

# TRIP REPORT FORM

## AGGIE SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

**DATE:** 3 September 2023

**STATE:** Texas

**SPECIFIC AREA:** Entrance to South caverns

**TEAM LEADER:** Bobby Randolph, Paige Hudson

**TEAM MEMBERS:** Christian Musil, Drista Pandey, Sebastian Perches, Tanushri Bhatt, Will Flack

**TIME ENTERED:** 13:00

**CAVE:** Whirlpool Cave Preserve

**COUNTY:** Travis County

**EXIT TIME:** 16:50

### PURPOSE OF THE TRIP

Recreational trip to take new grotto members on their first beginner-friendly wild cave

### BRIEFLY DESCRIBE YOUR TRIP AND ANY SPECIAL OBSERVATION

8am Sunday morning, on the third of September, I pulled my car into our usual pre-trip meeting spot: the Walmart parking lot. Having been the first to arrive I popped open the back of my car and sat down, eating my breakfast eagerly awaiting to see the new faces that were only hours away from experiencing their first cave. As our new cavers began to trickle in we loaded gear bags into the back of my car. Once everyone arrived we quickly debriefed the next few hours before splitting into cars. Unintentionally our two cars ended up split between a “girls” car (the better one of course) and a “boys” car. Pulling out right on time at 8:30am, we hit the road to Austin! First stop: Avery Ranch.

Avery Ranch, a new cave for the Aggie Grotto, was part of our group's double header for the day. As we arrived around 10:30 at the “cave entrance” I questioned if we had driven to the wrong address. We were driving through a new and fairly well off residential neighborhood. My GPS told me we had arrived, but there were houses in front of me and a neighborhood pool and playground to the right. Sure enough, to my left lying in the middle of the neighborhood was the cave entrance! In a patch of grass lay double doors leading straight into the ground. Holly, a member of the UT grotto met us at the entrance to lead us down a flight of cement steps into a decorated chamber smaller than my living room. Holly explained that there is no natural entrance to the cave, the man made stairs we took are the only known way in and out. The reason being that the only reason the decorated room was discovered was because developers were trying to run a pipe and accidentally discovered Avery Ranch instead. I was in complete awe that feet away from the road and swimming pool

Avery Ranch existed. It certainly makes you consider how many other caves we walk on top of in our day to day lives, how many caves are alive and creating millions of years of speleothems that we don't even know exists right below our feet. Avery Ranch is a small room, and discovered by accident after all. I believe a beautiful aspect of caves is the secret beauty of them. If you are intrepid enough to enter you are rewarded with such natural, raw beauty, and a millennia of preserved ancient history.

Now that the Aggie Grotto had taken its second ever trip to Avery Ranch, and the new cavers had their chance to see a decorated cave, we headed back to the car for the dirty, twisty, crawly passages of Whirlpool.

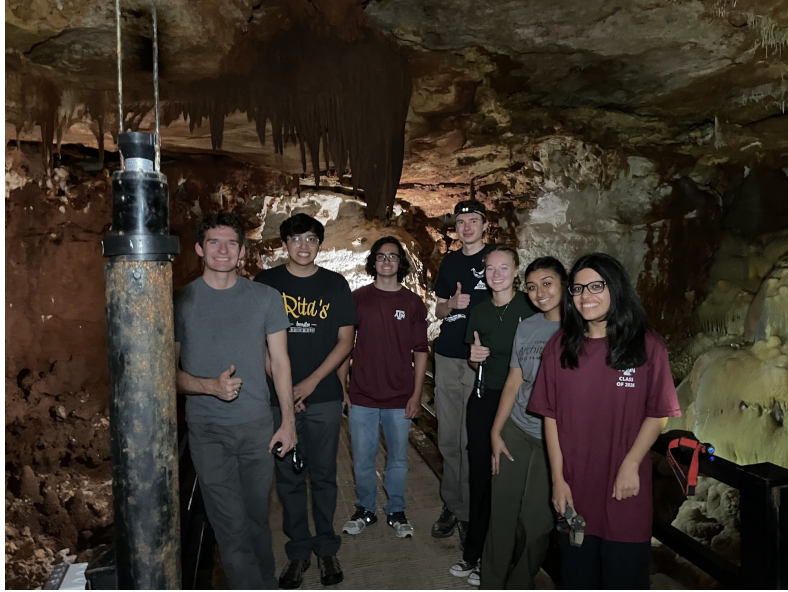
We arrived at the parking spaces of the highway underpass where we began to change into our gear and prepare any last minute additions to our packs. As Bobby briefed the new cavers on safety, expectations, and general rules of caving Will and I went to retrieve the key. After both parties had finished we met at the entrance of the cave! Bobby entered first, reminding the members to count off as they went in. After hesitancy about who would be descending the ladder next, each caver slowly made their way into their first cave! I brought up the rear, closing off the gate and descending the ladder myself. Everyone was hunched sitting in the best spots they could find of the already narrow and low ceilinged entrance. As we began to move forward to start our trip through the cave I heard someone from the front say "woah, we're already crawling." I chuckled knowing we wouldn't be vertical for another four hours. Passing through diverging passages Tanushri exclaimed that she saw bats hiding out between some break down. Unfortunately, it was just a lot of cave crickets. Despite crawling the group made incredible speed to the Travis County room where we all sat down for a break around a small opening known as "the coffin." Most everyone took turns with their first truly tight squeeze, crawling in and turning themselves around to peak back out for a photo opp. We had a snack, checked in with everyone, and prepared them to expect the birth canal before we made descent further into the southern caverns.

