January 2024: NYE in Mammoth Cave, Blue Spring Cave: Ghost Wind Borehole Survey, Blue Spring Cave: Mega Canyon Survey
Submitted by: Corey Ellis

12/29 - Whigpistle Aid Climb/Survey/Tourist Trip Attended by: Corey Ellis, Rachel Saker, Justin James, Alea Moore
Photos: https://photos.app.goo.gl/FjuvW55ap9jS1PXb9

12/30 - Austin Entrance: Turner Ave>Canyons of Absolon>Northwest Passage Trip Attended by: Corey Ellis, Kohl Mitchell, Kaitlyn Coleman, Mandy Harris
Photos: https://photos.app.goo.gl/ojH5z3MNfYZqwVFG9

12/31 - Great Onyx Cave Trip Attended by: Corey Ellis, Dave West, Michelle Touma
Photos: https://photos.app.goo.gl/FWD9DvVfvXUEEPmP6

1/6/24 - Ghostwind Borehole Survey Trip Attended by: Corey Ellis, Tim Bratcher, Mike Rogers, Mark Ferguson, Brandon Crane & Others
Photos: https://photos.app.goo.gl/CHGEhNBgCt2xdv7B7

1/27/24 - Mega Canyon Survey Trip Attended by: Corey Ellis, Tim Bratcher, Justin Huffman, Alea Moore
Photos: https://photos.app.goo.gl/7dQCEu6QH8ts2VKb8

Summary: *A brief synopsis of my experience at the NYE Mammoth Expedition followed by two survey trips into Blue Spring Cave. One to the newly discovered Ghost Wind Borehole and another out to Mega Canyon.*

Narrative:

I recently took the longest solo road trip of my life. I had already planned on driving down to Georgia from Kansas City for Christmas, but then kept tagging on extra things which ultimately culminated in around 2.5 weeks away from home. First I looped in the New Years Mammoth Cave expedition. My job (still based in Nashville) later offered to put me up in a hotel the first

week of January to have me available to do some in-person training for our new employee. And finally I tacked on one additional caving trip at the tail end before making the long drive home.

12/29-12/31/23 New Years CRF Mammoth Cave Expedition

The Mammoth Cave expedition was a blast. I got to see many of my favorite people and met quite a few new ones as well. Jenny Tison absolutely crushed it as a first-time Expedition Leader and the Nashville contingent showed up strong in support of her. On Friday, I took a pre-exped trip to the Whigpistle Cave System (Jackpot/Natural Bridge Entrance) and surveyed some upper level areas with Alea Moore accessed by Justin James and Rachel Saker via aid climbs. Alea and I subsequently took a leisurely tour of the incredible gypsum-decorated Celestial Borehole while JJ and Rachel continued on to another aid climb.

On Saturday, fellow KCAG member Kohl Mitchell led a trip into the Austin Entrance of Mammoth Cave. I got a detailed briefing of the trip from Dan Lamping (Missouri caver who recently took over the cartography for that section of the system) and was able to help out a bit with some of the route finding. Early on in the trip, I wound up bonking my shoulder pretty hard on an overhung slab of breakdown which gave me a pretty nice 2” gash. There was a moment where we considered calling the trip, but thankfully Ohio caver Kaitlyn Coleman was WFR certified and came to the trip fully prepared to tend to my wound. She got it closed up with butterflies, treated with antibiotic ointment, bandaged over, then sealed up with some PT tape. Thankfully my shirt did not tear so it didn’t really get any grime in there, but Kaitlyn seemed pretty insistent that it would need stitches. After some consideration, I decided to continue with the trip. I was just a bit handicapped with only one fully functional arm and had to channel my inner Bill Koerschner! We were ultimately able to accomplish our main objective which was to tie the current re-survey into the Northwest Passage which hadn’t been visited since the 1980s. The passages along Turner Ave on the way there were heavily decorated in gypsum and featured one of the most iconic formations in the cave, “old grandad.”

