TRIP REPORT

April 7-8th 2017

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For this trip Will and I planned to take Will's cousin Ethan to visit Sand Cave and Pink Dragon cave. Will and my brother in-law Phil and I had made a trip to this Sand cave last December. We really enjoyed this particular cave because it resembles a maze. There are lots of rooms and side passages. On that trip we had to spend some time finding the exit. Thankfully there was survey flagging with alpha-numeric labels to help us find the way back out!

As we started the drive I had only received a permit from the forest service to visit Pink Dragon cave on Saturday. This cave is only open in April and September so it was perfect timing to check it out. I had emailed the BLM office about obtaining a permit for Sand Cave for us to check out on Friday. I tried calling multiple times that week but had heard no response. If we did not get a permit I planned to make a day of hiking. We started our drive from Lubbock around 8 am Friday morning. Once we were about 20 minutes from Carlsbad I received a call from the BLM cave specialist, Jim. He asked if we still wanted to go caving. Yes! We were 20 minutes away from his office so we headed straight over.

After we picked up the BLM and forest service permits we headed out of town for McKittrick Hill. This area is on hilly arid land northwest of Carlsbad. The drive to get there requires driving 5-6 miles down terribly rough dirt roads. Once we got close to Sand we decided to take a look at the entrance to Dry Cave. Previously I had stopped here to look at the gated entrance and remembered that it was impressive because of the steep angle of the floor. As we walked up to the cave mouth I warned Will and Ethan to watch out for snakes. No sooner had I finished that sentence when we heard a rattler give us a warning. He was at least 4 feet long. There was a second much smaller rattlesnake closer to the entrance that scurried away under a ledge. Yikes!

We continued over to the parking near Sand Cave. We gathered our caving gear and hiked over the fence and down to the entrance. Sand has two entrances, one requires rope and the other is more easily accessible. They are separated by at least 40 yards and both are small holes in the ground with gates.

Lower entrance to Sand Cave.

We headed into the cave and our first plan was to revisit the lowest of the three levels of the cave. The main entrance and first passage of the cave is extremely dusty and I have to guess that this is how the cave gets its name. To our knowledge the only way down from the main level was to shimmy down a short vertical shaft. We had no issue getting down the shaft and found ourselves in a large room.

The ceiling was well over 30’ at one far end of the room. The rest of it had a ceiling that was just over walking height. The ground and ceiling was tilted at 10-20 degrees. We pushed the outside edge of the main room, finding several side rooms. The main room on this lower level was very large. I would estimate 40-50 yards in diameter. After 30 minutes we decided to head back up to the middle level and visit the upper entrance. We shimmied back up the vertical shaft in a Ninja like fashion, hands and feet on both sides. We headed back to an area just below the upper entrance. From here the cave had another more sloped shaft that dropped 20-30’ into another passageway. At the bottom of the drop there were two passages. To the left I was familiar with more maze passages and rooms to look through. We decided to go that direction first. That initial branch had several long and narrow rooms with spectacular formations and very high ceilings. There were several holes in the floor that dropped down 20’-30’. I did venture down one of the easier to climb shafts but it appeared to be a dead end. There were several rooms off of this large passage. Some of the more interesting ones had 4’ ceilings with tons of soda straws and several uniform stalagnates.

Soda Straw type formations that curl and sometimes loop back and connect to the ceiling.

We explored several side passages that required bear crawling to avoid damaging the ceiling formations. We decided to head back to one of the larger rooms. We took some time to shut down our lights and enjoy the darkness. After all the hunched over crawling we decided we could use a short nap! About 20 minutes later we were up and headed back to the base of the sloped shaft descending near the upper cave entrance. From there we took the passageway to the right. This passageway had lower ceilings and led us to much more maze passageways. Further in, I made my way around a corner and recognized a familiar looking room. I realized we were back at the bottom of the first vertical shaft near the lower cave entrance. I was happy to know it all connected as the ninja crawling up the shaft was not ideal.

We headed out of the cave dusty and exhausted. From McKittrick Hill we headed back down the dirt road to NM 137 and turned towards Queen and the forest lands. The plan was to head for a favorite campsite located adjacent to a dry river bed. The site was great for camping and had several amenities such as Bermuda grass, flat ground for a tent as well as several fire pits and stacked wood! The weather was perfect over night and into the next day.

