

Bloomington Cave History

Bloomington Cave has been visited by the public and cave enthusiasts for well over a century. When the cave was first discovered, and for many decades later, it was believed that there were two separate caves. However, it was eventually discovered that the two entrances to the cave did indeed connect, creating one large cave. The earliest known record of people using the cave goes back to the 1890's; throughout the cave are historic writings showing use by people during the past century.

It has also long been a popular destination for local school and youth groups, including Boy Scouts of America from southern Utah, and adjacent areas of southern and eastern Nevada. Among local residents, a visit to Bloomington Cave has long been a "rite of passage" for young people. According to data collected by the BLM, visitation is highest from March to the early winter months, when students are out of school. Recreational visits are usually reserved for day use only, but local youths started using it as a setting for under-age drinking, overnight camping, among other illicit activities. Fire rings, trash, spray paint, graffiti, and human waste remained as evidence. Visitors also camped in the parking area leaving broken glass, trash, and fire rings behind.

As the cave became more popular with the locals, the visitation also increased. In 1953-54, a local caving club was created in St. George called Utah's Dixie Grotto. The purpose of the grotto was to advance the study, exploration, and preservation of caves. In 1952, assisted by members of the Southern California Grotto, they evaluated conditions in Bloomington Cave and determined that it was too dangerous for continued, and often unsupervised, exploration by schools and youth groups. They noted that between July and November 1952 "several hundred tons" of rock had fallen in the cave, burying "virtually miles of binder twine" that cave visitors were using to mark routes. They believed the cave was geologically unstable, and posed a genuine safety risk to visitors.

Grotto members informed the Washington County Commissioners about the potential hazards associated with visiting Bloomington Cave and presented a plan to blast the entrance of the cave closed to protect public safety. The County Commissioners agreed to furnish powder and a powder man to close the cave for good. This took place on Jan 2, 1953. Overall, apart from some of the younger generation, public reaction for the closure was good. The Grotto received the thanks of the St. George Chamber of Commerce and also received an approving editorial in the local newspaper.

This closure was only temporarily effective, as local youths quickly removed the rock rubble from the cave entrance, and re-gained access to the cave. The Dixie Grotto made a second, unsuccessful attempt at closing Bloomington Cave to public access in 1954.

In 1977, The Salt Lake Grotto received word of the cave and started mapping its system. They mapped the cave to a length of 3,000 feet, but after 2 years abandoned the effort due to the great difficulty and complexity of it. In 1999, two members of the local Color Country Grotto started to resurvey the cave. In a three year time span, the Grotto had surveyed the cave to its current known length of 7,136 linear feet (1.3 miles) and 250 vertical feet deep.

In recent years, a number of incidences involving large groups of visitors to Bloomington Cave have required Search and Rescue emergency recoveries. In the summer of 2002, a member of a Boy Scout troop that was exploring the cave had to be rescued after breaking his leg in a fall near the Big Room. That same year, at midnight on Christmas Eve, a teenager fell more than 150 feet to her death, while visiting Bloomington Cave with 15 other students and 5 adults.

These large groups rarely have basic cave safety equipment, such as reliable light sources, protective head gear, or appropriate clothing and footwear. Many have never explored a cave and are unaware of the safety hazards associated with this activity.

In 2005, BLM installed a temporary wooden kiosk in the parking area and posted a map of Bloomington Cave, as well as information about main routes through the cave, cave safety, and cave “etiquette” on the kiosk. During 2005-6, volunteer cave enthusiasts also flagged the main routes through the cave, to lessen the need for visitors to create their own route markings. The temporary kiosk was damaged by a wild fire in 2006 and finally destroyed by vandals in 2008. In 2011 new interpretive signs were put in place, offering information about not only cave safety and etiquette, but also cave ecology and biota.

In 2005, more than 50 volunteers donated over a 1000 hours of time, assisting with the sandblasting of spray paint and graffiti from the walls and removal of trash from the cave. This project restored approximately 600 feet of the cave passages; however, spray paint and the fluorescent contents of Glo-Sticks quickly re-appeared in the restored areas of the cave. A few efforts at sandblasting graffiti have also taken place in 2011, and are on-going.

In 2006, the St. George Field Office began work on a cave management plan. Approved in March 2009, the Bloomington Cave Management Plan ensures the protection of cave resources while still providing for recreational experiences. Bat friendly metal gates were installed at each entrance in April 2009, and a permitting system began on July 1, 2009, for public access into the cave.