On Sunday, I opted for an easy trip due to my shoulder injury (which had since been cleaned up and rebandaged with some late-night assistance from Jenny). I went into Great Onyx Cave with Dave West and helped resurvey an area toward the back of the cave and didn’t even have to wear gloves or kneepads. It was unusual to be back at Hamilton Valley at such an early hour, but after dinner the evening shifted into NYE festivities. Jenny anxiously awaited the final team to exit the cave before joining in herself just after midnight. However, the night quickly took a turn as more of us began to notice the hushed meetings in the back room and others including myself were ushered away for private conversations. Eventually the word spread among the entire expedition that a callout team had arrived at HV to recruit for an in-progress rescue of an injured caver in one of the most remote regions in the nearby Fisher Ridge Cave System. They had been camping in the cave for several days already. Fortunately the patient, despite a significant tib/fib fracture which ultimately required surgery, was somewhat mobile and able to crawl on his own after an improvised leg brace was applied. But the rescue would ultimately take multiple days, require lots of innovative rigging, and finish off with a SKED (rescue

stretcher) portion which brought in several additional personnel for the manpower required. I couldn't help but feel a bit of guilt having to leave... But I was injured, and my job had already arranged for me to stay in a hotel to be on site for the week. Fortunately there was an incredibly strong team of competent cavers readily available, some of which were already familiar with the FRCS and the cavers involved. It all amounted to a highly successful rescue which I'm sure will be written about and discussed for years to come. Jenny Tison naturally transitioned into the lead above-ground coordinator of the rescue and got much more than she ever could have bargained for on her first time as an Expedition Leader!

After spending the week in Nashville working during the day and playing tourist near my bougie downtown hotel by night, I planned to fit in one final caving trip before making the long drive back to Kansas City. I had started putting out feelers for a trip into Blue Spring to go see a new-to-me section of the cave, Greyson Hall. However, those plans were quickly changed when after speaking to Mike Rogers I got invited to go survey a new discovery that had recently been dug open in the cave. I was eagerly anticipating learning more about the discovery ever since seeing the post from Lonnie Carr back in November: "New discovery this past weekend in Blue Spring Cave, a room that has boulders in it the size of a house." The new room had been kept quiet in order to avoid the team who discovered it from being scooped. After asking around, I learned that the digging crew who opened it up didn't get the chance to fully explore it. It was hard for me to imagine how they could just sit on this new discovery and not go back the very next weekend! I later heard that they broke through to the new room at the very end of their trip and were nearing their callout time. Then they wanted to wait until everyone who was involved with the dig would be available to schedule the return trip. Well this return trip just happened to be when I was going to be in town.

Tim Bratcher is the main reason for the new discovery. He has been working on various digging projects all over Blue Spring Cave for the past decade and has possibly taken more trips (~100) into the cave than anyone else besides Bill Walter himself. This new discovery seemed like it was one of the more significant fruits of his labor, so it was an honor to get to be on the first trip back to get it surveyed and pushed.

1/6/24 - Ghostwind Borehole Survey Trip

I arrived on site early Friday evening. Ordinarily I would prefer to car camp, but I had a massively full car from the holiday road trip including a bunch of random bulky things I unloaded from my Mom's attic to drive back home with me. We were expecting some rain the following day, and Lonnie was kind enough to let me camp out in a nice floored canvas yurt his daughter put together near the creekside camping area. I set up my stuff, then headed into Sparta for some Marioochi's Pizza.

Everyone started rolling in around 8am the next day, and we entered the cave by 8:45. We stopped at Tim's dig on the opposite side of the NA survey to scavenge for tools, then continued down NA and reached NA-56 at 11am where the NC-survey takes off heading south. This is a

branch of the cave I have walked by a few times but never visited; it's where Lonnie Carr took his very first survey trip. It starts out as a very pleasant borehole trunk with intermittent breaks of stooping/hands-and-knees crawling. At the very end of the NC-survey is Preacher Dome, but we would only be going about two thirds of the way down to the lead off NC-56 marked on the map as "GOOD AIR DIG LEAD." We took a break and admired the blowing air coming out of the lead before crawling through into the new room.

At the end of the small belly crawl, a crack up on the ceiling has been enlarged and the black void above must have been quite a motivating sight to the digging crew. The climb up out of the dig was a bit awkward and the loose sandy slope one steps out onto funnels a bucket of sand into the hole with every couple steps. Mark Ferguson and I spent some time shoring/damming up the sand slope with large slabs to prevent it from filling back up. We also spent some time digging open side walls of the far end of the crawlway so that there would be enough room to turn around in it so you don't have to crawl backwards on the way out. We took a quick tour of the "room" which turned out to be more of a truncated section of large breakdown-floored borehole.There were some sections along the side walls that required separate survey lines, and possibly a couple leads, but Brandon Crane reported that it seemed to end in around 500'. After Tim and Mike finished surveying through the crawlway, we started surveying the rest of the impressive passage around 1pm.

