

Historic cave connection planned

Public invited to see crawlway completion Saturday



People gather to watch Seth Bast of Manitowoc, front left, and Kevin Kollath of St. Nazianz, excavate the Tartarus cave in this 2011 photo. The public is invited on Saturday to watch the historical joining of Tartarus and Split Rock caves by members of the Wisconsin Speleological Society. HTR file photo

MARIBEL — Two caves at Cherney Maribel Caves County Park will be connected for the first time on Saturday.

The final digging for a 200-foot crawlway, joining Tartarus Cave and Split Rock Cave, is expected to begin at 9 a.m., said Gary Soule of Sturgeon Bay, a member of the Wisconsin Speleological Society.

The nonprofit group invites the public to witness the historic event and take a candlelight crawl from one cave to the other starting at 10 a.m. A red ribbon ceremony also will be held.

“It’s the first major connection at Cherney Maribel Caves,” said Al Schema of Manitowoc, society board member. “To connect two cave entrances is very rare.”

This event is in conjunction with the society-sponsored Hodag Hunt Festival Friday through Sunday in the park. While the cave connection event is free, the festival, which includes activities, meals and camping in the park, will have a charge.

Cave discovery

It was 22 degrees below zero during the winter of 2008 when Schema discovered Split Rock Cave.

“Caves hold a constant temperature of around 43 degrees,” he said. “Caves will actually start breathing outward when it’s 20 below or colder. You’ll usually see the steam coming out.”

The cave is named Split Rock because of the big split that goes all the way from the entrance to the top of the bluff, Schema said.

He and several members of the group, who were digging glacial sediment out of the cave in 2009, discovered a chamber nearly 7 feet high with popcorn coral formations, small stalactites and some fossils. They named the room Cat’s Lair because of the cat’s skeleton they found inside, he said.

The group also found a freestanding floor-to-ceiling pillar in the cave. The New Hope Cave, a walk-in cave that is the park’s biggest, also has a pillar. “We’re one of three caves in the state of Wisconsin with multiple pillars,” Schema said.

Southeast of Split Rock is Tartarus, the oldest known cave at the park, first documented in 1837, Schema said. It bears the name of a mythical Greek place in the underworld.

“We really didn’t know that they were going to join at all,” Schema said of the two caves.

After the group broke through the fall-down rock in the main passage from the Cat’s Lair, Schema found a continuing passage.

“Once I got 10 feet in, I could hear a small thudding noise ... another 10 to 15 feet, you could hear people scratching and digging from the Tartarus cave,” Schema said.

On March 4, they felt a breeze blowing through Split Rock Cave. “That’s when we knew we had a connection for sure,” he said.

Members of the group made a voice connection on July 15, a light connection on July 21, a face-to-face connection on Aug. 12 and were able to shake hands on Aug. 18.

“Tartarus and Split Rock are both domed or tunnel caves caused by the high flow of water through them,” Schema said. “They’re very safe caves to be in ... pressure is pushing on the rock evenly so you won’t have collapses or fall-downs.”

It’s the interest in exploring that has kept Schema digging for the past six years.

“I like the unknown of what’s going to be ahead 10 feet. You’re not going to know until you get there ... that’s what keeps me coming back,” he said.

“The underground is that last frontier,” said Kasey Fiske, Prairie du Sac, chairman of Wisconsin Speleological Society. “For me, it’s the equivalent to walking on the moon.”

Restoring the caves by carefully removing glacial debris with small shovels is a laborious process, he said.

The joining of the two caves “is a culmination of probably two years of solid work,” he said.

Hodag Hunt Festival

A Hodag is a mythical cave creature with five legs, as he is portrayed by the Wisconsin Speleological Society.

The group’s three-day festival named after the creature will feature camping, cave trips, science-related trips, nature hikes, informal slide shows, yard games, a Saturday-night grill out, a featured speaker and social gatherings. A replica of a Hodag will be placed in one of the caves in the area and whoever finds it will receive a prize.

Those interested in attending can register at the event starting at 4 p.m. Friday through Saturday morning.

Friday and Saturday evenings will include star and planet gazing through high-powered telescopes and a campfire if weather permits. Saturday morning will begin with an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast. Names from registered Hodag attendees will be drawn to see who will be the historical first few to crawl through from one cave to the next.

On-site cave and off-site cave trips, vertical rope work in the park and a geological [roadtrip](#) are planned for Saturday afternoon and Sunday late morning. A

fundraising auction and entertainment from a bluegrass band also is on tap. For more information, contact Fiske at fiske@grad.wisc.edu or visit www.wisconsinincaves.org.

Directions to caves

Cherney Maribel Caves County Park is just off of Interstate 43, halfway between Manitowoc and Green Bay. Take the Maribel exit off of I-43 onto Wisconsin 147 east. Drive less than a ¼ mile onto Wisconsin 147 and then turn north onto Manitowoc County R. The park is one mile north on County R on the right-hand side. Follow the signs for the park once you exit I-43.