

Photos of the Week

by **The Boston Globe**



WEEK OF DEC. 31-JAN. 6, 2005

'Chronic sign stealer'

Shawn Dufour, a graphic artist from Whitman who sells photos online from his urban explorations around Massachusetts, displayed some of his spoils on a shed behind his home. ▶ [Story](#)

(Globe Staff Photo / Justine Hunt)

- ▶ [See past photos of the week](#)
- ▶ [Buy Globe photos](#)

[E-mail to a friend](#) | [Close window](#)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 ◀ Previous Next ▶

WANTED

Easy digital photo sharing to bring your family closer.



shutterfly
share the love





[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Local](#) > [Mass.](#)



Shawn Dufour, a graphic artist from Whitman who sells photos online from his urban explorations around Massachusetts, displayed some of his spoils on a shed behind his home. "I'm a chronic sign stealer," he said. (Globe Staff Photo / Justine Hunt)

Getting caught in the past

The Boston Globe

Urban spelunkers find rewards worth risks

By **Donovan Slack, Globe Staff** | January 3, 2005

It seemed the perfect day for a little urban spelunking -- exploring abandoned buildings or, in this case, a construction site, for signs of times gone by.

But as the cold, stiff mud closed in around Steve LaRochelle's head Saturday, he didn't have time to think about the discarded pottery he had hoped to find at the Lowell construction site. Instead, he concentrated on jiggling his head back and forth, making a little pocket in the collapsed earth to breathe.

"I heard movement, I heard shoveling, so that was a good sign," recalled LaRochelle, nursing a cracked shoulder blade and a few bumps and bruises at home yesterday in Dracut.

It was 30 minutes before rescue workers freed him from the mud, which had collapsed on his 6-foot frame while

TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION](#)
- [SINGLE-PAGE FORMAT](#)
- [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
- [TOP E-MAILED ARTICLES](#)

SEARCH GLOBE ARCHIVES

- Today (free)
- Yesterday (free)
- Past 30 days
- Last 12 months

[Advanced search](#)



SPONSORED LINKS



[Free Project Management Seminar](#)



[Unlimited Phone Calls to US & Canada \\$24.99/mo](#)



[Need help with a tax filing issue? Click Here.](#)



[Find great offers from your Boston Area Audi Dealers](#)



[Protect Your Vehicle with LoJack. Click Here](#)

YOU ASKED FOR IT... YOU GOT IT!
2-WEEK RETURN ENGAGEMENT - TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE!

BOB AMARAL **ANDY TAYLOR**

THE PRODUCERS
 the new MEL BROOKS musical



FEB 22 - MAR 6 · THE COLONIAL THEATRE

click here for tickets!

LEXUS BROADWAY IN BOSTON | Legi | T-Mobile | CITIZENS BANK

he and two friends foraged for urban artifacts Saturday at the East Merrimack Street site.

LaRochelle is part of a growing subculture in New England of urban spelunkers, a term adopted from cave exploration. It is usually an illegal pastime, requiring the breach of trespassing laws, but the practice has exploded in popularity in recent years, fueled by the region's abundance of defunct institutions, abandoned factories, and rich history.

Spelunkers say new websites chronicling expeditions in the region came online during the past year at the rate of two or more per month, far

more rapidly than the one or two per year of the previous decade.

"I think the young kids found a hobby and realized it's the latest cool and hip thing to do," said John Gray, who last year published "Abandoned Asylums of New England: a photographic journey," chronicling many of his expeditions during the past decade.

But there also are bankers and pharmacy technicians, convenience store clerks and advertising executives. Some explore abandoned subway tunnels, others steam pipes, police stations, or schools.

They do it for various reasons -- some for the rush of going where no one is supposed to go and others for unique finds that offer clues to past inhabitants.

For many, it is an adolescent compulsion they never grew out of, like the urge to check out a purportedly haunted house at the end of the block, said 34-year-old Shawn Dufour, a graphic artist from Whitman who specializes in subway tunnel exploration.

"I started out doing it when I was on my BMX bicycle," said Dufour, who sells photos online from expeditions at the Armstrong Cork Co. in Braintree, a farmhouse in Westminster, and a now-demolished mill in Fitchburg.

Urban spelunkers follow a loosely held set of ethics, according to the self-styled Institute of Urban Speleologic Studies & Archeology: "Take only pictures, leave only footprints."

And explorers have adopted their own jargon, catalogued on another website, Infiltration.org. "CIHY" is short for "Can I help you?" -- a query frequently fielded by urban explorers. [Continued...](#)

1 [2](#) [Next ▶](#)

 [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)  [SINGLE-PAGE FORMAT](#)  [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)

Get up to **\$40** of **FREE** groceries with
Globe home delivery at 50% off!

[CLICK HERE](#)



Find Deals in Your Favorite Cities!

GO!

hotels.com
BEST PRICES. BEST PLACES. GUARANTEED.®

*see website for details

boston.com News

your connection to **The Boston Globe**

Home **News** A&E Business Sports Travel Your Life Cars Jobs Personals Real Estate

Today's Globe Politics Opinion Magazine Education Science NECN Special reports Obituaries

Traffic | Weather

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Local](#) > [Mass.](#)



Shawn Dufour, a graphic artist from Whitman who sells photos online from his urban explorations around Massachusetts, displayed some of his spoils on a shed behind his home. "I'm a chronic sign stealer," he said. (Globe Staff Photo / Justine Hunt)

Getting caught in the past

The Boston Globe

January 3, 2005

Page 2 of 2 -- Practitioners even had conventions last year, according to Infiltration.org. Roughly 65 explorers from across North America met in Toronto in June, under the guise "Office Products Expo." In July, a smaller group met in Rhinebeck, N.Y., and called their meeting NEOPEX, or North East Office Products Expo.

Urban spelunking is innately secretive, since many practitioners explore abandoned sites without permission, sneaking onto premises and ducking security guards and police. One online forum based in Rhode Island, InsaneBunkers, features advice for novice spelunkers, such as, "As long as you look like you belong there, no one questions you."

The same posting advises explorers to wear black at night, but to dress age-appropriately.

A key component to the practice is chronicling expeditions so they can be shared with other explorers, said one spelunker, who identified himself by e-mail only as Matt Fallout. For some it is posting

TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION](#)
- [SINGLE-PAGE FORMAT](#)
- [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
- [TOP E-MAILED ARTICLES](#)

SEARCH GLOBE ARCHIVES

- Today (free)
- Yesterday (free)
- Past 30 days
- Last 12 months

[Advanced search](#)



SPONSORED LINKS



[Free Project Management Seminar](#)



[Unlimited Phone Calls to US & Canada \\$24.99/mo](#)



[Need help with a tax filing issue? Click Here.](#)



[Find great offers from your Boston Area Audi Dealers](#)



[Protect Your Vehicle with LoJack. Click Here](#)

photographs online, for others it is writing a weblog of sorts about the adventures, and for others it is collecting small souvenirs.

"I'm a chronic sign stealer," said Dufour, who displays his spoils around his home and on a shed out back.

LaRochelle, the Dracut man buried in mud Saturday, said he is an amateur urban spelunker at best, with only one year under his belt, though he has collected the odd chipped teapot and displays his finds on a shelf in his living room.

"It's sort of like fishing," said LaRochelle, 41, a senior vice president and chief commercial real estate lender at Lowell-based Enterprise Bank and Trust Co. "It's mostly a waste of time, but a chance to get some fresh air."

He says he likes to scour the 3- or 4-foot-wide dirt troughs -- like the one that collapsed on him Saturday -- between newly poured foundations and the craters dug to house them. His two friends were able to free his head before rescue workers arrived to pull him out.

As scary as the experience was, LaRochelle said he may not be done spelunking. "I'm just very opportunistic," he said. "If you see stuff, you check it out."

Donovan Slack can be reached at dslack@globe.com ■

© Copyright 2005 Globe Newspaper Company.

[▶ More News](#)

 [50% off Globe home delivery. Order today!](#)

[◀ Previous](#) [1](#) [2](#)

 [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)  [SINGLE-PAGE FORMAT](#)  [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)

[feedback](#) | [help](#) | [site map](#) | [globe archives](#) | [rss](#)

© 2004 The New York Times Company

Home delivery for as little as **\$1.75** a week!

