

Silvertip 1996

By Peter Sprouse



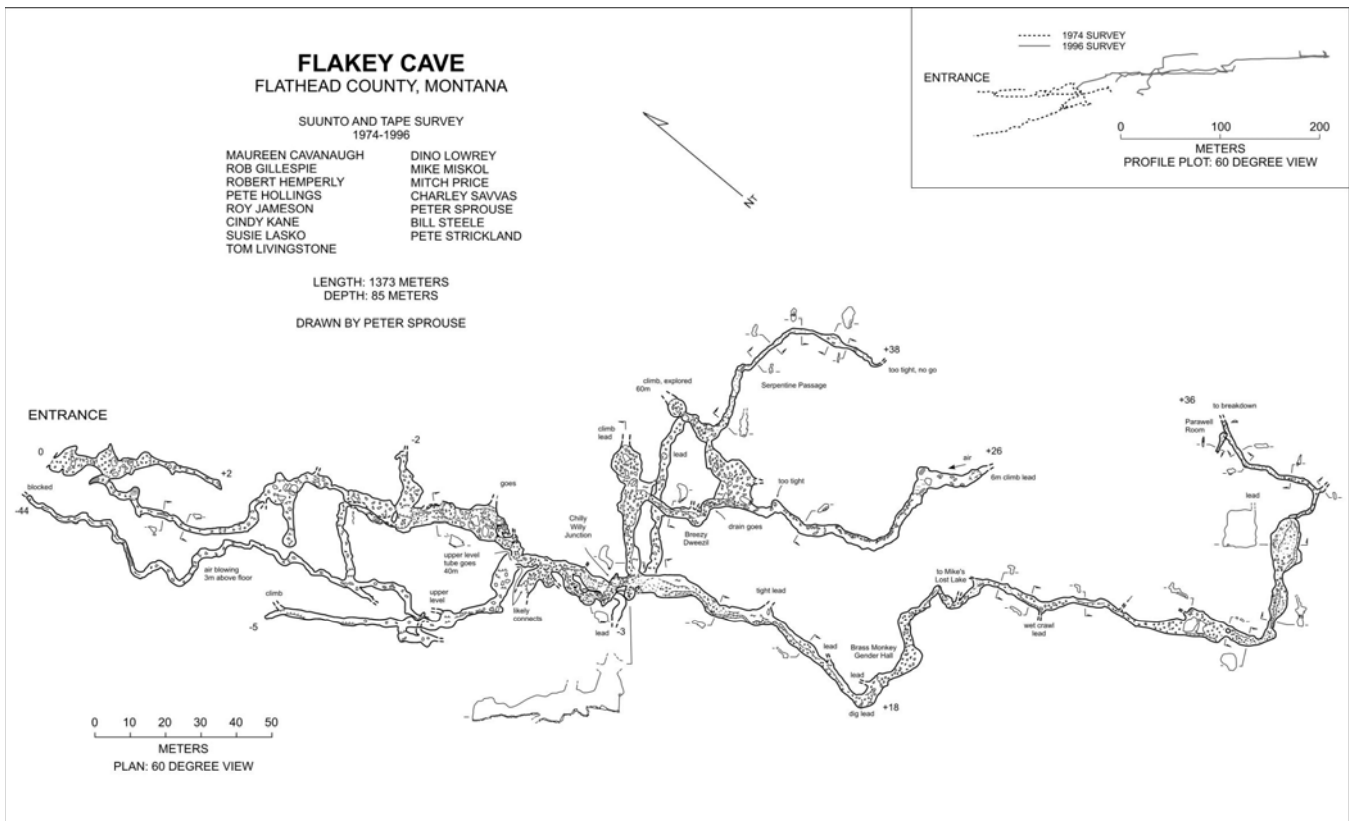
The north cirque of Silvertip Mountain. Photo by Peter Sprouse

It had been quite a long time since I had been caving at Silvertip Mountain. The long drive from Texas, the long hike in, and the plethora of caving available in Mexico had kept me away. But Bill Steele and I began talking about going back to the Tip, and by early 1996 I was delving into old reports and survey notes. I converted old Ellipse data files to the Walls program for the PC, cleaning up closure problems in the data as best I could. When summer came around, Bill couldn't make it, so only three of us set out from Texas, Susie Lasko, Charley Savvas, and me. We met three more cavers at the trailhead on 12 August, Marie Hedrick and Mike Miskol from Montana, and Pete Hollings from Sasquatchewan. Although I recalled that in the past we'd done the hike to the north cirque in one day, we weren't quite up for that, and camped the first night at the packer's camp on Silvertip Creek. The next day we had trouble locating the Silvertip cutoff trail over to the cirque from the Ibex Mountain trail, cutting over too soon. We ended up doing some bush-whacking both ways, but it wasn't too bad. Once on the right trail we went right to base camp. Seat rocks were still gathered around the fire ring.

