



Steve Baksa performs the "magic trick" of lighting his lamp.



Jason Czarnecki follows Dawn Hill down into the first cave at Rattlesnake Point.



Dawn, looks up at Jason on the rock wedged in the chimney space at the end of Cave 1.

# Beginner Caves on the Escarpment

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis

When Steve Baksa leads a beginner's caving trip, he likes to start things off with a bang. A research chemist in his day job, he enjoys demonstrating how he lights his caver's head lamp. He uses the traditional miner's light, an actual flame that burns at the front of the helmet, even though he admits that LED lights are becoming standard.

**W**hen lighting his lamp, Steve Baksa explains that "water is poured into an upper chamber and allowed to drip into a lower chamber containing calcium carbide pellets. Acetylene gas is produced by a chemical reaction. It is quite effective as one kg of

carbide generates about 300 litres of acetylene gas. The gas exits through a small nozzle at the centre of a reflector. Now comes the fun part. I place my hand over the reflector to trap a pocket of acetylene gas. Then I strike a flint mounted on the reflector to make a spark. It ignites the acetylene gas with a very loud pop. Acetylene burns very hot and produces a bright white flame."

People who have crowded close during this demonstration,

gasp and instinctively pull their heads back when the flame flares. It's the first of many moments in the caving trip that will test people's instincts.

Steve is a member of the Toronto Caving Group (TCG). "I started caving about 30 years ago during hikes along the Bruce Trail," he recalls. "We kept finding these crevasses and started to explore them. Being young and invincible, we climbed while holding flashlights in our mouths. Not recommended! Eventually, some of us joined the Toronto Caving Group and learned to enjoy the sport safely."

This day, he's leading a trip organized by the TCG, to some of the caves at Rattlesnake Point and Kelso Conservation Area near Milton. "The first two caves at Rattlesnake Point are small and an easy introduction," he says. "Afterwards, beginners can bail out if caving is not for them, and a few do."



Steve squeezes out of a tight exit from the





Wanda Prochazka explores Cave 1.



Wanda chimneys up onto the wedged rock.



Steve prepares to lead Dawn, left, and Wanda into the second cave at Rattlesnake Point.



Wanda enjoying Cave 2.

second cave at Rattlesnake Point.



Indeed, Mike Davis, also a member of TCG who went on Steve's trip to take photographs, vividly remembers a beginners' trip to Rattlesnake's first cave, in which a woman in front of him and others in single file, was crawling through the low, narrow, winding entrance. Suddenly the woman stopped and cried out "Let me out!" Everyone behind her had to back out of the dark, rocky passage as quickly as they could to liberate the panicked woman. Afterward, she told Mike "I want to be cremated, not buried."

Those who continue exploring this first cave end in a narrow crevice that is so high that it seems spacious in comparison to the entrance tunnel. You can stand up and see the roots of a tree growing on the surface above. You may even want to "chimney" up the crevice to perch on top of a rock that is wedged between the cave walls.

There is a second easy cave at Rattlesnake Point and a third one at Kelso. Steve describes that one

