

FOCUS

the CAVING CRAZE

At the Caving Club's fist meeting, 125 people showed up eager to learn more about getting down and dirty

STORY BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER ROBYN GERSTENSLAGER



Above: Sophomore Madison University Student Grotto (MUSG) secretary Jennifer Davis wedges herself down a mud wall at Marshall's cave in Highland County, Va. After only one year of caving with the club, Davis now leads some of the group's weekly trips beneath the surface.

Gearin' Up For an Underground Adventure

According to Madison University Student Grotto's Web site, "The most important thing in caving is to have fun, but it is definitely not fun if you are poorly prepared." Here is a list of things every caver should have:

- **Clothing suitable for 55 degree temperatures.**

Fifty-five degrees can feel very cold! Ideally, you should wear some kind of wicking material (polypropylene, capilene, wool) against your body, with some durable material over it, such as jeans and a sturdy cotton sweatshirt. However, for most shorter trips (up to 5 hours), cotton underwear is usually okay.

- **High-top boots** with a lug sole are preferred. Look for some type of shoe that will give you support! Tennis shoes with flat soles will get you in trouble!

- **A helmet.**

Members are entitled to use one provided by MUSG. Wearing a helmet is necessary due to wet conditions and

- **Three independent light sources.**

Typically, each caver will have a helmet mounted light (electric or carbide) and two other light sources such as a flashlight and lighter.

- **Food.** For best results, bring some easily-carried high energy food such as candy bars or Power Bars.

- **For the trip home:** You should bring a complete set of clean clothes, and some plastic garbage bags to put your dirty clothes into. You'll appreciate this if it's your car we're riding in!

- **For more info:**

Check out the MUSG Web site at www.jmu.edu/orgs/caving/gen_info/info.html for information about safety, etiquette, the club's history and some old fashioned "cave humor."

Up for a night of rolling around in some mud, hiking, climbing or even crawling into the depths of the Earth?

Last year approximately 150 JMU students answered "yes" to this question by joining the Caving Club — and this year over 375 students showed an interest in joining at last week's Student Organization Night.

"I wasn't surprised about the number of sign-ups — we had about that many people sign up last year," Caving Club President Patrick Rodgers said. He was, however, pleased to see 125 of those sign-ups at the club's first interest meeting.

"I think it's so popular because it's something new and different. It provides people with an opportunity to participate in an activity they may otherwise not do on their own."

Rodgers also attributes the club's popularity to the low cost of annual dues. For an entire year of caving, it costs \$10 — a fee that includes equipment rental and admittance to special events. "There's also at least one trip per week so everyone gets a chance to go," Rodgers said.

The club got started 20 years ago when JMU Outing Club members wanted to focus specifically on caving. The group now calls itself the Madison University Student Grotto (MUSG) and today has a claim to fame as one of the largest student organizations on campus.

Senior Rich Bailey, who has been an active member for six years, now leads most of the trips. "I live for caving," he said. Bailey also helps to organize transportation and can provide hands on field training in vertical caving, climbing and repelling.

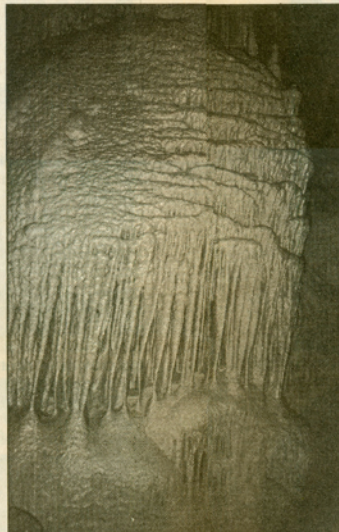
Leading a caving trip requires a lot of familiarity with the cave and confidence in one's ability to lead. Before any member can lead a trip, they have to have gone into the cave with an experienced leader several times and prove that they will be able to lead on their own.

"I was nervous the first couple of times I led because I was used to relying on someone else, but by the end of last year I was really comfortable with it," sophomore MUSG Secretary Jennifer Davis said.

Sophomore member Meredith Stenberg said that caving presents her with obstacles she wouldn't ordinarily encounter and enjoys overcoming.

"One time I went straight up 'the mud wall' by myself . . . and they called me 'the beast' after that," she said.

Senior John Doroshenko said that during a visit to Key Cave in West Virginia, "there was a chute which was a 25 foot drop down, and to get through it you had to wedge yourself between the rocks and slide down."



This flowstone, found in Marshall's Cave (Highland County), is one of several unique features cavers encounter while exploring underground.

According to Rodgers, overcoming obstacles in a support group like MUSG makes it that much more fun.

"I remember my first time caving, and how everyone helped everyone else out and in general had a great time . . . that's why I kept doing it," he said.

Anywhere from three to six hours are usually spent in a cave on one trip.

"The longest I've ever been in a cave is probably seven to eight hours," sophomore Jimmy Royster said.

Preserving the caves visited is one of the primary expectations of members. "Take nothing but pictures, Leave nothing but footprints, Kill nothing but time," reads MUSG's motto on their web site.

"We like to avoid damaging the caves as much as possible because it can take thousands or millions of years for a cave formation to form," sophomore MUSG Vice President Brad Ricks said. "Over traffic'd caves lose their natural beauty."

