

Windeler (Broken Key) Cave
October 26, 2013



Part I

Windeler had always been a bit of a legend to me - known for its magical and unspoiled formations, untouched by man for thousands of years. The cave was well protected and locked since its discovery through a mine several decades ago. Now, the cave requires special access and keys to access multiple gates protecting the crystalline depths below.

Our long awaited trip to Windeler Cave was supposed to be back on Apr 13 - I had waited several years for the opportunity. We had a contingent of 6 of us. Led by Jef Levin, the group was me, Dominic Ramirez, Mary Rose, Mo Tangestani and Eric Johnson. Sue was going to hang out by the entrance gate (it was a very secure place) and make sure all was well while we were inside.

After much planning and discussion, we were on our way to the historic gold mining town of Columbia, where we met up at the state park. However, after many miles on the bumpy dirt Italian Bar road, we passed a broken-down car at the bottom of the hill that had been later vandalized - I felt bad karma starting to appear. At least we would be able to park inside a gate off the road keeping our cars safe...

But when we finally reached the road gate, Jef started fiddling with the lock to open it. Our faces went from eager expectation to curiosity to dismay within a few minutes when he realized the lock wasn't going to open. The words "the lock looks new" turned my stomach a bit. It looked like we would have to keep our cars parked outside and hike the extra bit along the road to get to the cave. The day seemed to not be shaping up so well - our favorite breakfast joint a bit earlier had been full (we had to go somewhere else), so there had already been some disappointment and I was worried about what else could happen (I had been on a couple screwed-up cave trips in the last few years).

In addition to lots of physical security, Windeler has security by obscurity - fortunately Jef had been there many times and knew exactly which pile of leaves and rocks and sticks to look under to find the secret entrance culvert. The culvert is vertical, requiring about 50 feet of rope - it was when we got to the entrance that we all looked at each other, realizing none of us had the rope! Another bummer. But Mo, being a trooper, ran all the way back to the truck to retrieve it.

Now came our moment of truth. The lock was inside a hard-to-reach pipe, so it looked non-trivial to open. But after 10 minutes of clinking and clanging inside the pipe, Jef was still unable to get the key to turn. Again, the words "shiny lock" came out - hmmm I feared the worst... On a trip to

Cave of the Bells in AZ a few years back, we had a similar problem - they had given us the wrong key to the cave. Finally after some 30-40 minutes, Jef held up the product of his labors, a broken key! He had to apply so much force that the key started to shear in the lock. His face clearly said "sorry kids, we're not going caving today".



The broken key

Mo finally came back with the rope, all smiles and eager to go caving. But when Jef showed the broken key, Mo laughed it off - it had to clearly be a joke! But the expression on our faces said otherwise. All we could do was give up and collect our gear and head back in despair. We had spent so much time coordinating this weekend, and it was all lost - bummer... my fears were realized after all.

Thankfully we got back to our cars seeing nothing damaged or vandalized. It was about 2:00 in the afternoon and we considered our options. With none of us getting cell signal, we decided to go back to Columbia and see if we could get another key and try again, or if we should go back to Oakdale and check out their annual kicking rodeo, or do some consolation cave. At least we were right in the Columbia state historic park, so we could check out the one-lane wooden bowling alley, one of the original Wells Fargo banks from the 1850's and do a bit of bouldering in the "rock city" nearby.

Seeing that Wool Hollow on Camp 9 road was nearby, we decided to at least get underground for part of the afternoon (besides we couldn't go home without getting some of our gear dirty, right?) Fortunately I had been to Wool Hollow recently (ironically also as a consolation on a screwed-up Pinnacle Point trip, where the group got split trying to find the cave and we got delayed too much to try to do it). So I remembered the way and was able to lead the group there. Wool Hollow was quite fun (and a bit sporty), requiring several climbs and chimneys. We dickered around for a couple hours, photographing time-lapse rings with glow-in-the-dark gloves, playing with our cameras a bit and squeezing through some spots.

All in all, still a fun day, but we would have to come back!

Part II

Well, all stories have to come to a happy ending, right? So on October 26 the 6 of us re-gathered

our forces to set out on another attempt on Windeler cave. Jef found out the problem before was that the keys were new (copies were made at a cheap hardware store), and they "weren't cut quite right". I had experienced the same problem with new keys myself the following week, so it made sense after all.

Jef assured us that a group had entered the cave just the previous weekend and all the keys worked and they had a great time. Whew! I was still a bit cautiously optimistic, but I felt a much better karma this time. We all had good practice from our trip 6 months ago, so getting the group together, carpooling, and finding the cave worked like clockwork this time. No vandalized cars on the way, and the road gate opened with an easy click, so we could park inside. After suiting up and remembering to bring the rope this time, we made the easy stroll to the cave entrance.

Jef found the familiar entrance culvert and he and Sue made a wonderful team this time (the pipe is much easier to manage with 2 people). The gate was open and the cool air from the depths below wafted in our faces as we donned our helmets and clicked our lights on. Heading down the ladders in the culvert and crawling to the entrance room, we were elated to finally be in one of the hidden crown jewels of the Mother Lode cave country. The cave had been sealed off for so many years since it doesn't have a natural entrance.

Almost immediately, we were greeted with wonderful cave bacon, many soda straws and clean white stalactites. It was clearly worth the wait! The cave isn't all that big (just a few thousand feet of passage), but every square inch of it seems to be decorated! And it is one of the most pristine caves due to lack of natural entrance, and heavy protection.

I wonder what IXL or Rippled cave once looked like, before scores of spelunkers thrashed their way through with muddy boots and careless backpacks and intent on collecting a few formations for themselves. I really hope Windeler stays protected the way it is and doesn't become just a faded memory in old photographs. I'm keeping my fingers crossed on the Columbia dig nearby - they are currently about 35 feet down and supposedly getting close to breaking through - maybe another "Windeler" is hiding in the depths.

