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Blanchard Springs Caverns Announces Summer Schedules

MOUNTAIN VIEW, AR -- Memorial Day weekend will soon be here, and it marks the opening of Blanchard Springs Caverns' summer schedule. The Caverns will open at 9:30 a.m. and remain open until 6:00 p.m. All three tours, which begin at the Visitor Information Center, will be offered throughout the day.

Saturday, May 29, 2010, marks the opening of the Discovery Trail Tour. This trail takes visitors on a 1.2 mile walk through the middle level of the Caverns. While this tour is not as heavily decorated as the upper Dripstone level, visitors have a chance to see where the explorers camped out in the cave. The tour also travels under the caverns' natural entrance and by the underground stream before entering more decorated rooms. This tour is not for everyone, because it has nearly 700 stairs throughout. The Discovery Trail Tour is offered periodically throughout the day; the last Discovery tour time varies depending on visitation.

The upper level Dripstone Trail is open year-round and is accessible by most people. This tour takes an hour to travel through a half-mile of cave. On the Dripstone Trail, visitors will walk through two huge rooms filled with crystalline flowstones, multicolored stalagmites, and tiny soda straw stalactites. Water dripping into the caverns this year has been abundant, and if there's been a rainstorm you may see waterfalls and reflecting pools. Don't forget to bring a camera! The Dripstone Trail Tour will be offered frequently throughout the day, with the last Dripstone tour beginning at 5:00 p.m.

The Wild Cave Tour is also open year-round, and begins at 9:30 a.m. This tour takes the visitors into the undeveloped portions of the middle level. These are guided tours, available by reservation only. Hard hats, coveralls, knee pads, gloves, lights, and a souvenir T-shirt are provided. Participants will need sturdy hiking boots (no tennis shoes). They also need to be in good physical shape, because the tour involves steep slopes, climbing, and crawling. The tour ends at the Titans, a group of tall spectacular

columns. The tour averages four hours in length. Participants will need to bring a pair of lightweight shoes to change into after the tour is over. Wild Cave Tours must have at least three people scheduled to tour, and are limited to twelve people per tour. Participants must be at least ten years old, and ten- to twelve-year-olds must be accompanied by a responsible adult.

Memorial weekend also marks the beginning of summer interpretive programs in the forest. This year's schedule will involve evening programs on Wednesday and Fridays, day or evening programs on Thursdays, and Saturday morning walks. Program topics will be posted on area bulletin boards, local newspapers, the Ozark National Forest webpage, and the Visitor Center. The first program is:

- Friday, May 28– 8:30 pm, Amphitheater – “Eyewitness: Mammal” – What Talent do Bats and Dolphins Share? How can you tell the oldest elephant in a herd? Huge or tiny, mammals trot, hop, swim, and soar. Meet some of the mammals that make up this varied family.
- Saturday, May 29 – No program is scheduled because of the recreation survey.

Blanchard Recreation Area has both large and small picnic pavilions and either can be reserved. There are signs marking whether a pavilion is reserved or not. You may also reserve the amphitheater for weddings and special programs. The recreation areas on the forest are open for camping and picnicking. All of the forest campgrounds are on a first come, first served basis. The group campsites are available by reservation only. The larger group site will accommodate up to fifty people, while the smaller site can handle up to thirty people.

The North Sylamore Hiking Trail runs for 15 miles alongside of North Sylamore Creek. Some walkers or folks with strollers may want to try the Accessible Trail which begins at the Visitor Center. It's a paved 3/4-mile loop on top of the hill and offers a nice stroll through the woods. There is also an accessible parking lot and ramp that lead to the Mirror Lake fishing pier. The ramp has bump-outs that overlook Mill Creek and the old mill.

The Syllamo Bike Trail was designed with several loop trails that take cyclists through the Sylamore District. Some trails are made for novice riders, and others are more challenging for the seasoned cyclist. There are several trailheads to the bike trail. Most can be reached from Green Mtn. Road, off Highway 5 North. Another bike trailhead is located on Highway 5 North. The bike trail can be reached from Blanchard Campground. Please note that various forest operations may have portions of the bike trail closed.

Blanchard Springs Caverns is located 15 miles northwest of Mountain View, Arkansas, near the town of Fifty Six. Schedule changes and groups can make tour times erratic; you may want to make reservations for your Caverns tour, particularly if you are bringing ten or more visitors to the Caverns. You must make reservations if you want to go on the Wild Cave Tour.

For additional information, current schedules, or tour reservations, please call Blanchard Springs Caverns at either 888-757-2246 or 870-757-2211. For group camping, pavilion, and/or amphitheater reservations, please call the Sylamore District Office at 870-269-3228. You can also write to the U.S .Forest Service, 1001 East Main Street, Mountain View, AR 72560. Look us up on the web at www.blanchardcavetours.com.

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