Mike Rogers was sketching, Tim Bratcher was setting point, and I was running the disto. I made sure to take some good photos of the room which was around 80' wide and 35' high in the largest section toward the beginning of the survey. There was a lead on the north end of the room which became too tight after around 10'. We surveyed up and over the large breakdown slope along the widest section of passage. After a couple hundred feet you reach an area with a tilted jenga stack of breakdown slabs splitting the passage. It looks as if there might be a pancake crawl bedding plane lead at the top of the stack but it looked far too dangerous to climb up. We continued the survey along the left side which dropped down another 25' raising the passage height up to an impressive 35'. I later prodded holes in the floor in this lower area and climbed down ~30' through unstable breakdown until reaching a muddy slot along the right wall that dropped down into a stagnant water passage with no airflow. I opted to stay dry and did not push it. Just beyond this final section of borehole, the breakdown rose up again to the ceiling leaving a few leads which were all pushed hard. The only way forward seemed to be digging upward with large cobblestones falling downward which proved to be too dangerous.

Next, Brandon swapped Tim out as point person and we surveyed back toward the main room taking the outermost routes along the breakdown-walled passages to capture the fullest extent of the area. There remains a lead along the east wall at the far end of the passage that seems to take at least some of the "ghost wind" for which the passage was named. The lead is a muddy slot that drops down along the wall and will require some major digging. But the significant airflow that the entrance crawlway to the borehole is not felt anywhere else. I would guess that the rest of the airflow is just dissipated through the breakdown at the end of the trunk. We wrapped up our survey around 5pm.

I split off from the group around 7pm at Mega Junction to go do a quick solo exploration of some of the Q-survey which I had never visited. It is essentially the continuation of the Mega Junction borehole trunk with massive breakdown borehole mountains. I saw some very impressive clusters of aragonite and an unknown animal skeleton. I wanted to go on to see Greyson Hall but didn't want to have the others worry about me so I rushed back and caught up with the rest of the group. We exited the cave around 9pm.

During the trip, Tim had asked if I would be interested in leading a trip out to Mega Canyon on 1/27/24, but I wasn't ready to commit to another trip out to Blue Spring Cave that soon. As the date approached, it turned out I did have the weekend available. I wasn't enthusiastic about the trip at first, but then remembered we still had a hanging survey from our trip out to Mega Canyon back on 4/16/22 along with the lead we scooped at the tail end of that trip. Then I learned that Tim had recruited Justin Huffman to come and I was committed to the trip.

1/27/24 - Mega Canyon Survey Trip

I wanted to at least get a long trip scheduled given I would be driving 10+ hours one-way just for a single trip. We agreed on an early meetup time of 6am to ensure Tim could get out of the cave at a reasonable hour. I made the long drive over and car-camped near the entrance. Alea Moore and Justin Huffman arrived after I was already asleep. I woke up around 5am and drove to town for some breakfast and we entered the cave around 6:30am. For the first time ever, I just packed my phone in my pack rather than having it with me given there would be nothing new for me to see and photograph on our way in.

We hustled through the cave. I enjoyed pointing out some of the nicer gypsum formations to Justin and seeing how little he cared about them LOL. We made good time and arrived at the third river crossing in a little under 3 hours to fill up water and take a break. After another 20 minutes or so we had popped out into Mega Canyon without any route finding issues. Our first objective was finding a tie-in to our 2022 NCMA-survey. It took awhile to find any old stations station. This process was hindered by the location of Crashing Spire being incorrect on the 2014 map. It is currently tied into NA-180 but clearly comes *after* a sharp 90-degree bend in the passage, rather than before it as it appears on the map. We quickly found the mysterious prominent A-3021 station which is tucked near a blind alcove and seemingly serves no purpose. We eventually spotted NA-180 (no where near Crashing Spire) around 11:30am which was the most convenient tie-in and got the job done.

