



Uncredited reviews by Chris Howes

## Hidden Nature

**Michael Ray TAYLOR**

**Vanderbilt University, Nashville. 2020. 330pp, 75 b&w photographs. Softback, 152mm x 230mm. £17.50**

**ISBN 978-0-8265-0102-8**

LEST any caver wonders at the title of Michael Ray Taylor's latest book, *Hidden Nature*, the subtitle makes it obvious why this review appears here: *Wild Southern Caves*. Taylor has an extremely good pedigree, with previous works including *Cave Passages* (1996), *Dark Life* (1999 – a personal favourite) and *Caves: Exploring Hidden Realms* (2001), a series that began with his editing the classic *Lechuguilla: Jewel of the Underground* (1991). Given the quality of his writing, it is only a pity that almost two decades separate *Hidden Nature* from his previous works, though some have seen more than one printing.

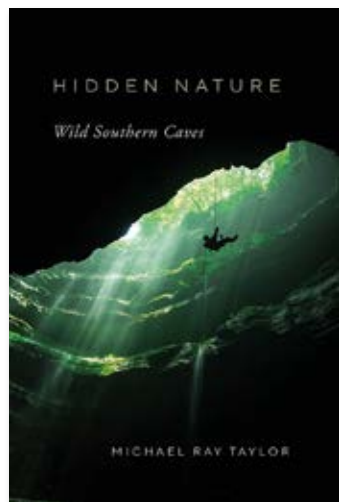
The 'southern caves' of the subtitle are those of Tennessee – TAG country, a region of the USA that is rich in vertical systems. Though, in passing, much might be gleaned of the area's caving history, this is more a book about cavers than it is about caves: the 'where and how and when', certainly, but the eminently readable story concentrates on the many 'who' and 'why' that have been part of Taylor's own journey through the sport. Think James Herriot or Bill Bryson ...

Taylor's style is to tell a story through setting scenes that encapsulate, with sometimes finely detailed descriptions, a conversation or occasion that almost subliminally, by using speech, imparts information that would otherwise be only a dry fact. As a reader, you are drawn into and under the skin of the cavers – the reasons they cave, the pressure that they feel to do what they do.

One character that resurfaces through the book is Marion O. Smith, a name well known in US caving circles but probably far less so elsewhere. One chapter, *Goat's Paradise*, concerns Smith and others and their discovery of an

extension and immense chamber in Rumbling Falls Cave. Here, the serious side of caving, caving politics and the nature of cavers comes through, within a background of discovery and the drive to conserve. With sewage effluent flowing into the system, with the permission of the authorities, the long-time secret extensions were revealed and photographs used to help publicise the appalling decision to allow the discharge.

Ultimately, the court shut down the plan to open a new sewage



plant, but cracks opened into fractures within the caving community, blaming the smaller group's unappreciated secrecy surrounding its discoveries and being labelled 'jealous' in return. It's one of many 'warts and all' tales that join with others of pure joy or sorrow.

Along the way, as well as discoveries and the inherent thrill of caving, Taylor covers topics such as bats, microbiology, archaeology and, again, conservation that includes cave purchases by the National Speleological Society and individual cavers, to protect those sites. History, also, such as how the legendary travels of John Muir (who, in the 1800s, was influential in seeing national parks being inaugurated and co-founded the Sierra Club) took him to Horse Cave in Kentucky – in 1867 a village of that name. 'Horse' in this context meant, in local parlance, 'big' ... as was the cave in the centre of the settlement. But, a local creamery voided

its whey waste into the cave, from where the effluent stench spread for miles into the surrounding countryside, making the town virtually uninhabitable each summer for six decades. It's another tale of how a major clean-up in Horse Cave (the town) changed the cave's name to Hidden River and developed a major showcave attraction.

These are but two short examples of storytelling that are revealed in a mere few paragraphs in *Hidden Nature*, so within the 330 pages that this 'journalism professor' graces us with lie many, many more. His is, ultimately, a story of compassion and passion with cavers and caving that must wriggle under the skin of speleologists anywhere.

It is for the most part a first-person tale with excursions into science and natural history and a commitment to conservation – the list of references is itself revealing for the background to the factual content. Taylor closes this section with a revealing sentence: 'This book is one caver's personal love letter to TAG', a theme that shines through.

Buy yourself a great and engaging read, as are all Taylor's books (though don't track down a copy using the cataloguing data printed at the front – it's for a different title!). All in all, this is a book that is difficult to stop reading once you begin – and it's likely to demand a second reading, as well.

## The Caves of Western and Central Thailand

**Martin ELLIS**

**Ellis, Shepton Mallet. 2020. 583pp, 250 maps and surveys. Hardback, A4. US\$40**

**No ISBN**

*DESCENT* (260) briefly reported that Martin Ellis had released two volumes in *The Caves of Thailand* series he had been working on, covering the eastern and northern parts of the country. Now, the third of the planned four volumes has been published to document the caves of the western and central regions. With each title the books become fatter: the first ran to 311 pages, the second 491 and now we have a staggering 583 pages.

Although this third volume contains sections on the history of cave exploration, a solid set of references and an index, the bulk comprises a listing of caves divided by province and amphoe (administrative district). In essence, the text for each derives from a database that Martin has maintained, itself drawing on personal visits and research together with reports by other cavers. At minimum, each site is identified with a grid reference

## BCRA Review 19

AS is now the norm, BCRA publishes an annual review to present the previous year's achievements, including reports from its officers and various special interest groups (archaeology, biology, explosives, radio and electronics, and surveying) and details of new publications (as well as listing older ones still available). Cavers who are into in statistics will find plenty to muse over, especially relating to membership (in 2019, that stood at 314 cavers and 60 groups).

Does this sound somewhat dry and, well, boring? It shouldn't, because the layout is attractive even while being information-rich, and the reports of the various science and field meetings are in particular useful reference points. In addition to photographs and artworks displayed in the Hidden Earth salons, three articles are included – one by John Gunn and Andi Smith on how things are developing at the British Cave Science Centre at Buxton (a BCRA project), another by David Gibson about DIY methods of data capture, and a well-illustrated feature on cave art by Dominika Wróblewska, with details of how she prepared her MA for the Manchester School of Art.

The publication (*BCRA Review 19* was published in October 2020 – its number represents the year it covers, rather than being the nineteenth in the series – it is A4, 56pp, with ISSN 2516-1423) costs a very reasonable £6.25 plus p&p from the association ([www.bcrareview.org.uk](http://www.bcrareview.org.uk)), or – even better – is available for free download. The volunteer time and expertise that goes into creating such things is high, so take a look and support those involved with some feedback.