Leaving the Travis County room the crawls became tighter and less comfortable as we slithered over loose rock. Everyone handled it well and continued to make good time through the cave. Being in the back, conversation was hard to hear, but I knew the front of the group had finally reached the birth canal when I heard an "oh no" exclaimed from the front. Again, our new members fearlessly and effortlessly pushed themselves through into the next room. It put a smile on my face when I came through last to see everyone not only excited about what they had just accomplished, but eager for more. The last big challenge was a tight squeeze with possibly less than a foot of room and plenty of breakdown underneath to make the crawl less than comfortable. We left our packs behind in favor of more room as we made the few final tight crawls and passages towards the back. As we made our way closer to the whirlpool room the earth became less dusty dirt and more of cool clay. The talking from the group became louder as everyone became more comfortable with the



cave environment. We made our way through the final passage before the tight squeeze to whirlpool. As I rounded the corner I saw a pair of feet disappear from the opening followed by a chorus of grunting and foul language, more than appropriate for this grim crawl. I patiently wait my turn behind the last two individuals, one of our new members, and Will, the third officer on our trip. The new member in front of us found themselves uncomfortable and nervous facing the passage. Will and I spent time talking them through hand and foot placements, and encouraging a mentality that would pull them through, sometimes your mentality in a cave is far more important than what you think you're actually physically capable of. After trying a few more time they decided to wait behind, Will followed the rest of the group and I headed back with our member to the nearest room where we waited for the group to return from the whirlpool room. Enjoying the silence of the cave I made snowmen out of clay and played around with the rocks while my friend did the same. Soon we could hear the sound of our group through breakdown as they made their way back through and around the corner. As everyone crawled back through the room we fell back into line and seamlessly made our way to the entrance of the cave. I had to hand it to them, after my first time squeezing through the final passage to whirlpool I needed to sit for a breath! We stopped for a few breaks when our passages widened enough for us to be side by side again. But in less than four hours we were back at the entrance to the cave. As we waited for each member to climb their way up the ladder, Will, Tanushri, and I scouted out cave crickets on the ceiling. Soon enough I was the last one climbing out and turning off the cave.

We exited the cave around 4:45, took pictures, and took an extensive wet wipe bath at the car before heading to our favorite tex mex place in Austin. Talking at dinner, everyone enjoyed their experience and challenging themselves, a couple were even enthusiastic to go on the next immediate trip!



Group photo at the end of the Avery Ranch tour. From left to right Will Flack, Sebastian Perches, Christian Musil, Bobby Randolph, Paige Hudson, Tanushri Bhatt, Drista Pandey  
Photo by Holly, from the UT Grotto



Christian Musil is the first to follow Bobby into the cave  
Photo by Paige Hudson



Tanushri Bhatt poses coming out of the coffin, sporting cute plant printed gloves.  
Photo by Bobby Randolph



The group comes to stop and members wait their turn as the passage ahead turns and becomes too narrow to traverse quickly. Left to right, Sebastian Perches, Will Flack  
Photo by Paige Hudson





Christian Musli offers Sebastian Perches a hand as he makes his way out of the narrow opening of the birth canal. Exiting can be difficult due to the upwards incline directly exiting the passage.

Photo by Bobby Randolph



Group takes a water break on the way out of the cave

Left to right: Will Flack, Tanushri Bhatt, Drista Pandey, Christian Musli, Bobby Randolph, Sebastian Perches

Photo by Paige Hudson



Post cave picture before heading back to the car.

Left to right, Bobby Randolph, Will Flack, Paige Hudson, Sebastian Perches, Drista Pandey, Tanushri Bhatt, Christian Musli