

Spelunker leads team to find lost teen-agers

By The Associated Press

GALENA, Mo. — A spelunker who wrote a manual on how to find people lost in caves finally took part in his first rescue, leading a team that found two teen-agers just as searchers were beginning to fear the boys were in serious trouble.

Bruce Herschend, who has been a cave explorer for 20 years, and the team he formed nine years ago found two 16-year-old boys who had been stranded in a cave for about seven hours Sunday.

"For what they had been through, they were in extremely good condition," said Herschend. "The good thing was, they were very calm."

The Stone County Sheriff's Department refused to release the names of the two boys, saying they could face trespassing charges in juvenile court. The cave was on private property near here, about 30 miles south of Springfield in southwestern Missouri.

Herschend said he did not even know the boys' names.

The two were reported missing after they failed to return from a Sunday afternoon outing at Salt Peter Cave. They became stranded after their two flashlights and a lantern went out, and waited in the cool, damp cave for more than seven hours before rescuers reached them, Herschend said.

Herschend, who manages two other caves near here that are in an amusement park, was contacted by the local sheriff's department.

"Cave search and rescue is totally different from any other type of search and rescue," said Herschend, whose manual

gives tips on cave rescues.

"It's important that an expert caver is leading the team on the initial assault," he said. Searchers should be "very, very familiar and comfortable in the surroundings. If you've got the least little bit of anxiety about where you are, that distracts from the 10,000 other things that should be on your mind."

Herschend and three other experienced spelunkers entered the cave after 11 p.m. Sunday and crawled along an underground stream for 45 minutes without success.

In most cave rescues, the victims are found within that time, Herschend said. Worried, he sent one of the initial team back to form another search team and set up an aid station within the cave.

But soon after he took those steps, the boys were found waiting calmly for help at a point where the fairly simple passage became more complicated, Herschend said.

"They went an incredibly long distance, much further than we expected," Herschend said. "The intrigue and interest in the cave has a way of luring people on beyond what their common sense should allow them."

Herschend estimated that the two had crawled four miles into the cave, but said he could not be sure. "It's hard to tell how far you've gone when you're crawling on your belly through mud," he said.

Herschend said he began exploring caves as a child, and became interested in cave rescues when four cave explorers died after becoming stranded in another southern Missouri cave 11 years ago.

When he learned later

that most of the members of the first rescue team had left the area, he turned to fellow explorers and formed his own team.

"Luckily, we're not needed very often," he said. "We prepared ourselves long ago, and it's just not the kind of thing you forget."

Herschend said he has been called on in the past when people have been believed lost in caves.

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