

August 25, 2010 - Wind Cave National Park
"A cave of a different color"

There are several things that makes Wind Cave distinctive and unique from others, including the Jewel Cave that I visited just last week. It is also part of the NPS, and was, in fact, the first cave so declared a National Park (by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906). This was because of a need to protect its unique "box work" formations found in no other caves in such wide abundance. So far over 135 miles of trails and passage ways have been mapped out, making it the 4th longest cave system in the world. It is also different in that it is found beneath rolling hills located within the boundary of the Custer State Park.

Just 15 miles south of the Custer County airport, I had flown over the general location of the cave just a day or so previously while "scouting" buffalo and never did locate its presence. However, today I made the 30 minute drive over to its visitor center and purchased a \$4.50 ticket for the noon tour. We started at the original entrance opening, which was smaller than our tour guide's "smoky" hat. He demonstrated the brisk outflow of 53 degree air coming from that opening before taking us to the commercial revolving doorway, much like those found in office buildings.

Our NPS Ranger then took us down the 350 steps, through narrow and low passage ways with numerous side trails, to the rather small "main room" in which he conducted a history lesson of the cave, its founding by Native American indians centuries ago, as well as its first commercial usage in the beginning of the 20th century. He showed us the old fashioned "candle buckets" which provide the only pathway lighting for its early explorers. The obligatory "total darkness" experiment was also conducted, but with today's technology of cameras, cell phones and blinking tennis shoes for the youngsters, this did not result in the blackout condition expected.

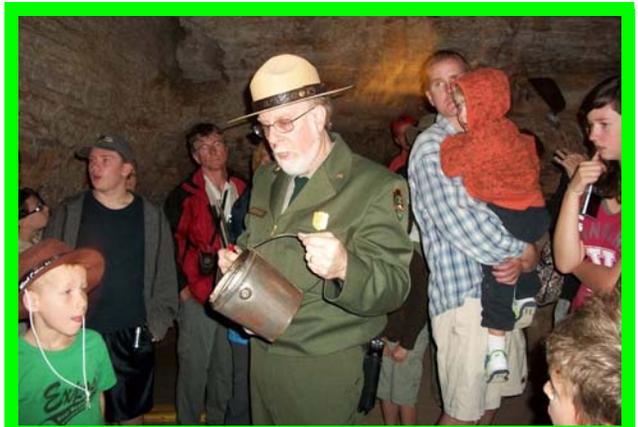
The delicate "box work" designs found throughout this cave is as fragile as it looks. Created by the normal flow of acidic water migrating through cracks and fissures in the limestone formations, wearing it away and exposing only the more durable rock, it looks much like a spiderweb of thin lace work and can be broken away with about the same force needed to crack a potato chip.



The cave is located beneath rolling hills & buffalo



350 step stairwell leading to the cave's bottom



Ranger lighting an old fashioned "candle bucket"



What makes Wind Cave unique is its vast network of distinct "box work" formations located on its ceilings