The next morning we loaded up the car and made the drive up forest road 69 towards the Guadalupe Ridge. This route put us back on rough roads! At the top of the ridge are a fire watch tower and some antennas. From here you can take in a great view of Cave, Black and Gunsight Canyons. On another trip, we had parked at the watch tower and hiked in to visit Black Cave. Our destination was two more miles past the watch tower. I had to utilize 4x4 and help from spotters to nagivate some obstacles in the road. We finally make it back to the 'parking lot' for Pink Ridge. The parking lot was a small area of cleared brush and a fire pit. From here we began using a step log for the two mile hike to Pink ridge. There was a faint trail we could make out from time to time but most of the hiking was through very pokey brush. The step log also included a satellite image with Pink Dragon and a second cave called Pink

Panther labeled on it. They appeared to be no more than 300 yards apart so we decided to take a look at the entrance to Pink Panther before heading to Pink Dragon.

The satellite image was very high level and not much help for getting us more than 40 yards to the Pink Panther. We began descending from the ridge at 6500'. The terrain and brush was challenging. There were a few cairns to help with identifying points to descend. The slope was around 45 degrees with a few rock benches to climb down. We ended up moving toward a large rock fissure with a steep drop to the canyon below. We were starting to think we would not find the entrance. I ended up peeking around a corner and below I found a cave opening. We climbed around and found a plaque labeling this as Pallette Cave. This cave had a small initial room with a tall ceiling that went back 20'. At the back was a 4 feet wide and 1 ft high squeeze that led to a larger passage. We saw at least 5 spiders, one a brown recluse, guarding the passage.

Pallette Squeeze and spiders

We slithered through to enter another medium sized room that went back 20 feet. This cave was in great condition. The stalactites on the ceiling 10-15' above were very impressive. The cave continued back around some stalactites but the ceiling and walls closed in. I would venture to say that very few people make a visit here as there was no prominent trails leaving this cave.

Ceiling, Pallette Cave

We headed back out to the surface and hiked further at the same elevation. In about 30 yards we came upon a very small, ~2’ opening in the ground. There was no monument marker. I took a peek inside and the cave was only one small room with some standing space.

The Forest Service Cave Specialist said this was a new cave that showed up after some heavy rains. Apparently, there is a third cave nearby called Pink Damn that we never found.

While I was crawling out of this cave, Will hiked upwards towards the base of a rock wall. He let us know he found Pink Panther. This cave had a very serious gate. The entrance was near vertical! We also found a narrow slit 15' away that was probably 1' by 2' on the side of a sheer rock wall. This was also protected with rebar. We had a blast hunting for this cave.

Cave Hunting On Pink Ridge

We hiked back up the ridge and headed towards Pink Dragon 'tree', a lone Ponderosa marking the beginning of the trail. Pink Dragon was much easier to find and was about 300' below the ridge on another rocky outcrop. The trail was marked fairly well with cairns. The entrance was very large. Once inside the opening the cave had a stairway type of slope that led us down 20'. From there it made a right turn and a drop of 5'. About at this point we lost the light from the entrance and found ourselves standing at the top of a slope leading down to a large straight room. This room was 20' wide and maybe 40' high and 150 feet deep. Along the sides were large stalagnates.

Just inside the main entrance of Pink Dragon where we found a stairway-like descent at right.

A view of the first large passageway in Pink Dragon.

In my mind I would describe Pink Dragon cave as being in the shape of a capital “T”. The main passage we were in would form the base. Near the intersection of this cross was one small area that required a ll over loose rock.

A 10 foot belly crawl. This is the only part of the Pink Dragon that we could not stand up in.

After the craw it opened back up to the intersection. Above us was a spectacular formation that looked like a dragon spreading its wings.

The Pink Dragon. Do you see it?

We chose to go left initially and explored straight passageway like the previous room. The back of it came down to a pinch where I found several crickets…My guess is we were very close to the surface. We back tracked and headed to the right arm of the cave. This passage descended at a shallow angle and required some climbing around cave formations. The acoustics of the cave changed in this section. Our voices no longer echoed. The walls and formations looked to be covered in mud. Upon closer inspection it was small brown crystals covering everything; even the floor in the back part of the cave. It was here that we saw a very large 'bottomless' pit. The permit mentioned a 60 meter pit and we figured this had to be it. Most of this cave was flagged off to mark where we could and could not step. With the flagging we couldn't get anywhere near this pit to look down as it would require stepping on the crystals covering the floor.

We had been hiking and caving for about 5 hours at this point and decided it was time to hike out.

Ethan, Will and I really enjoyed visiting the caves as well as the hiking and camping. I think they are both on board to plan another trip in the future.

Double Canyon as viewed from Pink Ridge.