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MODERN CAVE SCIENCE KEEPS GLENWOOD CAVERNS AND HISTORIC FAIRY CAVES ALIVE IN GLENWOOD CAVERNS ADVENTURE PARK

GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colo. — Glenwood Caverns, a living cave near Glenwood Springs, Colorado, and a part of Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park, is a sustainable resources success story that reflects what can be done to both preserve priceless natural resources and make them accessible to the public.

Caves depend on moisture and humidity in order to keep dripping and growing cave formations. Commercial cave owners in the 1890s did not understand this and allowed portions of the cave to dry out. The public enjoyed the caverns from 1895 through 1917, and then the Darrow family, owners of the caves since their ancestor Charles Darrow homesteaded the area in the 1890s, closed the caverns. Unfortunately when the caves were closed to the public, the entrance was not sealed. From 1917 through 1961 the caves were not protected from casual visitors and several generations of teenagers and hikers explored the site, often removing cave formations as souvenirs. The known portion of the Fairy Caves was exposed to the dry outside air, and eventually dried up and stopped growing.



In 1952 the modern exploration of Glenwood Caverns began. Members of the Colorado Grotto Club, led by Glenwood Springs resident James Kitt, visited the known Fairy Caves. These experienced cavers guessed that this one section was only a small part of a much larger cavern network. In 1953 the group returned and began exploring in earnest. The group first found new passages into the mountain from the Fairy Caves. These new areas, christened the *Register Room* and the *Pendant Room*, were large and doubled the size of the known caverns. Fortunately, these new areas were also living cave, still in its pristine ancient state, still dripping and growing. In 1954, the cavers felt a breeze blowing from a hole, followed that airflow, and discovered what they named the *Drum Room* and the *Canyon*.

In 1960 curious and courageous cavers discovered a vertical passage at the back of Fairy Caves and followed this narrow passage 30 feet down. At one place, the passage shrinks to 8 ½ inches wide. The cavers squeezed through this tiny space by exhaling, squeezing downwards, stopping, inhaling, exhaling again, and continuing to slowly move through the narrow opening. This experience led the cavers to name the passage the *Jam Crack*.

After the cavers had negotiated the *Jam Crack*, they were faced with another narrow passage, roughly horizontal. For obvious reasons the cavers named this passage *Purgatory* and continued to exhale, squeeze, inhale and painfully work their way through the *Purgatory* passage. The trip through *Purgatory* was worth it because the cavers found several enormous rooms with a fantastic array of pristine formations. The cavers named the two largest rooms *The Barn* and *King's Row*. The reason for naming *The Barn* is clear; after all, it is *big as a ...*, but the cavers gave the fanciful name *King's Row* because this huge room has a series of formations that look like chess pieces.

Visitors today can stand in both *The Barn* and *King's Row* and view the stunning formations. Visitors no longer have to squeeze through the *Jam Crack* or go through *Purgatory* to get there. Today's visitors can walk down a safe set of stairs with hand railings, accompanied by a knowledgeable and experienced guide, and view these same awesome formations discovered by the cavers.

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Peter P. Prebble, Robert Wilber, and Robert O'Connell, members of the Colorado Grotto Club, bought the caves and surrounding acreage from the Darrow family in 1961. Soon after the purchase, they installed a locked gate at the entrance to the caverns, effectively barring entrance to the uninvited. Prebble, Wilber, and O'Connell intended to reopen the caves, but their plans did not materialize.

From 1961 through 1998, a handful of cavers continued to explore the caverns but the caves were still closed to the public. Steve Beckley, who grew up in the Rocky Mountains and had been a caver since childhood, was a student at the Colorado School of Mines when he read about the Fairy Caves in an out-of-print book, *Caves of Colorado*. Beckley graduated and began working as a petroleum engineer, but he never forgot about the Fairy Caves. In 1982 Beckley contacted the owners of the caves to explore development of the caves to admit the public; however, Beckley and the owners were unable to agree.

Beckley persisted for the next sixteen years and, in 1998, reached an agreement with the owners under which he would be allowed to develop the property. During those years of negotiations, Steve Beckley continued to study what information was known about the caves. In 1992 for the first time Steve and his wife and partner in Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park, Jeanne Beckley, put on kneepads and headlamps and squeezed through *Jam Crack*. Peter Prebble, one of the three owners, a caver himself and very protective of the integrity of the undeveloped caverns, insisted that an emergency room physician from Texas, a friend of Prebble and an experienced caver himself, accompany them.

After this exploration trip, the Beckleys vowed to do whatever they could to gain control of the caves and reopen the historic section and open a new living section to the public. The Beckleys began the substantial improvement projects necessary to allow the public to view this natural wonder. First the Beckleys graded and graveled a road up to the cave entrance and cleared the Historic Fairy Caves of the debris that had collected there for decades. The Beckleys hired Evan Anderson, a local caver with knowledge in wiring, to rewire the Historic Fairy Caves by replacing the 1897 wiring and installing modern equipment to illuminate and emphasize the formations. Today's visitors can see the holes in the sides where the lights guided visitors in 1897.

Because the purpose of development was to make the living cave accessible to the public, and still not harm the cave, the Beckleys decided to carve a new tunnel into the mountain, one that could control temperature and humidity and preserve the formations. Beckley hired surveyors to help determine the proper path for the new tunnel. Beckley and his workers squeezed through the *Jam Crack* several times to set up antennas deep within the *Barn* to guide the surveyors. After the surveyors had completed the measurements, Beckley and his partners hired Dean Mussati, lead engineer of Mining and Environmental Services, to blast the tunnel 132 feet through the cliff.

Prior to the completion of the tunnel, Beckley installed two airtight doors in the new tunnel to form an airlock. The doors are 50 feet apart so that when visitors enter the airlock, the door closes behind them.

With the help of this airlock, the ideal humidity and temperature of the caverns can be maintained, ensuring the continuing growth of the age-old formations. The Beckleys enlisted cavers to install temperature and humidity monitors to ensure that the integrity of the ancient formations is maintained. The interior of the cave is a stable 52 degrees year round. For the visitor coming from the outside, the caverns feel cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Because of Steve and Jeanne Beckley's vision and courage, Glenwood Caverns and Historic Fairy Caves are now protected, able to continue to grow naturally, and yet are accessible to the public. The Colorado Governor's Office of Tourism recognized the Beckleys for their exemplary preservation efforts and selected them as the only winners of the *2001 Governor's Award for Outstanding Community Tourism Initiative*.

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