Our initial objective was Flakey Cave, mainly because we hadn't carried much rope up with us on this trip, making it a good choice. The strong breeze at the entrance was refreshing in the summer sun while we changed into our cave suits. We had no trouble following the old survey, and soon located a promising climb lead off the F survey. It looked straightforward so I headed up, though before I reached the top I wished I had a belay. But I made it, and rigged a rope for the others to follow. We later set a stainless bolt at this point for permanent rigging. (An interesting side note: during a 1999 trip into the cave, this rope was found to be completely shredded by rodents, so the climb will have to be led again.) We mapped southeast through a multi-level area with numerous side leads. We did several small climbs, one of which required piling up rocks into a large cairn to get up. At one point we reached the edge of a pit into a large room that likely connects to the former end point of the cave, but didn't descend it to do a tie-in. From there we headed off into "white space". The wind was howling as we crossed a pit to a large junction. Here two good-sized passages led off, but our clinometer jammed up, apparently not liking the cold. So we were forced to retreat for the day with 250 meters mapped. That evening we went on a tour of the cirque, looking at the entrances to Anne's, Bell, and Blood caves.



Peter Sprouse in Flakey Cave. Photo by Susie Lasko.

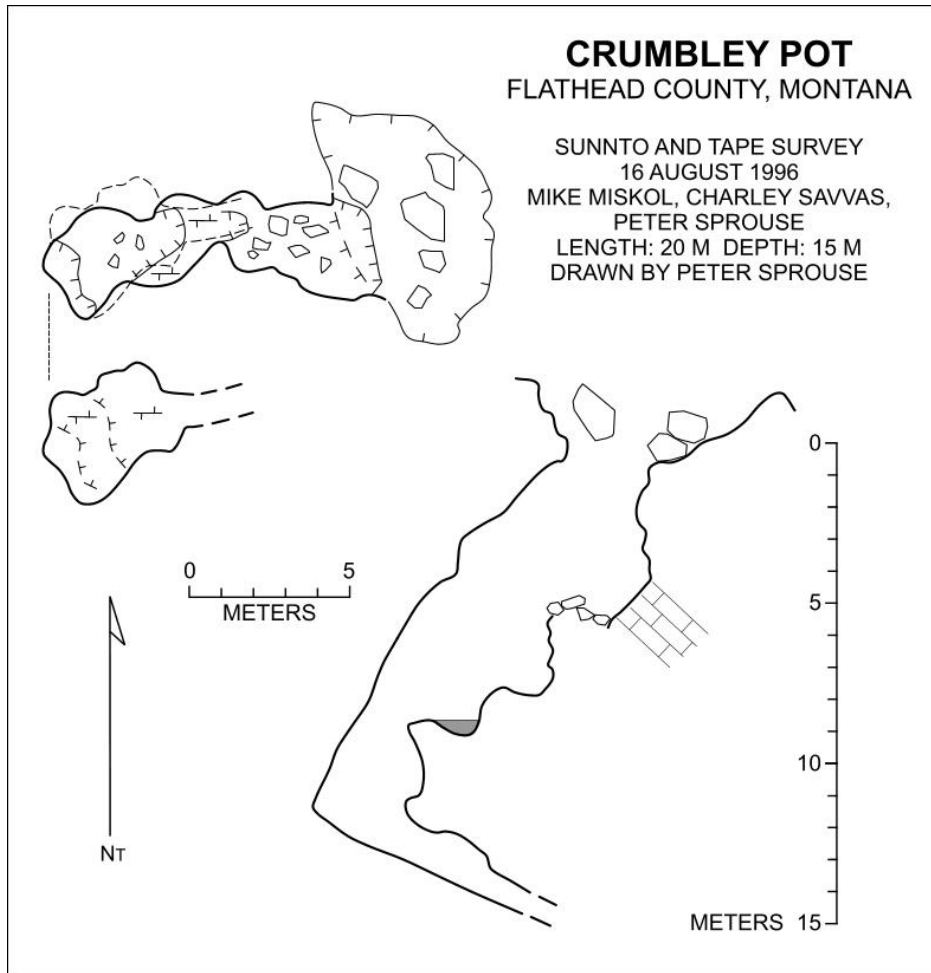


The next day we put two teams in, this time keeping the sticky clino inside our caving suit to keep it warm. We split up into two survey teams at the large junction room. The left lead went straight on to a drippy dome, no doubt with passage high above but not readily accessible. Just before that a blowing side lead kept on southeast to split again (Breezy Dweezil). The left way was chosen, as the right one was smaller, blowing, and therefore colder. The left way went up a climb to intersect a large passage. To the right it could be seen to stair-step up at least three climbs into blackness, handlines would be needed. To the left it dropped down to the base of another climb, where climbing gear would be needed.

The other team went to the right at the junction room, mapped long shots in large passage (The Brass Monkey). They quit after 276 meters with a climb lead and a crawl lead. Altogether we had nearly doubled the length of the cave to 1068 meters, depth 85 meters. Everyone was very impressed with the quality of the leads and the amount of airflow, indicating that Flakey Cave has a lot of growing to do. Afterwards Marie, Susie and I did some hiking above Flakey and located a 20-meter pit blowing good air. There seems to have been quite a bit of ridgewalking done around this area from reading other reports, and while some things have been checked, there doesn't seem to be any survey data.



Pete Hollings opens up Crumbley Pot. Photo by Peter Sprouse