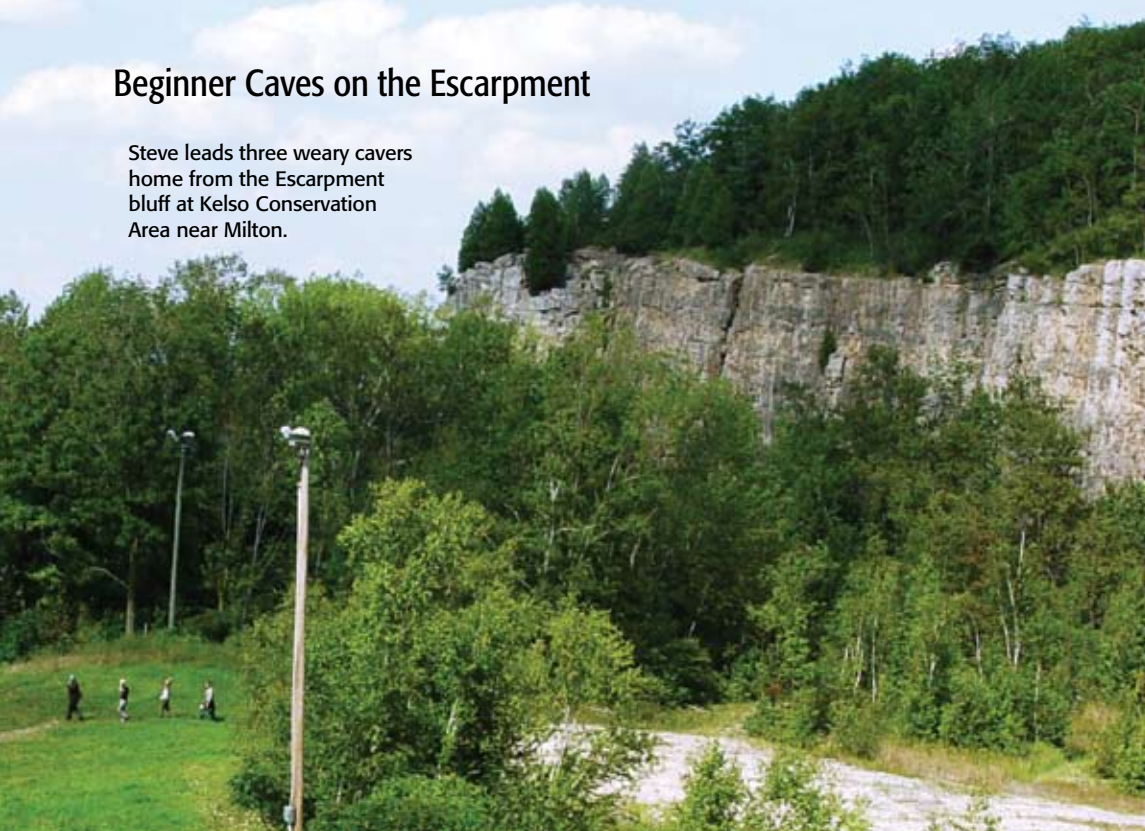
as "longer and more difficult, with multiple levels, passages and three entrances, two at the top of the Escarpment and one at the bottom." On the day that these photographs were taken, Steve's group ended their trip here.

"The last cave depends on the objectives of the group," Steve continues. "There is a cave at Mount Nemo, which is the longest, and really, really tough. A highlight is an underground lake between two vertical walls. Going forward involves a long strenuous climb over the water. Participants are usually exhausted after this cave, but also very satisfied."

Wanda Prochazka of Toronto was pleased with her first caving trip, saying "It was really fun, with great and encouraging instructors." Although she considered herself to be claustrophobic, she thought caving would help her. Her only challenge turned out to be managing an open drop in a cave, where she says she "would have liked a rope for security." She

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Steve leads three weary cavers home from the Escarpment bluff at Kelso Conservation Area near Milton.



A Little Brown Bat noticed in one of the caves by a second TCG trip on the same day.

PHOTO BY PIOTR SCIEZKA

says she would definitely go caving again.

Dawn Hill of Toronto had a different experience. She had been interested in trying caving

as a new adventure and greatly enjoyed parts of the trip. "In the first cave when we were all safely positioned, Steve had us turn off our headlights and just take it in,"

she says. "It's incredibly dark and quiet. Also at one point we had a bat sleeping a hand's distance away from our heads. You don't see something like that even in a zoo, at least not that close." Yet things changed for her.

"My least favourite part was probably when I let my mind get the better of me," she continues. "The thought of being many, many metres below rock. Becoming squeamish over the thought of slithering between slates of rock on my belly. I'm not claustrophobic but I did let it overcome me. I pushed through in each cave and got a few levels down but by the end of the day, only wanted to go so far, then waited for the others to return. Steve was great about encouraging us to try to go just a bit further, without making you feel pressured or guilty when you finally came to your threshold."

She praises TCG for providing a great experience, but explains "I've had my adventure and learned I'm not too keen on small, cramped spaces so it will be some time before I try it again."

Jason Czarnecki of Mississauga heard about caving from colleagues at work, one of whom led another group on the same

day. "The caving trip was a perfect intro to the sport," says Jason. "My favourite part was climbing out of the last cave of the day in Kelso using an alternate exit which forced me to scale a V-shaped wall and dangle over a jutting rock in order to pull myself through a small opening. Steve told me I was the largest person he has ever seen make it through the opening. It was both the most challenging part and the most fun. I hope to go caving again. I am a convert."

TCG organizes trips to other caves in Ontario and the U.S. Information about activities, membership and their newsletter is available at [www.trigger.net/~tcg](http://www.trigger.net/~tcg).

What Steve loves about caving is "the adventure of exploring a unique environment. Typical caves are formed by water erosion. You can follow stream passages deep into the earth and observe how the rock is dissolved away. The water flow can disappear in places, only to reappear further into the cave. Waterfalls are always a highlight. Some are small enough to walk through, while others are huge and require rope and rappelling equipment to navigate. Every cave is an adventure." ■