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### Researchers Study New Mexico, Mars

From: **Steven L. Wilson Sr** <[Ndunlks@aol.com](mailto:Ndunlks@aol.com)>  
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Subject: Researchers Study New Mexico, Mars

Researchers Study New Mexico, Mars

.c The Associated Press

By CHAKA FERGUSON

CARLSBAD, N.M. (AP) -- Deep in the subterranean reaches of the Spider Cave, there is little to sustain life. No sunlight, little water and few nutrients make this one of the most hostile environments in the world.

Yet somehow, scientists have found microscopic creatures dwelling in the eternal darkness. By probing the nooks and crannies of the Spider Cave, they hope to answer a question for the ages: Is there life on Mars?

NASA planetary scientists are eager to review the findings.

"The work is very relevant to Mars because we know the surface of Mars is as dead as a doornail and any life there -- if it exists -- would live underground," said Chris McKay, a planetary scientist at NASA's Ames Research Center in Moffett Field, Calif.

Spider Cave, in Carlsbad Caverns National Park, feels as if it might be on another planet. Dripping stalactites protrude from the cave's ceiling, reaching out like great tentacles. And gaping pits -- like giant moon craters -- are scattered haphazardly across the cave floor. The silence is as deep as the darkness.

The cave got its name from the thousands of daddy longlegs that once inhabited its entrance.

Caves are isolated ecosystems low in organic nutrients. But the microbes in the Spider Cave can survive without sunlight and thrive on the basic elements -- such as iron, manganese and sulfur -- found in the cave walls. Researchers have found similar microbes living in other remote places -- polar caps, ocean bottoms and mountain tops.

Scientists think life might be able support itself on a planet like Mars by feeding on underground chemicals, similar to the way bacteria in the Spider Cave survive, said Penelope Boston, part of a team of University of New Mexico researchers who have been studying the cave for four years.

Wearing elbow and knee pads and toting hard hats with

spotlights, scientists trek to the Spider Cave's research site by hiking down a mile-long, winding trail and over rugged terrain into a canyon. That's the easy part.

They then descend 10 feet to the first narrow opening and worm through a tight, 50-foot passage, no more than 3 feet wide and 2 feet high in some places.

``It's like being born again,'' quips geology student Justin Pearce.

After the first belly crawl, the cave opens into an intricate web of passages that run up to four miles in every direction. A marked trail keeps cavers from getting lost inside the bewildering maze.

The search for microscopic organisms may not have the appeal of the search for intelligent life, but NASA's McKay said it's just as important.

``If you look at our own planet Earth, for half of its history, life was microscopic,'' McKay said. ``It's the first step to more complicated life.''

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