Safety is also a primary concern among MUSG members. Rodgers took when he called a "pretty intense" course on cave rescue. In it, he learned

how to do vertical and underwater cave rescues.

"The greatest danger that faces cavers," reads the MUSG Web site, "is not the steep drop, the slippery foothold, or the falling rock. It is the absence of natural light . . . All the climbing skill, all the stamina or directional sense in the world will mean nothing without light." Although MUSG provides equipment for those who are without it, members are encouraged to bring a flashlight for an additional light source. For those interested, MUSG will host a cave rescue clinic on Oct. 8-10.

Club members are encouraged to take a Wilderness Emergency Medical Training (EMT) course or a Wilderness Responder course, both of which teach valuable training that can be applied to other outdoor activities as well.

Aside from spelunking, MUSG members also participate in numerous other outdoor activities, such as hiking, camping, biking, climbing, rapelling, rafting, skiing or snowboarding.

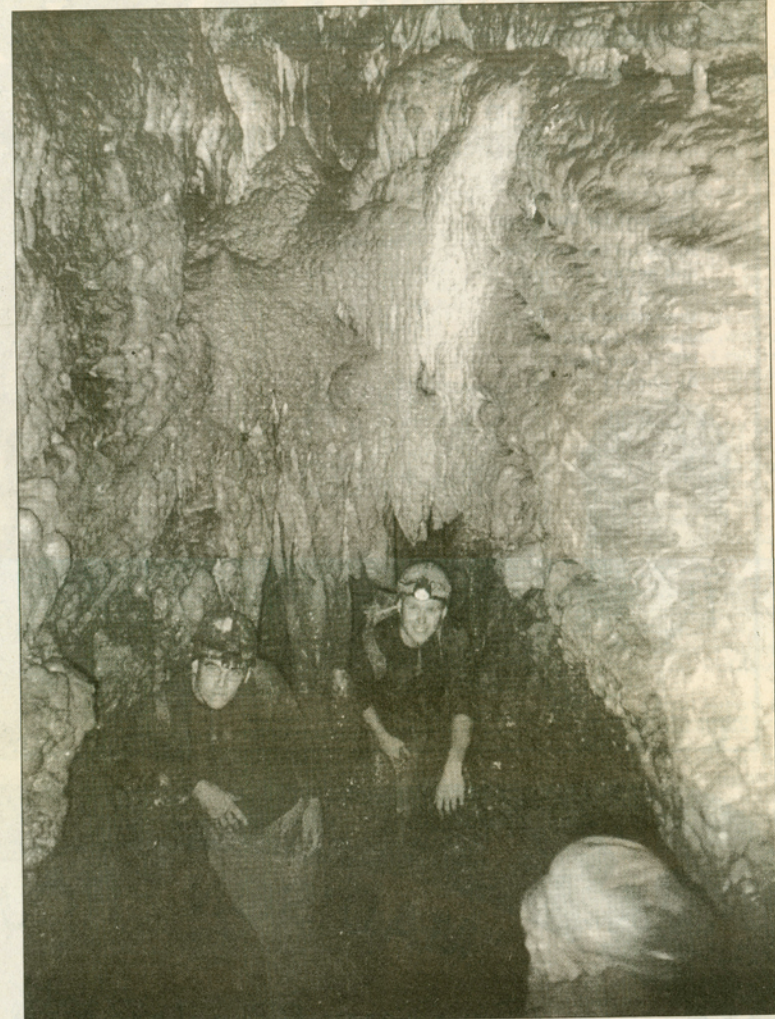
"All it takes is one person to stand up at a meeting and say, 'I'm going hiking, or I'm going biking this weekend, who wants to go?,' and there is almost always somebody else who will want to go," sophomore Pat Cushing said.

Cushing said that he tries to go on at least one caving trip per week. Each year the cavers also host or participate in an entourage of outdoor activities. MUSG also hosts the camping trip known as "Fall Ball." It is a fun filled weekend of caving, hiking, camping and getting to know fellow members. Fall Ball is usually held near a cave located within a one to two-hour drive from campus.

Another event, "Spring Fling," is basically the same thing as Fall Ball, only it is in the spring. Old Timers Reunion (OTR) is also a weekend full of caving adventures, only this time grottoes from the Central Virginia area participate and many of those attending are club alumni. In past years, caving clubs from as far away as Penn State, University of Maryland and West Virginia University have attended.

The cave club also holds a formal dinner and dance once a year, which gives members a chance to get rid of their muddy clothing and get dressed up.

The next year so far looks exciting for JMU's grotto. Ricks contacted land owners over the summer and has obtained permission to enter some caves that were previously untouched by the club. Rodgers says his goals for the club this year are to "introduce as many people as possible to caving in a safe environment." Anyone interested in joining or finding out more about the grotto is welcome to attend meetings, which are held in Harrison A205 on Wednesday nights at 6:30 p.m.



Above: Sophomores John Winkler and Pat Cushing pause while climbing through a passage called "the nutcracker" in Breathing Cave (Bath County). The passage got its name from its unusually narrow width. Below: The Caving Club at the mouth of a cave in West Virginia.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBYN GERSTENSLAGER