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GUIDE TO INDIANA CAVERNS

Introduction

Caverns have long excited popular interest in Indiana, a state possessing a wealth of such subterranean phenomena. Most caverns in this state are situated in a sinkhole plain region, located in or near the outcrop area of the St. Louis and St. Genevieve limestones, of Mississippian age. These limestones are divided vertically by both dip and strike joints, and bedding planes are numerous. As a result of the presence of such incipient openings, groundwater has been able to dissolve out the cavern passages, many of which have been explored and mapped.

Some Indiana caverns are dry, having been deserted by the subterranean streams which developed them, and others are still occupied by subsurface stream systems. The casual visitor to a cavern would do well to observe some simple rules of safety, unless the cavern is commercially operated, in which case few precautions are necessary. In the Cavern not commercialized, it is best to ascertain the presence of a moving current of air, so as to preclude the possibility of running into some of the

dangerous gases arising from the decomposition of vegetation. Flashlights furnish the best light, and are also easy to carry in difficult passages, but extra batteries and bulbs should be taken on the trip. In addition, matches in waterproof containers, and candles, may be used to test for the presence of dangerous quantities of carbon dioxide in the air.

Clothing worn on visits to caverns should be warm, but not too heavy. Although the air temperature in most Indiana caverns is approximately 52 degrees Fahrenheit, the humidity is high, and exertion makes the sensible temperature much higher. For wet caves, hip boots are recommended unless the visitor is not averse to walking for several hours in wet clothes. Deep pools on the floors of some caverns constitute a menace to the visitor.

The following pages give in brief form the location, name, and some of the general features of a few of the better-known caverns in Indiana. Hundreds of small caverns are to be found in many areas in the state, even outside the "Cavern Belt", but these must necessarily be omitted from this description.

CRAWFORD COUNTY

Marengo Cave

The entrance to this cavern is located in the northwest quarter of Section 6, T. 2 S., R. 2 E., at the northeast edge of the town of Marengo. Over 3,900 feet have been mapped in the cavern, although exploration has been carried beyond the portions of the cavern open to the public. The cavern is operated by a company which conducts several tours daily.

Entrance to the cavern is gained by a stairway. All paths followed by the visitor are dry, and are kept in good repair. Marengo Cave consists of one large passage, along which are located several large rooms. The floor is composed of dry, packed silt, and a sunken, dry stream channel meanders over it. This cavern is noted for the many beautiful dripstone and flowstone formations. Many of the large rooms are beautifully decorated by nature, and the visitor is well repaid for his visit to this, one of the most beautiful caverns in the United States.

Town Spring Cavern

The entrance is located in the southwest quarter of Section 31,

T. 1 S., R. 2 E., at the north edge of Marengo. Over 3,500 feet have been explored and mapped. The cavern is wet throughout, and a low ceiling and mud floor are encountered for over 1,500 feet, at the back of the cavern.

The cavern is composed of one main passage at one level. The floor is carved in rock, or is deeply covered with mud behind obstructions. A large stream flows from the mouth of the passage. Very few formations are present. Rooms at the end of the cavern are near the surface of the ground above. The rock walls and floors of the passage are beautifully decorated with solution facets.

Wyandotte Cave

The entrance to Wyandotte Cave is located in the southwest quarter of Section 27, T. 3 S., R. 2 E., 12 miles west of Corydon. Approximately four and one-half miles have been measured and mapped. This cavern is commercially operated, and good paths are maintained.

The cavern is developed on several levels. Large, fallen blocks and slabs give the cavern an appearance of imposing ruggedness. Many interesting rooms connected by high, broad passages, contain dripstone and flowstone formations. The subterranean Indian flint quarry is unique. The formations are not so numerous as in many caverns, and the main interest in Wyandotte Cave lies in its size and primitive rough appearance.

GREENE COUNTY

American Bottoms Cave

The upper entrance of this cavern is located in the northeast corner of Section 26, T. 7 N., R. 4 W., six miles east of Bloomfield. The lower entrance is two miles southwest of the upper entrance. The length of the cavern has not been determined, although it has been partially explored. This is a difficult cavern to traverse, owing to the fact that crawling is often necessary. In several places, a rope is needed to lower the visitor through crevices. Swimming is necessary in the lower end.

