

DECORAH ICE CAVE STATE PRESERVE

Directions to the cave once you are in Decorah: If turning off of College Drive onto the west end of Quarry Street/Ice Cave Road, follow the road a short ways until you cross a small bridge—to your left is Dunning’s Spring Park (another popular place to visit), and to your right will be a parking area. Park your car, and continue up the road by foot for about ½ mile. If you enter from the east end of Quarry Street/Ice Cave Road, Ice Cave is only a ¼ mile up the road. Park your car in the parking area by the Upper Iowa River, which is also close to the entrance of Palisades Park (another favorite of visitors).

Decorah Ice Cave is open to the public as an “enter at your own risk” attraction, meaning there is no supervision, admission cost, or set hours to visit. Ironically, summer and early fall are when the ice walls are the thickest. Visits in the winter time are not recommended. Minor children must be accompanied by an adult, and a good flashlight is recommended. At most, you may only go into the cave 60 feet; adults will find that they will have to turn sideways and duck their head in some places. Though the cave extends farther back, in the late 90’s the DNR Geological Survey Bureau required a permanent barrier be installed to keep visitors from that part of the cave where they determined some rock movement. The City of Decorah is not responsible for accident or injury and the sign at the entrance warns that the trail in the cave is slippery when ice is present and to beware of overhead falling rock.

Decorah Ice Cave is located beneath a south-facing wooded bluff of Ordovician-age Galena Group limestones exposed along the valley of the Upper Iowa River. Believed to be the largest known ice cave in eastern North America, this feature is unique for the unusual deposits of ice which coat its walls. The cave passage follows a prominent vertical fracture through the limestone, enlarged by the slipping of large rock blocks downslope.

Ice formation is caused by the sinking of cold air into the cave during winter along a network of crevices which extend back into the uplands north of the bluff. The air drainage cools the surrounding rock to temperatures well below freezing. Ice build-up occurs with the spring thaw when surface water seeps into the cave and is frozen by contact with the cold rock walls and entrapped cold air. Ice begins to accumulate in March, reaches a maximum thickness of 8 to 10 inches by June, and remains until August or September. The cave has an interesting history of scientific investigation and was shown as a commercial enterprise from 1929 until 1941.