

Let's see, where do I start? I guess, I will start how and why I got myself into the situation of actually crawling around in a cave for the purpose of counting bats. Duane and I sit next to each other at work and I always thought it was pretty interesting when he talked about going "caving", but this weekend added another aspect to the this term, bats! I am always ready to try something once (well except food), so I asked Duane if I could come along. He got a big smile and said "sure, and you don't have to worry about any type of equipment, I have it all".

So the next step, tell the wife what I am planning on doing this weekend. "Bats!!" was the first word out of her mouth, the second was "Why?". You will have to imagine the rest of our conversation.

Friday comes and it is now time to stop by Duane's house to pick up some equipment. However, first things are first, so I ask Duane if he wants to have a beer. Guess what, he is out! The garage frig was empty. For those of you who know Duane this is unbelievable. How rude (big smile). I was shocked, I almost fainted. Next Duane breaks out his large plastic storage box of goodies and provides me a caving helmet equipped with a light, an extra flash light, one MORE light, and most importantly some knee pads. Not that I am a baby or anything, but crawling around on rough gypsum on my bare knees, was not my idea of fun. Duane also gave me a listing of things at should bring (small back pack, extra change of clothes, a couple of snacks, water, my camera, and to dress in layers because the cave temperature will be a lot cooler than the daytime temperature). He told me that the number one rule in caving, everything has to be in three's, three lights, three people in a cave together, three people must know where you are, etc. So, do I bring three pair of underwear? I might just need them.

Well Saturday morning arrives. I am up at the crack of dawn. Two hours before Duane is going to arrive. So I have plenty of time to load up the truck, which takes all of five minutes. We have to take my truck because Duane's broke his last weekend. I wonder what could be in store for my truck. Next, time for the paper and some coffee. The entire time I am drinking this coffee I am thinking to myself, "What happens when I am in a cave and I have to relieve myself?". Well I will have to cross that path if and when I have too. Duane arrives right on time, we load up; stop by the local "stop and rob" for another coffee and cappuccino, and start heading to Altus to pick up Lil. Along the way I have 5,072 questions for Duane. Everything from "What do I do if the bats start flying?" to "Do they bite?" but, like a good trooper, he answer them all and it really makes for a quick trip to Altus.

We arrive in Altus way to early, so a stop at Burger King for breakfast and a bathroom break are in order, but guess what, more coffee. Once finished with breakfast, we head to Dale and Lil's house. Dale has other obligations today, but his wife Lil was fired up and ready to go. I almost cried when we walked up the drive way. A beautiful Honda Goldwing was sitting in the garage along with Lil's bike. My wife and I are also motorcycle enthusiast so we had a lot to talk about. I could tell right off the bat (no pun intended) that Dale and Lil were seasoned cavers and bat counters, because she drug out a large plastic storage box, just like Duane's and started picking stuff out of it that she wanted to take with her, but eventually decides to just take the entire box.

After getting everything loaded in the back of the truck and a few motorcycle stories behind us, we head North, then West, then North, then West, then I am a lost! However, Duane and Lil know right where we are going. So I ask where are we going? Duane responds with "the T". Great... "the T", whatever the heck that means. Shortly I find out. It is an intersection in the middle of... well, know where actually. I park the truck, grab some fresh air and a mouth full of seeds. For those of you who don't know me very well I love taking pictures about as much as Duane loves his beer. So I am out taking pictures of everything that I could find of interest while we wait for John, John, and JT. Great, two John,

easy to remember, but hard to get their individual attention, so I go with "sir" the rest of the afternoon and it works out fine.

Another vehicle soon approaches from the South, I know this direction because of the sun rising out of the East is now starting to warm things up, I guess being a Cub Scout paid off after all. John, John, and JT (I am not sure of his age, but I would guess he is 10) arrive and everyone starts gearing up. Not too long after that we are headed to my first cave. I will not go into all the names of the caves that we visited because frankly I don't remember, but they were all very interesting and were named by the person that discovered them many moons ago.

So, here is my first experience with real "cave" people, but for some reason they do not look like the cavemen on TV (big smile). My first thought as we are walking down the dirt road for a couple of hundred yards was "What am I doing?", "What happens when the cave collapses on our heads?", "When was my last rabies shot?" Funny how things go through you head when you face something that you have never faced in the past. But, it all worked out, I put on my caving helmet, turned on my light, and walked right on in.

