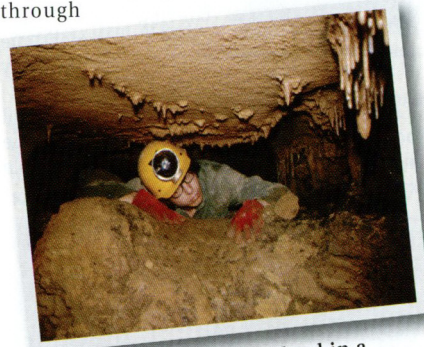


## RECREATION &amp; TRAVEL

*Cave Exploration*

Dr. Gary O'Dell

Snow-covered mountain peaks. Verdant tropical jungles. The deep ocean abyss. The polar icecaps. The limitless depths of space. These are some of the last frontiers of human endeavor. Most of us can only vicariously experience such exploits through



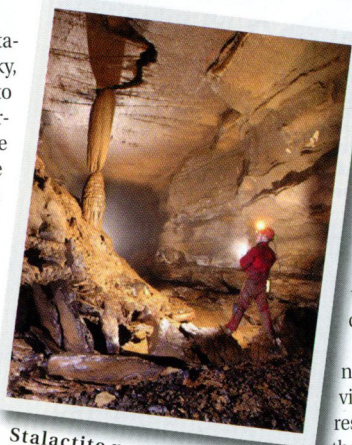
**Pushing a tight lead in a Rockcastle County cave**  
Source: Gary O'Dell

television documentaries and magazine accounts. There is in Kentucky, however, a frontier that remains accessible to the ordinary person. Explorations in the underground wilderness of caves generally require only minimal investment in equipment and the application of plain common sense along with informal training in safety and methods. Kentucky is home to Mammoth Cave, the world's longest, and thousands of other caverns large and small. Here, sometimes, it is possible to walk in places where no human foot has ever tread.

Caving can be hazardous, because caves have many slippery slopes, abrupt drop-offs, loose rocks, deep holes, or may be prone to rapid flooding. Among the most serious risks to the cave explorer are head injuries, injuries sustained from falling, drowning and hypothermia. To reduce the risk of a serious accident, anyone entering a non-commer-

cial cave should follow these basic safety rules:

- Never go caving alone; preferably go in the company of experienced explorers. Always tell someone where you are going, and when you expect to return.
- Always carry at least three separate sources of light, along with extra bulbs and batteries.
- Wear head protection: a hardhat or helmet with a chinstrap to keep your helmet on your head during a fall.
- Dress appropriately for the environment; caves in Kentucky have an average interior temperature of about 54 F, but some sections of a cave may be colder in winter. If entering a wet cave, layered clothing will help to conserve body heat.
- Wear boots with an aggressive tread that provides ankle protection (never slick-soled shoes).
- Watch the weather closely. Many caves contain active underground streams.



**Stalactite meets stalagmite in a Breckinridge County cave**  
Source: Chris Anderson,  
Darklight Imagery

An innocuous ankle-deep trickle can become a roaring torrent after a heavy rain. Sticks or leaves stuck to the walls or ceiling can indicate the cave floods completely.

The best way not to be the victim in a cave rescue is to have the proper equipment, experience and training before venturing into a cave on your own.

The flip side is that caves are fragile environments that can be easily damaged by the explorer. Heavy visitor traffic through a cave can disrupt the ecosystem; many of the animal species dwelling in caves are threatened or endangered. Mineral deposits such as stalactites and stalagmites are delicate and can be harmed just by touching, since the oils of human skin can stop its growth. These formations are very slow growing and, if broken off, may take centuries to regenerate if at all. Nothing is more disturbing than to enter a cave, once beautifully decorated, and find only broken stubs and piles of litter and trash. The guiding principle of the explorer is to "cave softly." The motto of the National Speleological Society

is, "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time."



Source: Chris Anderson, Darklight Imagery

For those interested in cave exploration, a good first step might be to visit one of Kentucky's many commercial show caves to test one's comfort level in an underground environment. Carter Caves State Park, in addition to regular tours, also offers self-guided tours for two of the "wild" caves in the park; visitors must obtain a permit before entering one of these caves and demonstrate that they are properly equipped.

Local chapters of the National Speleological Society ([www.caves.org](http://www.caves.org)) can help provide the training necessary for safe and responsible exploration of wild caves in Kentucky.



### Large trunk passage in a Breckinridge County cave

Source: Chris Anderson, Darklight Imagery



### Mineral deposits built these rimstone dams in a Breckinridge County cave

Source: Chris Anderson, Darklight Imagery



### Cave entrance in Pulaski County

Source: Robert Coomer

## Floyd Collins

Floyd Collins died while trapped in Sand Cave in 1925. His death became a national sensation.

Sheet music for a traditional ballad called "The Death of Floyd Collins," written by the Rev. Andrew Jenkins and Mrs. Irene Spain, was published in 1925 and sold thousands of copies.