Entrance is gained through a dangerous collapse feature in sandstone. This branch of the cavern is narrow. Entrance to the main cavern passage is made by dropping through a narrow crevice with the aid of a rope. The main cavern is large, and in places is obstructed by blocks and high mud banks. Consequently, passage is very difficult. Entrance to the lower end is gained through a wet-weather spring. Crawling for a long distance brings one into the main cavern, which here is large and filled partially with water. Even in low water, swimming is necessary in many deeper pools. There are no dripstone formations in the cavern. The American Bottoms Cave is a fine example of a cavern in the process of development.

LAWRENCE COUNTY

Bronson's Cave

This cavern is located a few yards north of the center of Section 4, T. 3 N., R. 1 E., four and one-quarter miles east of Mitchell, in Spring Mill State Park. The entire length of the cave has not been determined. The cavern is rough and slightly wet.

The main passage of Bronson's Cave is relatively narrow, and the ceiling is low. The floor is quite rough with rock shingle and collapsed slabs. Some formations of dripstone exist, but those are not outstanding. This cavern is a portion of Donaldson's Cave, the entrance of which is a short distance away.

Donaldson's (Donnelson's) Cave

The entrance to Donaldson's Cave is in the northwest quarter of Section 4, T. 3 N., R. 1 E., three and three-quarter miles east of Mitchell in Spring Mill State Park. The total length of the cavern is unknown; however, some exploration and mapping has been done. The main cavern is difficult to traverse, owing to the large stream which flows through it.

The mouth of Donaldson's Cave, situated at the head of a deep, beautiful gorge, is one of the most picturesque cavern entrances in the state. A large stream, rushing from the cavern mouth, adds to its beauty. A short distance from the mouth, the stream-filled main passage is obstructed by a high cascade. Two higher side passages are dry, but are obstructed a short distance back from their intersection. The main cavern, upstream from the cascade, is partially filled by the stream, and a boat is necessary for some distance. This cavern system includes the passages of Bronson's Cave.

Donnehue's Cave

The entrance to this cavern is located in the southwest quarter of Section 27, T. 5 N., R. 1 W., two and one-half miles southwest of Bedford. Twelve hundred feet have been mapped. The floor of the cavern contains a stream for the first 50 feet, and the lower passages are wet.

A stream issues from the mouth of Donnehue's Cave and a large room has been formed just inside the entrance. The main passage is six to forty feet high and six to ten feet wide. The side passages are rock tubes about four feet high. Many small tributary caverns join the main passage. Several subterranean natural bridges have been formed by the collapse of the floor of the upper level. The cavern contains only a few small, unattractive dripstone formations.

Hamer's Cave

This cavern is located in Spring Mill State Park, and the mouth is in the southeast quarter of Section 32, T. 4 N., R. 1 E., three miles east of Mitchell. The length is unknown, and the cavern has not been fully explored. Owing to deep water in the subterranean passage, a boat is needed for exploration.

Within the cavern there are two waterfalls, and water covers the floor entirely, attaining depths as great as 20 feet. Currents in the large stream are swift. This cavern furnishes water to run the restored grist and saw mill in the park. Owing to the constant large volume of water, no dripstone formations are present.

Salts Cave

This cavern is located in the southwest quarter of Section 13, T. 3 N., R. 2 W., one mile southeast of Georgia and six miles west of Mitchell. Several hundred feet are accessible and have been explored. Extremely dangerous mud paths, water and narrow passages make this cavern interesting.

The mouth leads to a cavern composed of two levels, the upper

one of which has collapsed in many places into the lower. Fallen blocks at all angles, covered with mud, block the passages. Some formations are present in the higher levels. At the back of the cavern, a passage one and one-half feet wide and forty feet high meanders through the massive limestone. The walls of this passage are faceted, and mud banks obstruct each turn. The cavern was named from the deposits containing nitrates, used during the latter part of the past century in gunpowder manufacture.