The "Lunch Room" in Windeler had a pure white shield probably 3 feet in diameter surrounded by layer upon layer of flowstone. Stalactites and stalagmites hung all around. Everywhere we turned, I just heard "wow, wow". It was awesome!



Wonderful formations

Checking the map, we saw the cave has 2 main branches, west and east. We headed west first, past a strange "dike" of volcanic rock about 4 inches thick that had intruded through a crack in the limestone.

The "Canopy" a little further along is a false floor about 4 feet off the ground and probably 10 feet across - it probably formed as flowstone on a mud floor before the environment and water flow had changed and washed away the mud, leaving a shelf of calcite flowstone hanging in mid-air. Afterward, the flowstone continued to form, lining the edge of the shelf with a rack of stalactites (you had to be extra careful to watch your head!)

Just past the canopy, we set up a tarp to get over a muddy crawl to the "Lions Tail" room. I'm glad we didn't get too muddy since up in that room are a set of wonderful soda straws lined with secondary growth making them appear like fuzzy lion's tails. A scramble and crawl to the "Balcony" yielded a fairyland room decorated 360 degrees all around us. Mantled with aragonite, rimstones, clear white stalactites and columns, and "butterfly-wing" shaped helectites, it was a little taste of beauty seldom seen. We had to go 2 at a time to the small room - when it was my turn, I felt specially privileged.

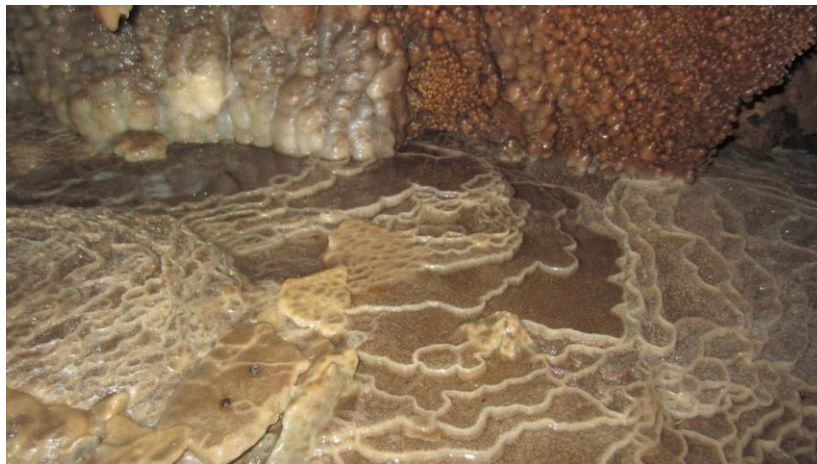
Heading down "Ray's passage", we found ourselves in the "Upside-down room" and "Cornucopia room". A bell in the wall containing a cornucopia of formations of all shapes and colors was like a thanksgiving basket. Beautiful marble-banded walls and thick deposits of pure-white calcite surrounded us. The calcite was so pure that we could see a brilliant orange glow when Jef shone his light through a 6-inch slab.



In the Upside-down room

Heading back to the lunch room, we decided to explore the east branch, heading through a wonderful helectite passage and through the Whale's mouth. Although we were deep in the cave, I saw an unusually black curly line on one of the flowstone walls. Getting closer to see what it was, I saw it start moving down the wall - it was a black millipede about 5 inches long, its legs moving in waves as it crawled.

The "Hanging Ball" room is a wonder in the cave. Requiring a sporty climb up a 12-ft flowstone slope and a squeeze through a narrow opening, it was a fairy room full of beautiful rimstone gours about 4-6 inches deep on the floor, helectites on the ceiling, columns in the middle, and flowstone all around the walls. And the namesake formation was hard to find, but after looking for a few minutes, we saw it - a small calcite ball about 1/2 inch in diameter hanging by a very thin thread, like a spider's silk. It moved in our breath. Although it seemed so very delicate, Jef said it had been like that for decades. I really respect the cavers that appreciate these kind of caves, taking care to preserve them for the enjoyment of future generations.



Rimstone formations

Turning off our lights for a few minutes, we admired the complete silence and stillness and utter blackness of the cave. I imagined how hard it would be if we had to find our way out in pitch darkness - it was humbling. We shared stories about visiting Alcatraz and "the hole" - solitary confinement. Prisoners would go mentally insane and start hallucinating after many weeks in

pitch darkness and isolation. I thought I saw shapes when I moved my hands but I realized it had to be my imagination. I was assured that light was just one click away, but I realized how much something so simple like light that we take for granted, like the air we breathe, and it was a gift that we could not produce in ourselves.

Heading back out of the Hanging Ball room, a few of us "adventurous" folks decided to take the shortcut back. It was a dug-out passage called the "Shotgun chute" narrowing to some 9 inches high at its tightest pinch. Although I was through it in just a few seconds, it felt like an eternity, and my ribs would feel the pinch - my soreness lasted a couple days after that squeeze.

We were soon back in the Lunch Room and getting ready to collect our gear. Back in the entrance room, we saddled up our harnesses and clipped in our vertical gear to head up the entrance culvert. While the culvert might have been possible without the rope, after 6 hours inside the cave, we were tired and were quite happy to frog up the rope and the entrance ladder to the cool dusky air outside.

The autumn leaves smelled of life again in the outside world as we coiled up the ropes, re-locked the gates and hiked back down the hill to our cars, where the "after-cave pizza extravaganza" at Mike's was waiting for us. Good food and good company made for a wonderful meal before our 2.5 hour drive back home to the bay area and our beds.



After-cave pizza extravaganza!