

What You Need to Know About Caving at Wind Cave

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If you are interested in going on a caving trip in Wind Cave, the best way to go off trail is to participate in a survey and exploration trip. The second and fourth weekends of each month are the official survey and exploration days at Wind Cave. We refer to these weekends as a “Wind Cave Weekend”. We reserve the VIP Center for cavers from Friday through Sunday afternoon on the second weekend of each month. A volunteer can stay up to two nights in the facility for each day of volunteer work they provide to the park. If a group wishes to use this facility another weekend, they will have to make arrangements with park staff and it will be on a first come first served basis, with the center often booked weeks in advance. This facility has cots, a kitchen, and showers. Cavers wishing to join the survey project must contact the Wind Cave Weekend coordinator (currently Roger Harris of the Colorado Grotto at rharris@alum.rpi.edu or 303-494-4899) at least three days in advance of a planned trip; even if they schedule a trip directly with Wind Cave staff.

Each Wind Cave off-trail trip must have an approved Wind Cave trip leader. Currently, we have a fairly large list of approved trip leaders that lead trips into Wind Cave (Roger has this list). We have this trip leader policy because Wind Cave is one of the most complex caves in the world and there are some unusual issues involved with caving at wind Cave. To become a trip leader, a caver has to have gone on at least ten Wind Cave off-trail trips and then attend a half-day Trip Leader Training course taught by the park’s cave management staff. Each survey trip must also have an approved Wind Cave sketcher. We allow up to four total people per survey trip, including the trip leader. A minimum of three cavers can make up a survey trip into the Historic Section, with a minimum of two experienced surveyors and one or two new people per trip. We follow a “survey as you go” approach to cave surveying. Scooping is not allowed. If your goal is to find lots of virgin cave, the interior of the cave is the place to go. The perimeter of the cave has been pushed so hard over the years; survey trips pushing the edge rarely come back with more than a couple hundred feet of survey that was in hands and knees and bellycrawl passages, with most of it having been previously scooped. Someday, someone will make another big breakout on the perimeter. However, those breakouts tend to happen many years apart.

We require the standard caving gear (helmet, helmet-mounted light, boots, gloves...). Helmets must be UIAA approved. We only allow side-mounted packs on off-trail trips, no backpacks. This is due to the delicate boxwork, frostwork, and gypsum that cover much of the ceiling of the cave. Knee pads are a must and elbow pads are highly recommended. For those with small packs that are going on longer trips, you can use loose pants with big pockets to carry extra gear. Due to the snaggy nature of Wind Cave, it is better if you don't have many flaps or buttons to catch on things. T-shirts are sufficient for most people. However, many cavers like to put on a long-sleeve shirt while surveying. Coveralls are generally too hot; however, some cavers like to wear light coveralls with only very light clothes underneath. Pee bottles (wide mouth plastic bottles with screw on lids) and burrito bags (two one-gallon locking freezer bags with baking soda or kitty litter) are required to remove all human waste from this very dry cave. You’ll also need to bring along a water bottle, extra batteries, and bulbs. For a day-long trip, you'll want to bring at least a quart of water. Although, cameras are optional, tripods are not allowed. Because we generally do not allow private survey gear to be used, we provide all the survey gear.

Wind Cave is known for lots of crawling and tight squeezes. If you plan on doing any serious caving, you should be able to squeeze through at least a 9 ½” squeeze. Having to use SRT (single rope techniques) is almost unheard of in Wind Cave. Due to the abundance of holds in the rough walls and the complex interconnected nature of this maze cave, you can either climb or find ways around almost all vertical passages. Roughly 95% of Wind Cave is basically horizontal (it slopes 5 degrees to the southeast). The remaining passages are vertical rifts that connect the five recognizable levels (upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, and lower level). There can be up to 250 feet of vertical relief between the highest and lowest levels. If you are headed to the Middle Level of the cave, everything there is calcified and can rip you up. Don't wear clothes that you do not want ripped.

If you are interested in reading about previous Wind Cave survey trips, a summary of all off-trail trips into Wind Cave can be found at the following site:

<http://www.nps.gov/wica/historyculture/wind-cave-trip-reports.htm>