Our next task would be to survey the fissure canyon lead on the opposite wall that we scooped last time. In 2022, we stacked a bunch of rocks and rigged a handline to help gain access to a lead which we found with a rock cairn at the entrance. Michael and I spent 5-10 minutes exploring it but did not push it too hard having already been in the cave for 13 hours and still having a long trip out of the cave still ahead of us. Tim was unable to make it up into the lead and opted to stay behind and check for airflow at the south end of Mega Canyon. Alea did an

impressive full split maneuver to climb up into the lead taking point, and I followed behind with my disto. We surveyed the right side which leads to a window back into Mega Canyon, then continued up the left side which actually goes. The narrow scalloped canyon was floored with thick sand which spills out of the mouth of the lead as you side scoot your way up it. It was a series of short awkward shots through there until we reached a junction with a little more breathing room. The canyon was only ever around 3-4' wide at most but very tall. We surveyed through it until it was blocked by breakdown at every level. Justin was able to cram his way through a very narrow side passage which intersected Crashing Spire ~40' down from the top. Despite having never seen Crashing Spire, he saw marks along the shaft where people's feet had dragged going down it. We were able to pass him the disto so that it could be added into the survey. A final canyon heading in the opposite direction turned out to end after a single station as well, netting a total of less than 200' for the entire area.

It was just after 2pm when we met back up with Tim, who said he did not detect any airflow at the south end of Mega Canyon and was interested in checking for leads up in the NF-survey. This survey was high up in the canyon up a steep exposed sandy climb. I believe this area of the cave ultimately ties back into Mega Canyon via a few high windows further north. We ultimately weren't able to find an easier route up there and I just climbed back down.

Around 3pm, Tim decided to go poke around and check several leads he had marked between Mega Canyon and the 3rd river crossing. We planned to go down to the end of the NP-survey and check a few leads that I had on my list from our last trip which we never got to see. We agreed to meet back at the 3rd river crossing by around 6pm, but absolutely no later than 8pm or else Tim would come back to look for us. The route to the NP-survey involved climbing down the west side of Mega Canyon to the floor, then up into a nice walking passage. We reached the junction at NP-19 where the 2017 camp trip focused a lot of their efforts down in the NU-survey to the left, and instead headed right/north. We checked the "30' PIT" lead in the NPA-survey which was a very cool looking waterfall pit much unlike anything I'd ever seen elsewhere in the cave system. It did not look like there was any promising passage at the bottom. We also checked out "Darcy's Double Domes" which included one 40' high dry dome with possible high leads, and another 60' high dome which was raining water and had a fairly unpromising lead at the top.

The lead I was most curious about is labeled "UPPER LEVEL BOREHOLE LEAD" and was where we headed next. At 4pm, we started climbing up some interesting scalloped breakdown near NP-37 in search of this lead. Justin spotted it first. It was a small keyhole into an upper level phreatic passage that looked very interesting. Justin immediately suggested that we start surveying, but we had to get his disto calibrated first since I had left my pack behind. After that was complete, we started our survey. Unfortunately it didn't last long for both sides of the passages to end. Toward the north end, we found ourselves on the topside of a domepit around N-38 which we had already viewed from the bottom. There was one climb lead on the south end that had a very thin fractured natural bridge which could potentially be used as a natural anchor for a handline. It looked dubious at best, but I lassoed some webbing over it and Justin strength

tested it with as much force as he could apply and it still held. After all that, he anticlimactically climbed up to find a blind alcove.

We finished up the day working our way up to the end of the NP-survey where “MASSIVE BREAKDOWN” is noted. We had to navigate through a very sloppy mud slope to reach this terminal room which was filled with muddy, non-massive breakdown. Justin was hanging behind, so I started poking through holes toward the top of the room while Alea started down at the bottom. I found several routes through the breakdown that meandered around the edge of the room and changed elevations until finally popping back out in the backside of the room. Alea spent even longer, describing dropping down significantly into lower areas with very small pockets but had a similar result. We were already getting close to 6pm, so we hustled back to Mega Canyon and flew through the sand crawl, making it back to Tim at around 6:30pm .

Tim started ahead while we took a break and filtered water. I had Justin on board for pushing the lead at the end of the S-survey earlier on in the day, but his enthusiasm had drained and he was not up for taking a trip out there anymore. Some day... We exited the cave around 9:30 having spent 15 hours inside. I was dreaming of Marioochi’s Pizza and had (unrealistic) hopes that it’d still be open late. With my dreams shattered, I settled for fast food then drove back to the cave to camp out before driving home the next day.

It was hard work for around ~300’ or so of net footage for the day, but at least a couple mysteries of the cave have been solved. Many more remain. I only hope that one day our efforts will be published onto an updated map.

Click here to view my entire archive of trip reports & caving articles