

# Fox Mountain History, Acquisition, Survey, and Access

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## **Abstract**

Fox Mountain has long been in the minds of the members who make up the core of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. Early attempts by individuals to acquire some of the land now owned marked the first attempt by cavers in Georgia to acquire caves through purchase. The Conservancy made several acquisitions early on through circumstance: either the cave was offered to them or a high profile cave was at risk. Indeed, when negotiations were coming to a head for Fox Mountain, another cave, Fricks, became threatened by development. The Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. was forced to acquire both simultaneously. This resulted in a huge debt load and stunted acquisitions for some time.

Fox Mountain is the largest purchase made by the Conservancy. It contains some of Georgia's most significant caves along with an abundant karst region. The SCCI is now one of the largest cave conservancies. The first major task was to have the land surveyed. Its location and history made that task difficult and expensive. Indeed, the land had never been surveyed. The way this survey has been accomplished is an example of how to harness the energy and dedication of the sport caver. This project brought together cavers and conservationists from different parts of the country. It has brought many in close contact with the Conservancy. The methods used to gather the volunteers demonstrates the value of the electronic medium. The result has been an example of how to save money needed for acquisitions and garner support from the people the Conservancy is in business to support.

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Recently the Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. made its largest purchase. It purchased 332 acres of prime caving land on Fox Mountain. The Fox Mountain Cave Preserve is the conservancy's largest acquisition. This land has played a central role in the formation of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. It has presented many challenges, which are still being met. It can serve as a model for others interested in acquisition of cave properties.

Fox Mountain is about four miles long and is an offshoot of Sand Mountain. Fox and Sand Mountains are joined at Low Gap, which is well known to local cavers as the area above Moses Tomb and Kudzu Cave. From Low Gap, Fox Mountain runs northeast to the area around the Rising Fawn exit from I-59. It is bounded on the west by Deer Head Cove and on the east by Interstate 59. The mountain lies equally in Dade County, Georgia, and DeKalb County, Alabama. There are about 50 known caves on

the flanks of the mountain. The top of the mountain comprises about eight hundred acres and is uninhabited at this time.

The rock in Fox Mountain is for the most part like the surrounding mountains. Starting at the base is the Monteagle Limestone. Above that is the Hartselle Formation (usually shale). Above that is the Bangor Limestone and on top of that is the Pennington Formation, which can be any number of rock types. Near the top is the Raccoon Mountain Shale. On top of the mountain is the Warren Point Sandstone. It is readily visible as the ring of cliffs forming the cap and is erosion resistant.

All of these layers dip slightly toward the center of the mountain in a gentle syncline. However, the rock that contains Rustys Cave, Hurricane Cave, and surrounding small caves slopes down the flank of the mountain. Several cavers who are geologists have been investigating this from the inside out and have come up

with an interesting theory. They have concluded that this area of the mountain is an ancient over thrust of the Bangor Limestone. It is 50 to 100 feet thick. This formation has been eroded from the rest of the flank. This would explain the tilt of the passage down the side of the mountain. It has been known that the water in Rustys Cave flows into Hurricane Cave. According to these researchers, the floor of the stream in Hurricane Cave is the Hartselle Formation. They explored a small cave known as Yellowbox Cave high above the entrance of Rustys Cave and found it is formed at the top of this over thrust. The west wall of the cave is Raccoon Mountain Formation and the east wall is of the steeply dipping Bangor Limestone. Only a caver could have researched this. They are currently preparing an article that will have a more complete explanation.

Fox Mountain was inhabited on the top until the 1930s when the water table dropped. Locals say there were peach orchards and numerous dwellings on the top. The mountain has interested cavers for over 40 years because of all the exposed limestone. In 1961 local cavers found Byers Cave. This cave became a standard for cavers from around the Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia area. The cave is extensive and challenging. It contains two hydrologic systems and is formed along several different fault zones. In 1963 another local caver found Cemetery Pit. This cave consists of several miles of passage and has been protected from vandalism by the 185-foot entrance shaft. Another popular cave known in that time was Hurricane Cave, which was regularly used for beginner trips. Rustys Cave was found in 1966. This cave is the most scenic cave on the mountain and is also protected by a pit entrance.

Recently, several conservancy members began pushing Hurricane Cave. A difficult push through the Air Chute helped expand the cave under Rustys Cave. Over 2,000 feet of virgin passage were added. The vertical extent was extended to 254 feet. A second entrance was located in the new area. The largest and best-decorated rooms in the cave are in the new section.

In the mid 1960s, construction of Interstate 59 began. At first the Department of Transportation planned just to cover the entrance to Hurricane Cave. Five members of the Dogwood City Grotto were Department of Transportation employees and convinced the engineers that the amount of water issuing from the entrance would undermine the road. The local cavers convinced the construction crew to use a caver-sized culvert, which is used today. The acquisition of land by the state is the reason for

the land-locked nature of the current Southeastern Cave Conservancy property. Although it is not supposed to be possible to land lock property in Georgia, this property has a special status. This happened because of the use of eminent domain by the government. Apparently the land was paid for and, after carving out the right of way for the interstate, it was given back.