Shiloh Cave

The entrance is located in the northwest quarter of Section 18, T. 5 N., R. 1 W., seven miles northwest of Bedford near the Shiloh Church. Over 2,900 feet have been explored. The cave is wet throughout and "choke damp" gas has been reported in the main side passage.

The entrance, from which water comes only after heavy rains, is situated in a sinkhole. The main passage is 2,000 feet long, and the floor is covered with water. Stalactites are numerous and beautiful. At 1,500 feet from the mouth, a tributary passage leads to the southwest. Many falls and pools exist in this passage, which approaches the surface. "Choke damp" has been encountered here.

Twin Caves

The entrance to these caverns is located in a karst window near the center of Section 4, T. 3 N., R. 1 E., four and one-fourth miles east of Mitchell, in Spring Mill State Park. The length is unknown, but both caverns are occupied by an underground stream.

The entrances are situated at opposite ends of a karst window, formed by the collapse of a portion of the cavern. At the present time, boat trips are conducted in one of the caverns. A few dripstone formations are present.

MONROE COUNTY

Coon's Cave ✓

This cavern is located in the southwest quarter of Section 8, T. 8 N., R. 2 W., seven miles west and two miles south of Bloomington. Approximately 800 feet have been mapped. This cavern is difficult to traverse, owing to the rugged masses of fallen rock. Water is present in the lower levels, and pools have collected in the rooms.

Entrance is gained by means of a ladder in a pit. The main passage is four to twenty feet high. Many deep crevices and pits in the floor of the main passage lead to lower levels which are blocked. The main cavern passage ends in a room containing a deep pool of water. Many beautiful dripstone formations are present in this room.

Eller's Cave ✓

The mouth of this cavern is situated in the southwest quarter of Section 15, T. 8 N., R. ² W., about five miles southwest of Bloomington near the Illinois Central Railway. A distance of approximately 1,000 feet has been mapped. Several difficult, short passages require crawling.

This cavern has two distinct levels, the lower one of which is occupied by a stream. The lower level is terminated by an unusual cylindrical pit, 20 feet in diameter and 60 feet deep, with water falling down one side. The upper cavern level is dry and contains two large rooms. Several small side passages are present. Of chief interest are the circular pit, and the bear-wallows found in the upper level.

Mayfield's Cave

The entrance to this cavern is located 400 yards south of the center of Section 26, T. 9 N., R. 2 W., three miles northwest of Bloomington. Approximately 1,800 feet have been explored and mapped. The cavern is dry throughout, and a few passages require crawling.

The cavern consists of a long, narrow cavity, eight to twenty feet wide, and six to eight feet high. At 1,475 feet from the mouth, the passage terminates in a circular room, 22 feet in diameter and seven feet high. A narrow passage nearly 300 feet long leads from this room. This passage is two feet, eight inches wide, two and one-half feet high, and contains 29 sharp turns. The main passage has been filled with indurated clay. No dripstone formations are present.

May's Cave

The mouth of May's Cave is situated in the northwest quarter of Section 24, T. 8 N., R. 2 W., three miles southwest of Bloomington. Several hundred feet of this cavern may be traversed. Entrance is difficult, since water falls from the mouth of the cavern. A stream is present throughout.

The mouth of the cavern is spectacular, being situated at the back of a grotto in the hillside. A ten-foot waterfall falls from the opening at one side of the chasm. Two subterranean passages lead from the opening. The floor is mainly stone, and is relatively smooth. One passage leads to a large room with a high ceiling. The main interests are the form of the cavern and the entrance.

Saltpetre Cave

Saltpetre Cave is located in the northwest quarter of Section 15, T. 8 N., R. 2 W., six miles southwest of Bloomington. Access is possible in the cavern for a distance of only about 400 feet. The floor is dry, and some crawling and climbing is necessary.

The mouth of the cavern is broad, but is less than five feet

high. Fifty feet from the entrance, the roof lowers, but a ditch enables the visitor to proceed. A room 50 feet wide and 60 feet long occurs 100 feet from the mouth. Beyond this point, the cavern is forty feet high and three feet wide. An alcove off the large room contains red earth from which potassium nitrate was formerly leached for the manufacture of gunpowder.

Strong's Cave

This cavern is located in the center of the northeast quarter of Section 34, T. 9 N., R. 2 W., four miles west and three-fourths mile northwest of Bloomington. Nearly 670 feet have been described. The cavern is dry except in rainy seasons, but stooping and crawling is necessary in some passages.

The entrance is in a sinkhole. The cavern is composed of several rooms, connected by narrow passages. One of the rooms contains beautiful dripstone and flowstone formations. Two large rooms, each more than 25 feet long and 20 feet wide, are present.

Truett's Cave (I. U. Cave)

The mouth of Truett's Cave is located in the southeast quarter

of Section 4, T. 8 N., R. 2 W., five miles west of Bloomington. About 1,400 feet have been explored. The cavern is dry except for isolated pools of water.

The entrance is very small, and is situated in a sinkhole. The floor is covered with rough stone slabs. Many stalactites are present, but they have been damaged greatly by visitors. The main interest lies in the great rugged masses of fallen rock in the main room.

ORANGE COUNTY

Lost River

The Wesley Chapel Gulf entrance to the Lost River cavern is located in the center of Section 9, T. 2 N., R. 1 W., four and one-half miles southwest of Orleans. Passages totaling several thousand feet in length have been explored and mapped. Exploration is hazardous, owing to the numerous interlacing passages and to the pitted character of the floor in certain parts of the cavern. Streams are present in most passages.

Entrance is gained through a narrow, vertical hole at the side of Wesley Chapel Gulf. The upstream passage is wet, the water attaining depths of several feet above the muddy and gravelly floor. Mud banks are dotted with mud stalagmites. Downstream from the entrance, the pot-hole floor is rough and jagged. The cavern system consists of numerous interlacing passages at different levels. The dripstone formations are few, and are, in most cases, muddy. The main interest in this cavern is the rugged character of the system.

Near the Wesley Chapel Gulf, the entrance to Elrod's Cave may be found at the bottom of a sinkhole. This cavern is short, but contains many interesting mud features and some picturesque dripstone formations. This cavern is probably a portion of the Lost River underground system.

OWEN COUNTY

Porter's Cave

The opening to this cavern is located in the east half of Section 33, T. 12 N., R. 2 W., five and one-half miles north and one mile east of Gosport. Over 1,000 feet have been explored in dry seasons. The floor is covered with water after the first 270 feet, and a low roof is encountered at 750 feet.

The mouth of the cavern is situated in a gulch. The entrance is 50 feet wide and 15 feet high, and water falls from the mouth to the floor of the gulch, 33 feet below. The floor of the cavern is rock, covered in places with sediment and water. The roof is flat the first 100 feet, and is arched beyond. The few stalactites are muddy. Complete traverse to the source is impossible, owing to a low roof.

WASHINGTON COUNTY

Clifty Caves

These caves are located in the east half of Section 14, T. 3 N., R. 2 E., three miles north of Campbellsburg. Approximately 3,000 feet have been mapped in the two caverns. Both routes contain running water.

The two cavern mouths are situated about 200 yards apart. Passage through the "wet" cave must be made with a boat, as the water is deep in numerous pools. The "dry" cave is a waterworn passage, over the floor of which winds a small stream. The cavern is approximately 20 feet wide. There are a few small side passages, and only a few dripstone formations. Two thousand feet from the entrance, a room 100 feet wide has been formed by collapse. In general, this cavern has few outstanding features of interest.

✓ Sinking Creek

The best entrance to this underground stream is located in the south half of Section 11, T. 1 S., R. 2 E., one and one-half miles southeast of Hardinsburg. Approximately 9,230 feet have been measured and mapped. This cavern is wet, with mud floor and water in deep holes.

The entrance described above is at a collapse, leading into both the upstream and downstream routes. Upstream, the passage is 6,520 feet long, twenty-five to thirty feet wide, and four to ten feet high. The ceiling is beautifully arched, and the passage contains imposing mud banks. Downstream, from the entrance the passage is 2,710 feet long, six to twenty feet wide, and four to six feet high. In this portion of the passage, the roof is flat and the sides are vertical. In some portions of the cavern, brown and white dripstone formations adorn the ceiling.