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## Book Review: Hidden Nature: Wild Southern Caves

Linh Uong  
*University of North Georgia, [linh.uong@ung.edu](mailto:linh.uong@ung.edu)*

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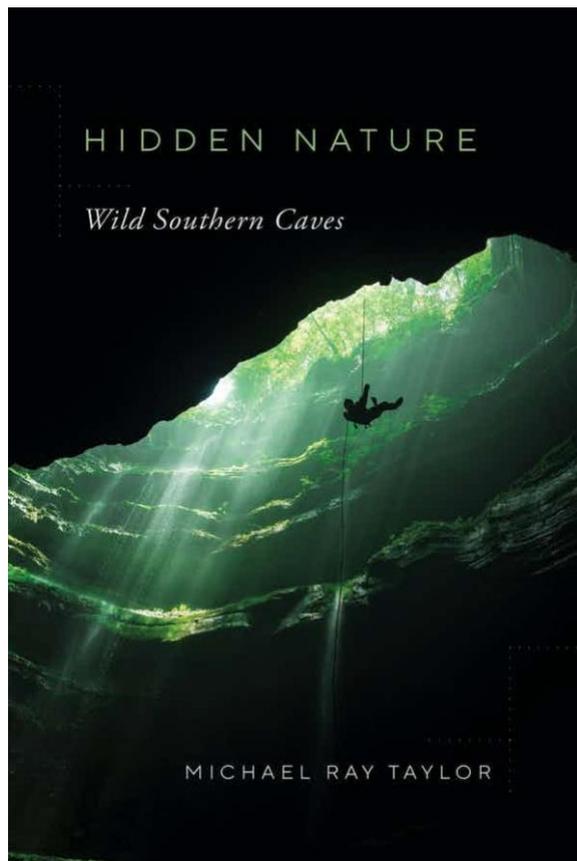
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Off the **SHELF**

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**Hidden Nature: Wild Southern Caves** by Michael Ray Taylor (Vanderbilt University Press, 2020: ISBN 9780826501028, \$19.95)



*Image courtesy of the publisher*

The TAG region, where the borders of Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia meet, is well-known for its vast number of caves. Tennessee alone lays claim to more than 10,000 caves. In *Hidden Nature*, author Michael Ray Taylor offers a glimpse into this beautiful and mysterious subterranean world, sharing his tales and adventures of cave exploration over the course of more than 40 years.

Growing up in Florida with its rivers, mangroves, and springs, Taylor had never ventured into a cave until one summer on a family trip, returning from Illinois. His father

decided (after many pleas from the back seat) to stop in Chattanooga and visit Ruby Falls, and Taylor was hooked. At Florida State University, Taylor and his housemates joined the student cave club, which was actually a grotto—or chapter—of the National Speleological Society. There, he learned the difference between cavers and spelunkers—“cavers rescue spelunkers”—received sage advice on gear and safety, and most importantly, was told, “Take nothing but pictures. Leave nothing but footprints. Kill nothing but time.”

Taylor is a natural storyteller, intertwining the biology, geology, conservation, and history of caves and caving into his stories. In the chapter “TAG on Steroids,” he recounts the history of the TAG cavers and Richard Schreiber, who began TAG in the 1960s. In “Bat Season,” he tracks white-nose syndrome (WNS), a fungal disease first observed in 2006 in a bat population in New York. Although biologists and cavers have taken measures to limit the spread of WNS in the caves where bats dwell, it has killed over seven million bats across the eastern United States and Canada. In “Graffiti,” he describes a study at the Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky to identify 10,000 plus signatures left by long-forgotten visitors on the cave walls and ceiling. Led by a history professor and assisted by Marion O. Smith, caver extraordinaire (although he would grunt at the title and deny it), and Kristen Bobo, photographer and a well-known caver in her own right, the study found evidence that at least 41 of those signatures belonged to soldiers from the Civil War.

The book reads like a travelogue, memoir, and field journal and is best taken in parts, not to be

read through from beginning to end like a novel. The time periods between chapters are not necessarily sequential, so it may be disconcerting to some readers. However, the book is interspersed with photographs that capture the wonder and timelessness of the caves, pits, and caverns found in TAG and other regions of the country. Also included are “Social Interludes,” Facebook posts from colleagues, and (mis)adventures with one of the author’s best friends and a fellow caver, H. Lee Pearson.

Students with undeclared majors and those with an interest in the natural world may be intrigued into exploring these “wild Southern caves.” Cave enthusiasts and those in the caving community will enjoy reminiscing along with the author. Recommended leisure reading for academic and public libraries.

*Linh Uong is a catalog metadata librarian at the University of North Georgia Libraries*