After the interstate was opened, access to the area was by crawling through drainage culverts and trespassing on state rights of way. Breaches in the boundary fences and four-wheel drive roads were common. In the late 1970s, there were problems between visitors and the land-owners at Byers Cave, and the cave was closed. Since that time, NSS cavers have been denied access and the cave has suffered abuse from trespassers and vandals. In about 1987 several cavers from the Atlanta area began negotiations to buy the 160-acre southern tract of the Middleton property, which included much of Byers, Rustys, and Hurricane Caves.

This unsuccessful attempt underscored the difficulty of buying this land. There were problems getting a clear title on a small portion of this section and that was always going to be a problem. The Chairman of the NSS Cave Ownership and Management Committee unsuccessfully tried to get the NSS to buy the Fox Mountain property. These experiences helped form in local cavers an interest in establishing cave preserves. A small group of interested cavers formed the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. The Conservancy started as an idea and was later propelled into being by a gift of their first cave. Several other properties were acquired. The acquisition of Neversink cemented the conservancy's reputation. Through all of this, the Fox Mountain area was always on the mind of members. Early in 1997 Mark Wolinsky, the Acquisitions Chairman, approached the three families who owned the land and made an offer. To his surprise, negotiations began to move swiftly. A purchase price of \$89,640 was agreed on with a monthly payment of \$1,622. Owner financing was arranged which helped with the title problem. At \$270 an acre, the land was cheap. That is due in large part to the lack of access.

At the same time, Fricks Cave came on the market. The land was going to be sold on short notice. The cave is a significant gray bat hibernaculum. Undeterred, the conservancy applied to The Nature Conservancy for help financing Fricks Cave. As of this writing, they are ahead of the repayment schedule. Fox Mountain was not made available at a convenient time, but the land was too important to pass up. It was

at this time that Mark Wolinski made his often-quoted statement, "we have landed on an island and burned our ships."

Most of the land had never been surveyed. There had been a preliminary survey of the southern tract when the earlier effort failed. It showed that the entrance to Byers Cave was not on the property, although over 80 percent of the cave lay under it. Starting in the fall of 1997, the Southeastern Cave Conservancy began an effort to re-survey the property. A surveyor, who had just joined the Chattanooga Grotto, stepped forward to help. When other assets fell through, she agreed to take on the whole project. Access was still a problem. The Department of Transportation could not find the interstate plats. The land lot lines were questionable. Some of the adjoining deeds were hand written in ledger books. These plots had not been surveyed carefully. Our volunteer saw the job as a challenge and a worthy project for her master's license.

A need for manpower was obvious. The terrain was steep and rocky. A call went out to the regional caver population. The Conservancy's Internet mailer was used, along with a regional mailer, TAG-net. All the local grottos had newsletter editors and they were emailed. This proved to be the key to what has proved to be large mobilization of labor. Almost a hundred different cavers have participated. They have hauled equipment, held station, chopped brush, and cooked meals. Whole grottos from as far away as New Orleans have traveled to the area to participate. One large grotto took an entire weekend as theirs. Cavers from Florida and Virginia came just to help. A survey, which would have cost tens of thousands of dollars, was accomplished for virtually nothing.

This experience has been gratifying. It has brought many individuals into contact with their Conservancy and given them a vehicle for participation beyond giving money. At the same time, the efforts of the Conservancy were kept on the minds of the local caver population.

The access problem was later addressed. A local landowner and neighbor was approached

about the use of his land to access the property. This landowner had land on both sides of the interstate with a connecting tunnel. This tunnel is suitable for pedestrian use. His only concern was for the condition of his fences, which were sustaining damage from climbing. The conservancy came up with a plan to protect his fences as well as the cavers crossing them. Volunteer efforts constructed these ladders as well as new trails which do not trespass on the interstate right of way. This is a "best case" solution. While pedestrian access is provided, vehicular trespass is not possible. The land has become "caver friendly."

This cave preserve is what the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. is all about. Not only have we succeeded in protecting a number of Georgia's premier caves, but we have also obtained an area with potential for further discovery. The significant watershed is protected. Fox Mountain will always be there for cavers to enjoy as long as the Southeastern Cave Conservancy is alive. It will never be logged or used in any other fashion. Our experience with The Fox Mountain Cave Preserve will prove to be a model for future acquisitions.

### Author

Jim Wilbanks, NSS 8967 FE, SCCi 89, has been active in cave exploration and survey and the issues surrounding caving for over 30 years. He started in his teens as an explorer but quickly moved to discovery, survey, and preservation. He was part of many of the early efforts in Ellisons Cave.

As an early member of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, he was acutely aware of the caves on Fox Mountain. He had participated in the original survey and map preparation. When the Conservancy bought the preserve, he stepped forward to help manage it.

He lives in the vicinity of the preserve because of the caves in the area. He is an active member of the Chattanooga Grotto, The Dogwood City Grotto, The Georgia Speleological Survey, The Vertical Section, and the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc.