

Karst Vocabulary

Karst: a limestone or dolomite region characterized by caves, springs, losing streams, and sinkholes.

Cave (in karst terrain): an underground cavity created when limestone or dolomite rock is dissolved by weakly acidic rainwater. This creates cracks, crevices, and conduits (water-filled voids) that enlarge into caves. Caves can store large groundwater reservoirs.

Spring: flowing water where an underground stream intersects the land's surface. Spring discharge is measured in cubic feet per second (ft³/sec) for larger springs or gallons per minute (gpm) for smaller ones. Springs are classified by magnitude; first magnitude springs have a discharge 100 (ft³/sec) or greater.

Losing stream: a stream in which the flow goes directly underground; it doesn't hold water except briefly after heavy rains.

Sinkhole: a hole in the ground where soil has subsided; sometimes these form when a cave roof collapses. Sinkholes come in all shapes and sizes, from gentle swales, to steep cones, or giant craters.

Karst groundwater circulation consists of three phases: recharge, where it enters the ground; storage, while underground; and discharge, where stored water resurfaces aboveground.

Diffuse recharge occurs when rainwater slowly soaks from the land's surface to underground storage over a large area in a diffuse manner.

Discreet recharge happens when rainwater goes into underground storage quickly, entering in a concentrated area, such as through a losing stream or sinkhole.

Recharge area: the area that contributes water to a spring.

Aquifer: a geologic formation that holds water and is capable of yielding an economically significant volume of water. Aquifers can store diffuse and discrete recharge; diffuse is the primary water source.

Interbasin transfer: a situation in which the recharge area for a spring crosses the divide between two watersheds. Sometimes it's called "water piracy," because one basin "steals" water from another.

Natural bridge or **natural arch:** a rock formation with a tunnel running underneath it; typically it's formed when some of the rock over and around a cave is eroded away or falls in.

Sink basin: a depression where there is no surface stream to carry away runoff, and rainwater has nowhere to go except directly underground. These can cover hundreds or even thousands of acres.

Swallow hole: the end point of a flowing stream where it vanishes underground.

Karst window: a feature in which an underground stream is visible from the surface, such as is sometimes seen through a sinkhole.

Resurgence: this karst feature can be either a sinkhole or a spring, depending on rainfall and groundwater saturation. Some are dry, rocky sinkholes in most conditions, but when underground passages fill with rainwater, they serve as an outlet for the excess.

Sinkhole pond: a sinkhole that has naturally become plugged with sediment so that it holds water.