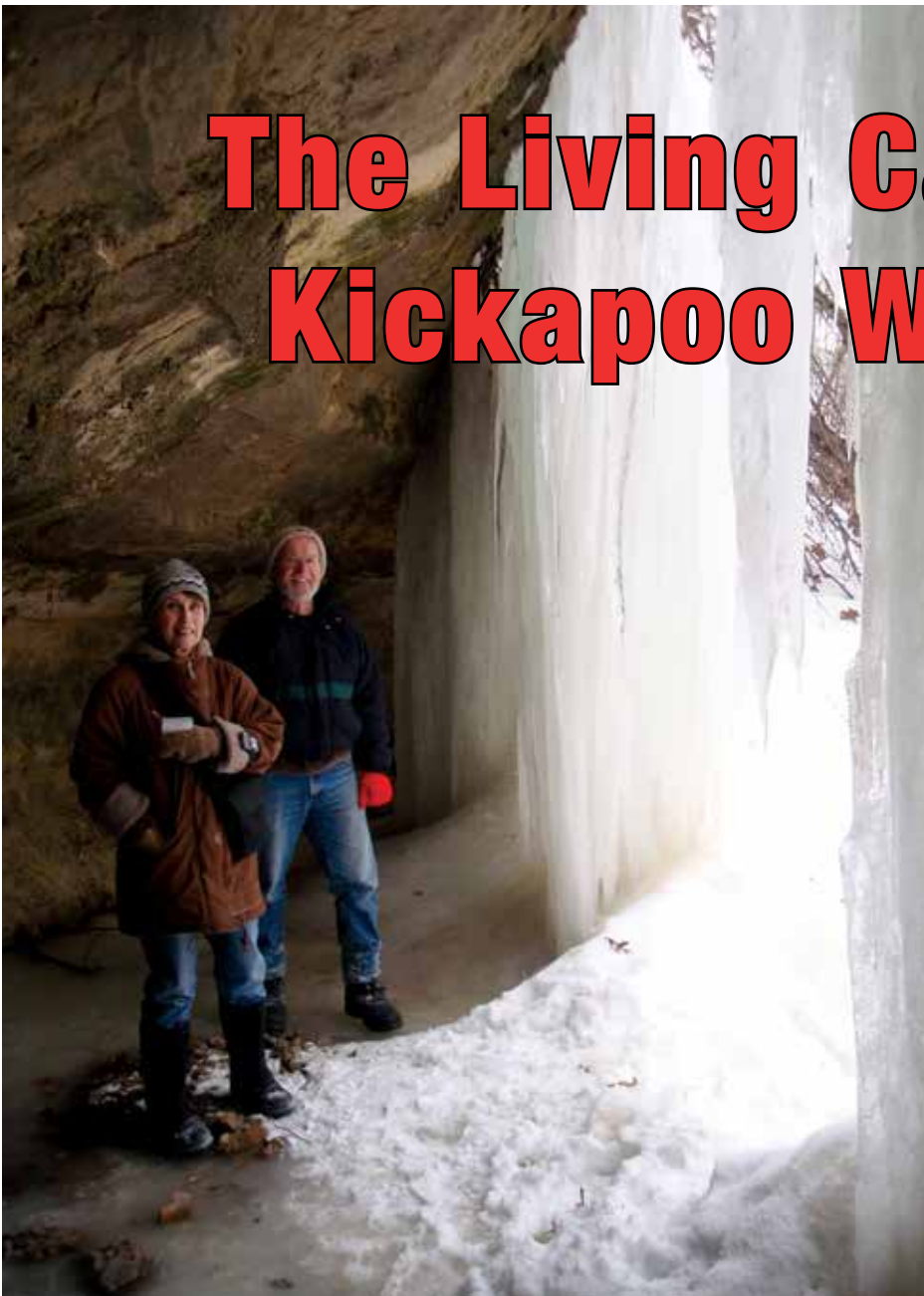


# The Living Caves of Kickapoo Winters



The author and Chuck Hatfield visit an ice cave in the Kickapoo Valley Reserve.

**By Joan Kent**

**Photographs by Janet Kruk**

**C**runching along a narrow make-shift trail through the snow, 33 hikers began their trek to see the ever changing Kickapoo Valley Reserve ice caves. The trail led them up steep hills and valleys. After arduous climbing — sometimes on all fours — they reached the first cave, called Balcony. “Wow!” some exclaimed, but most stood in silent awe before the creamy white curtain of icicles framing a room of rock, floored in ice.

