

Slow, Steady Work

"Lint pickers follow me," park official Gretchen Baker says to the rest.

Park workers explain the rules: Don't touch anything without gloves. Oils from human skin can alter the growth of the delicate formations, already slow at 1-inch a century. And no food. One dropped crumb could cause an explosion of bacteria and affect the cave's formations.

Baker's group starts slowly, nervous about touching the rock. The work often requires a magnifying glass and tweezers when the lint sticks to rocks like cobwebs.

Poer, who is from California, began caving in 2001. She asked: "How clean do I need to make this?"

"Just the major stuff," Baker says.

"I just don't know where to stop," Poer says.

As she brushes off the lint, the formations seem to come alive. No longer a dull bone color, many seem to sparkle.