I am thinking to myself, this is very interesting. You could immediately feel the temperature drop and darkness surround you. It only took about 50 feet before we find our first bat. Actually this is not the first time that I have ever been in a cave or seen a bat before. Before I retired from the Army I was stationed in Kentucky for a couple of years and Corby (my wife) and I visited almost every cave that had a "public" tour in it, but this time it was different, there was no colored lights, no paths to walk on, no guide telling us what is going on around us. Just the six of us knowing deep down inside that we only had each other to depend on if something goes wrong. I think that is a lot of trust to put in someone and is often overlooked by seasoned cavers. Not that the caves were that hard to maneuver around in, but just the fact that something could happen, at any moment.

Everyone made me feel right at home, I was quickly taught the difference between a Pip, a Long Ear, and a regular cave bat, what the packing rate was and what it means. It was not long before I was calling out counts between the flashes of my camera trying to get every angle that I could of a bat hanging from ceiling.

For the first 20 minutes or so I stayed dry, but it was inevitable that sooner or later I had to get wet. The water was cold at first, but my body quickly adjusted to it. I only had to get wet up to my knees, but there is no feeling like water soaked socks and the water squishing between your toes. Everyone else was wet to, and there was no complaining from anyone, it was just part of caving, per Duane.

While counting bats that day in different caves around the area, two things really stick out in my mind that happened to me. First, Duane, Lil and I, were counting a particular part of the cave. I had the right side, Duane the left, with Lil doing the recording. I came across a opening in the wall on my side so big that I could walk into it. I asked Duane (I always asked someone permission before doing anything, I did not want to do anything wrong) if I should follow the path and see if there are any bats in there. I got the okay from Duane, so I start walking in. I followed the path for a good ways, far enough that I could no longer see the lights from Lil and Duane's helmets, then all off a sudden, right in front of me a bat falls off the wall and starts flight towards me. I did not jump or move, but it sure startled me. My heart started pounding and it took a few seconds for me to calm down. We had bats flying around us out in the main chamber and it did not bother me, but I guess being alone, the only light coming from my

helmet, really changed my awareness of my surroundings. It felt alone and when the bat jumped it I was actually scared for a few seconds.

Second, as the day wore on we were in a large cave which contained a great number of bats, all packed together, I am calling out numbers, Lil is writing then down, we are leap frogging the John's and JT, and all of a sudden I hear a sound that I have not heard before. A loud screeching sound that sounded like it was coming from thousands of bats. I am thinking to myself, "Were we to noisy?" "Did we wake them up?" "Do we have to go through that room?". You guessed it, we had to go into that room and count them. I really did not know what was going too happened so I did whatever new caver does, let someone else go first, so JT jumped up front and head right on in. There was no way was going to let a 10 year old show me up so I headed in right behind him. The first thing that I noticed was that there was not as many bats as I thought and there was not that many flying around. It is impossible to count that number because you only see them when they cross the path of you light source. They were just being noisy, talking to each other, probably telling tales about how many bugs they got from the night before. So what started out as something that really worried me, again turned out to be another fascinating sight.

The day ended too quickly and it was time to pack up and head to a friend's house that lived nearby to change clothes real quick before we headed to Blair and visit Luigi's restaurant. About half way there, I had to pass Duane a rag for his mouth (he was drooling) because he could hardly wait to bite into the best calzone in the world. Just kidding, he was not drooling, but he sure was looking forward to it. Lil's husband, Dale, met us there and we had a wonderful dinner. After ordering our food, water, and a beer, I headed to the bathroom to wash off the bat poop from my hands. When I got back I had my beer in front of me, but one thing was wrong, it was empty. I asked the waitress if she knew that she had brought me empty beer. She had this big bewildered look on face for a few seconds and swore to me that it was a full beer when it arrived. Come to find out, Duane downed his, then downed mine, and waited for me to return. It got a good laugh out of us all. The joke was on me...

After dinner we all loaded up in the truck, dropped Lil off in Altus, and Duane and I headed back to Cache where I live to pick up Duane baby truck that he left at my house. All in all I have to say that I had a wonder experience. Something that I would do again, that is for sure and I owe it to Duane's comradeship and the great friends that I meet that day. Thanks again Duane, Lil, John, John, and JT!