



What is Karst?



Dissolving Bedrock

The term 'karst' refers to a landscape pockmarked with sinkholes, caves, and springs and is formed when water seeps through a thin layer of soil into fractured bedrock usually made of limestone. Over tens of thousands of years, water moves through the fractured bedrock dissolving and enlarging pathways that act as drains to divert water underground.

Where are all the Streams?

In karst landscapes, water flows beneath the soil through underground streams in the limestone forming pathways and caves. As the water continues to travel through the rock, it will eventually reappear at lower elevations as a spring.

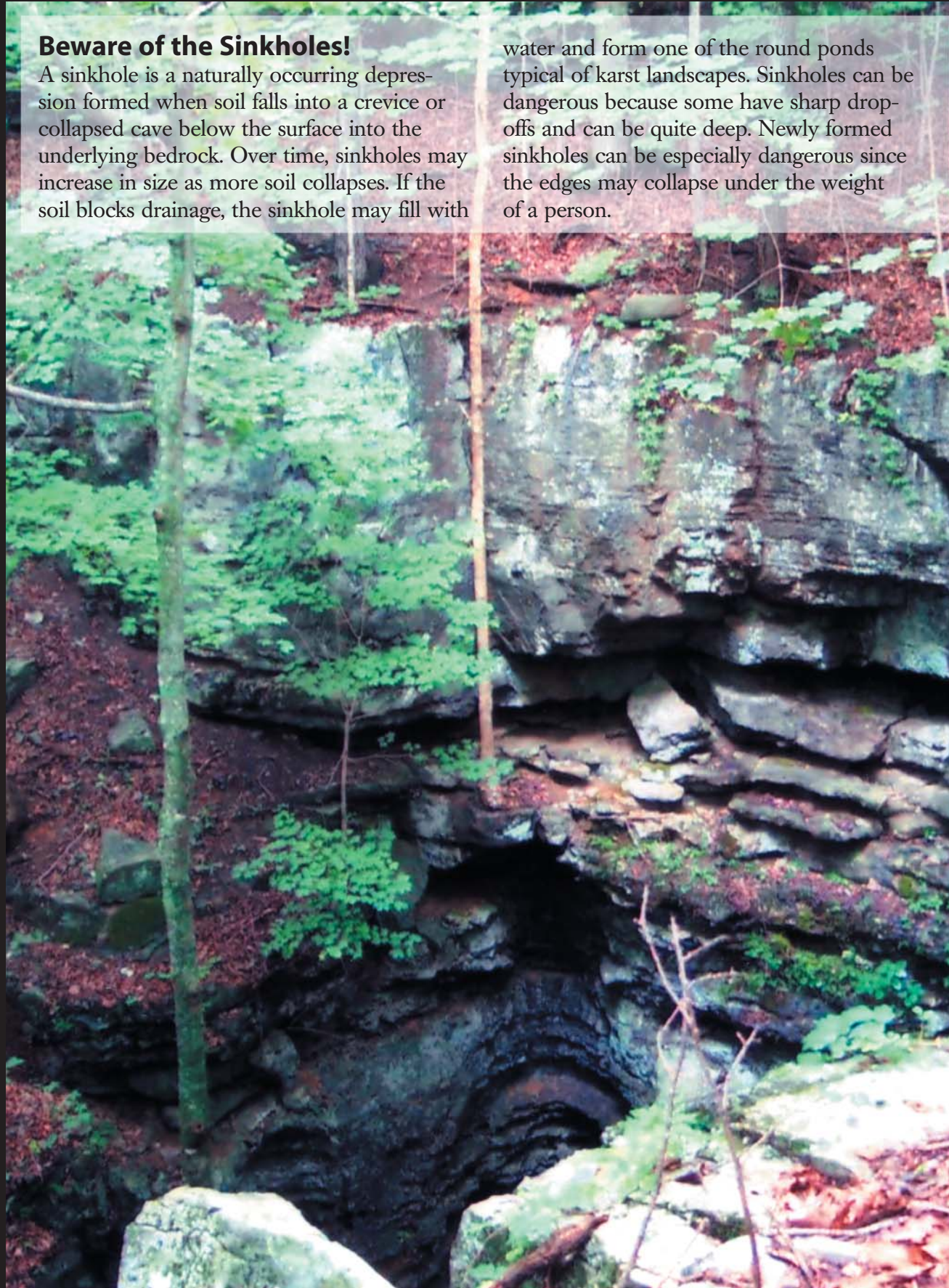
The Rarest of the Rare

Key Cave National Wildlife Refuge is home to the Alabama Cavefish. First listed as threatened in 1977 and then endangered in 1988, this species is a blind, white, cave dweller. While direct disturbances such as cave damage threaten these unique fish, indirect disturbances such as pollution may alter their habitat irreparably.

Beware of the Sinkholes!

A sinkhole is a naturally occurring depression formed when soil falls into a crevice or collapsed cave below the surface into the underlying bedrock. Over time, sinkholes may increase in size as more soil collapses. If the soil blocks drainage, the sinkhole may fill with

water and form one of the round ponds typical of karst landscapes. Sinkholes can be dangerous because some have sharp drop-offs and can be quite deep. Newly formed sinkholes can be especially dangerous since the edges may collapse under the weight of a person.



Morgue entrance at Fern Cave National Wildlife Refuge/USFWS, Steve Seibert



Gray Bat/ADCNR, Keith Hudson

Hanging Out in Karst

Bats are particularly fond of karst landscapes. The subterranean caves that form throughout the area provide an even temperature and a dark place for bats to rest during the day. Key Cave is home to the Gray Bat, one of North America's most endangered bat species. A healthy bat population provides fertilizer and nutrients for many other species that call caves home.



Alabama Cavefish/Rick Maden

Who Needs Eyes in the Dark?

Since eyesight is useless in the complete darkness of a cave, species have evolved strengths in other senses. The selection of 'blind' creatures in caves is quite remarkable and includes fish, crayfish, shrimp, and even salamanders. Most of these blind species are also colorless, appearing white or clear when brought out to the light.