On our last day we decided to hike over to the south cirque to have a look at that karst. We hiked up past the High Camp site, passing the high cave entrances like Getout Cave. We reached the snowfields and crossed over the west col, where we got a spectacular view of the south cirque. We headed for the large sink shown on the topo. The primary snowmelt swallets at the bottom seemed to pinch, but above it on the west side we located two promising caves. Snow Cone Pit was nearly plugged by snow but a stream coming from the main Silvertip snowfield had melted a way in, allowing access to a wet climb-down. It went, but was quite wet, and our waterproof suits were back in camp, so we moved on. The second one, Crumbly Pot, required moving some boulders to get in, then we mapped down two climbs to a wet body-size crawl dipping east. Jason Ballensky checked this on a later trip and said that it did not go.



Pete Hollings takes a GPS reading on a south cirque cave. Photo by Peter Sprouse

We hiked down toward the bottom of the cirque to try to find the entrances explored by Hans Bodenhamer and others in the 1980's. We think that we did locate two of them, but the locations seemed to be a bit off from their map, so it was a little hard to tell what we were looking at. We proceeded to the east side of the cirque where the line plots indicated the back of Blood Cave to be heading. We saw no promising entrances here, suggesting that the Blood through trip may be easier to establish from the inside. We didn't locate a 50 meter pit lead reported by John Ganter. We crossed the mountain via the east col, and saw several promising pits in the east part of the north cirque that could lead down into Flakey Cave. Meanwhile Susie and Marie had begun a survey of Three Sinks Ice Cave, where Marie could practice sketching, though they didn't map much.

With various team members nursing sore feet and knees from the vigorous hiking we knew it would be a 2-day hike out, so it was time to go. A week trip to Silvertip is really too short. The Montana cavers were glad to have gotten an introduction to Silvertip, and planned a return trip for the next month.

Mike Miskol headed back up to Silvertip in September 1996 with Rob Gillespie, Mitch Price and Tom Livingstone. They continued pushing the three main leads heading southeast. The easternmost one, the Serpentine Passage, got too narrow to explore. The middle passage led to a 6-meter climb that one of them managed to scale, but lacking a bolt to rig from they decided to turn back. The westernmost of these three leads was pushed to a breakdown choke. They also pushed a downstream lead that passes under Breezy Dweezil that continues, and trends toward lower sections of Flakey. Altogether 810 m was added to Flakey Cave in 1996, making it 1373 meters long and tripling the footprint of the cave. It is still trending into a blank area, and remains promising for those prepared to lead climb.

Thanks to all who helped me with preparations for this trip, particularly Mike McEachern, Nancy Boice, Preston Forsythe, Hans Bodenhamer, John Ganter, Mitch Price, Art Palmer, and Jerry Ayers.



Peter and Marie at the entrance to Anne's Cave. Photo by Susie Lasko.