Ice caves are a product of the rela-

tionship between rock, water, gravity and freezing temperatures, explained hike leader Chuck Hatfield. The Kickapoo caves are created by a different process from the better known ice caves on Lake Superior. “In those, the ice forms from waves splashing into the caves and up to their ceilings and then coming down. They’re ice caves born of the violence of madly splashing water.”

The Kickapoo ice caves are formed when groundwater, flowing along the

surface of a rock formation, drips over a ledge and freezes into a curtain, he said. It is a matter of timing, because the water must reach the edge of the cave before it freezes. “These ice caves are formed in lonely silence with just the sound of dripping water.”

“It looks just like a waterfall, but you can’t see the room behind it. Some people think that’s it, take a picture and leave. But there’s so much more than what you can see from out here.”

As more icicles form, the entrance becomes smaller until ice on the floor and icicles on the ceiling might make it impossible to enter without crawling. Ice colors vary, depending on the minerals in the water, with limestone giving an aqua tint and iron a reddish or yellow tint. On a clear day, it reflects the blue of the sky.

The caves are of potential archaeological interest, because some were used as seasonal shelters during the post-glacial period 10,000 years ago. Though the area was not covered by glaciers during the last ice age, as the glaciers retreated north large mammals followed, and people tracked them using caves for shelter, as evidenced by charred food and firewood from that era found by a Wisconsin Historical Society excavation, Hatfield said.

“After a hike, we can go back to our warm houses with food on the table, but these were places where people went in desperate need. There is still a feeling of safety and protection, a sense of history, of quiet ghosts of those who may have occupied this snug haven ages ago.”

The hills of the reserve are 1,100 to 1,300 feet above sea level. At the 900-



Hikers clamber down the trail after viewing an ice cave.

foot elevation there's a 10-foot layer of strong, water-resistant sandstone, and beneath that, a layer of soft, crumbly rock, Hatfield said. "That's the combination that makes this area so special. As water washes down, it comes over the top rock, which resists it, but the rock underneath falls apart, creating the caves. I do not know of any other place in Wisconsin where all these circumstances come together."

The caves were known to generations of farm families who lived here, he continued. But stories about the caves were lost when the federal government condemned the land in the 1970s for an ill-fated dam project. No one at the reserve knew about the caves 11 years ago, Hatfield said.

The Kickapoo Valley Reserve is about 40 miles southwest of La Crosse, Wis., near La Farge.

In 2002, when there wasn't enough snow for the reserve's Winterfest cross-country skiing, Hatfield suggested a hike to a Wildcat Mountain State Park

cave in nearby Ontario, but thinking there might be closer caves, he went exploring.

"I walked over the first hill," he recalled, "and was blown away because I found an ice cave."

"I became obsessive. Otherwise, who would have kept doing this?"

Starting in La Farge and working his way north to Wildcat Mountain, about 11 miles away, he surveyed every valley along the Kickapoo River on both sides, hiking where there are no trails. His late black cocker spaniel, Beau, accompanied him. "He began to understand where we would end up. So he started to find them first and then would patiently wait for me, sitting and posing in front of the caves."

Hatfield named some caves for their shapes — Balcony, Horseshoe, Grotto. He called one place Valley of the Ice Caves, another, Valley of the Elves, "because if there were elves, they'd live there."

"Each has its own personality. In

some caves, the ice channels into one fall. Some have twin towers with an opening between. Or they may be

**"These ice caves are formed in lonely silence with just the sound of dripping water."**

influenced by a quirk of nature ... a branch falls and horizontal icicles form, defying gravity."

He's watched their changing nature over the seasons and years. "The first ice in December is not as elaborate as what you will see in February or March. But I really enjoy the first hikes because the ice is crystal clear, so you see images you don't see later. They're different every year, depending on the





Chuck Hatfield leads a group of cave explorers.

amount of water and changes around them such as a fallen tree, which the water freezes over creating a waterfall. These beautiful features are so unpredictable.”

Due to the rain last fall, he expects 2014 to be a good year.

At first, Hatfield questioned whether he should bring people to the caves, fearful some might damage them, but he decided to share them. Often people return after learning the locations. “I see tracks now, but minimal damage,” he said. “The people who come are enthralled, and would do no more damage than I would.”

Trails can’t be built to the caves because they’re federally designated archaeological sites. Hatfield packs down the snow for the hikes, but admitted parts of the hike are rough.

“The number of people who will see these caves is small, but that’s what makes this so special — you can be one of these people.” ❄️

**Joan Kent is a journalist who lives in La Farge, Wis. Her last story for Big River was “The Frustrating, Meandering Story of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve,” September-October 2013.**



Ice-cavers hike through the frozen woods.

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