His family was enjoying tooling around in it, and was looking for the expert take on what had been discovered and what should be done about it. The caving crew set out on their mission with a few good leads – the main cave on site and another called Phillips Cave, which Peter found a reference to in the TSS files prior to the trip. The weekend was promising.

The caving crew arrived to a warm reception Saturday morning, March 6th 2010. The ranching family – 81 year old Toby Carlton, his wife Coco, their children and grandchildren - all excitedly welcomed the

cavers. They shared their finds so far from earlier exploring – reporting “wooly mammoth teeth and a massive thigh bone” – and some important information about Phillips Cave, explored 50 years ago by Coco and now home to a mass of slithering rattlesnakes.



Sofia lights up the main passage in Paleo Cave.

Paleo Cave: Led to the recently unearthed cave, the team set about surveying, with Peter sketching, Ryan setting stations, and Sofia reading instruments. The cave was found when a bulldozer excavating caliche for the gas well pads scraped the bedding plane open which formed the top of the cave. The newly formed entrance led into a larger chamber, with promising leads shooting off in a few directions - most leads stopped up shortly and one was too small to pass. Notable was a small skylight in a dome, about 1 inch in diameter and width, showing the thinness of the cave ceiling. Another similar hole was found outside of the cave between two of the trucks, leading to speculation that another chamber may exist – and that it would be desirable to find another parking place. Also notable were four paleo sink entrances, now plugged, which had left large debris cones, ranging from 20 centimeters to 2 or 3 meters. These were filled with many old bones. A tooth of unknown origin, which was later identified as a horse tooth, was about 2 inches long and curved. Left in the cave for the family and future explorers, pictures were taken to be analyzed by paleontologists. Sadly, the family was informed their “wooly mammoth teeth and bones” were simply cave formations.



Ryan admiring the formations in Paleo Cave.



Jacqui at an ancient filled entrance.

“Paleo Cave” was home to fossils and numerous small formations, such as popcorn, gypsum crests, stalagmites, stalactites, and fried eggs. It was also home to small critters like crickets, roaches and

centipedes, and, of course, to many, many bones. Relatively untouched for some folks using beer cans Hansel and Gretel style to get out of the cave, Paleo Cave is promising in its wealth of data for paleontologists. The cave opening took a lot of runoff water after it was opened up in 2009, demonstrated by goat manure in the back passage place high on the cave wall and the significant erosion on the cave floor between debris cones in this short of a time span. The team speculates that the water may either fill the cave in the future or widen narrow passages, leading to other chambers.



Entrance pit to Phillips Cave.

Phillips Cave: Next, the ranchers took the team to Phillips Cave. As promised, this mossy green entrance (1 meter wide) lead straight down (6.1 meters) to a floor bed populated by three (at least) enormous and beautiful rattlesnakes. Coiled comfortably in the direct light, these snakes bore detailed black, gray, and brown diamond shaped markings. When stretched out they appeared close to 6 feet each! Explored by the grandmother Coco (now in her late 70s) when she was a teenager, the cave opens into a much larger cavern with unexplored leads. This cave was initially opened up circa 1950 when reportedly donkeys were used to move the large stones covering the entrance. The caving crew aborted the idea of entering the cave.



The residents of Phillips Cave.

Rattling Yo-Yo Cave: The ranchers then mentioned another cave found by their adult daughter many years ago, whose location nobody could remember clearly. Rough directions were provided, and the caving crew spent hours ridge walking amongst cactus in search of this cave. The peaceful afternoon was marred only slightly by the non-stop noise of the gas compressor stations. The final cave, named “Rattling Yo-Yo” was discovered by Sofia. Fitting in description though not exact location, it’s unclear whether this was the same one found by the rancher’s daughter. Rocks were thrown searching for rattlers before Sofia lowered herself straight down from the small triangular shaped entrance (.5 meters). The cave (1.7 meters vertical) opened into a single chamber, with just enough room for everyone inside and standing room at the back of the cave. Two small skulls and other body parts, possibly raccoon, were discovered, along with an old rusted metal yo-yo with whistling holes on each side. Animal scratches were also found closer to the entrance. Quite lovely, the cave walls were decomposed limestone of chalky white with unknown black markings, and the floor consisted of large piles of rich black dirt. The day’s excitement peaked when trip leader Peter Sprouse, the last to enter the cave, stated, “How come none of you noticed these two rattlesnakes?” They were staring at him eye level, with their tongues flickering. Peter descended and the survey team (Peter sketching, Ryan



Sofia calmly squeezing into Rattling Yoyo Cave.

setting stations, and Don on instruments) continued, while the team strategized on how to exit the cave safely. Peter thought of sending out an initial member, who could then drape a rain jacket over the snakes. Sending up the member with largest body mass was discussed, as was sending out the member who was smallest and quickest. Don Arburn, at 6ft 3in, went to observe the situation, at which time he noted the snakes nestled in a crack near the entrance, just 8 inches from body passing, and exclaimed, "Oh, no, this changes everything. We have a problem here, guys." Mustering courage, Don played sacrificial lamb and exited the cave first, draped the jacket over the wall crack, and each member proceeded to exit. Phew!

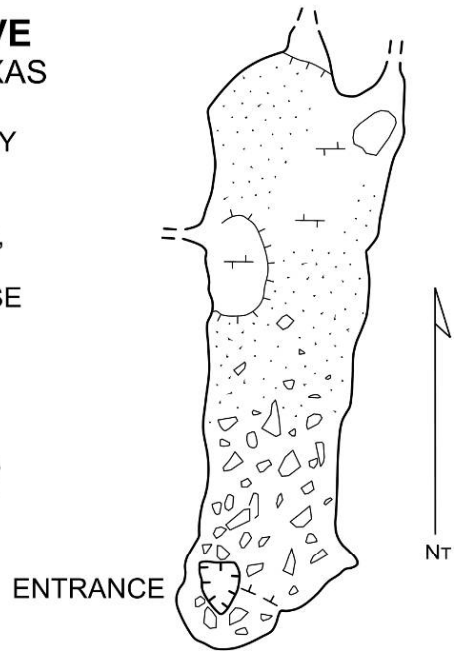
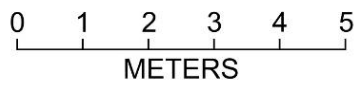
Back at the ranch, the caving team celebrated Toby Carlton's 81st birthday with him and the entire family, and then slept soundly after a full day exploring. A good day's caving!

RATTLING YOYO CAVE
CROCKETT COUNTY, TEXAS

SUUNTO AND TAPE SURVEY
6 MARCH 2010

DON ARBURN, RYAN REID,
PETER SPROUSE
DRAWN BY PETER SPROUSE

LENGTH: 10 M
DEPTH: 4.4 M



PROFILE: 105 DEGREE VIEW

