

# CAVES

The Journal of the Australian Speleological Federation Inc.

# AUSTRALIA



**SPECIAL ISSUE: WOMEN IN CAVING**

No. 215 • MARCH 2021



# COMING EVENTS



COVID-19 is still disrupting international travel and events. Many events are now providing virtual attendance options. Information on UIS-sanctioned events can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/y7rgb8ah>

Don't forget that 2021 is the International Year of Caves and Karst. You can find more information about what's going on and what you can do to help the cause at <http://iycck2021.org/>

FILM SCREENING

## ADAPTED TO THE DARK

### Rhaphidophoridae



Join us for the worldwide premiere of a short documentary on Australia's enigmatic cave crickets.

**6 March 2021, 7:00pm (AEDT)**

Special online screening for the Australian launch of the International Year of Caves and Karst 2021, followed by live Q&A with the director

Register now: <https://bit.ly/3oiDC3X>

Produced & directed by Sil Iannello  
Filmed & edited by Scott Lewis Blue Starling Films  
Sound recording & music design by Dr. Jan Bruggemeier  
Graphic design by Kelly Eljdenberg Poco People and Sam Lyne

We gratefully acknowledge funding support from the Australian Speleological Federation's Karst Conservation Fund.



## Save the Date!

ASF Conference **17th to 21st April 2022**, Ceduna SA

Welcome BBQ 16th April

Field trips **22nd April to 1st May**,  
exploring the caves of the Nullarbor

**Register now**

for updates: [www.asfconference2022.com](http://www.asfconference2022.com)



## CAVES AUSTRALIA

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### Issue Dates

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### Change of address

Notify us immediately of any address changes to ensure delivery of your *Caves Australia*.

# Caves Australia

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ASF

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Cover: Sixteen of the contributors to this special edition, *Women in Caving*. Various photographers.

## ASF Executive

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# WANTED

**ARTICLES FOR CAVES AUSTRALIA!**

Whether caving, cave diving or generally just caving, *Caves Australia* readers are interested in YOUR story. It is only with YOUR contribution that we can produce a quality magazine for all to enjoy. For writing and style guidelines, contact the Editor or Production Manager.

# President's Report

**IT IS a wonderful coincidence that my first President's Report is for this special edition celebrating the achievements of some of our amazing female cavers.**

It would be great to get to the point where special editions are not needed, where half the regular content in *Caves Australia* is written by women and where half of the ASF's volunteers are also women. So many female cavers go to amazing places and are achieving great things in the sport, in research and in conservation. We would love to hear more of your stories!

Many women have made significant contributions to the ASF and to caving in Australia; unfortunately, this report is not long enough to list them all.

The ASF Edie Smith Award is named after one of Australia's greatest cavers, who was a pioneer of exploration in Tasmania and NSW, the first life member of TCC and the first female president of an Australian caving club (CSS; *Australian Caver* 154). This prestigious award recognises outstanding contributions to speleology over an extended timeframe and has been awarded to three women so far: Aola Richards, Julia James and Grace Matts. The latter two have also become Fellows of the ASF, along with Susan White.

Jay Anderson was the first female President of the ASF from 2005-2007, and now in 2021, I am only the second. Alisa Harper was the first woman on the executive in 1971 in a secretarial role.

However, it wasn't until 1992 when Clare Buswell stepped up to become a Vice President that the ASF has consistently had at least one woman on the Executive, and parity was first achieved in the early 2000s.

The record for the longest time volunteering on the Executive goes by far to Grace Matts with 20 consecutive years! Grace's phenomenal dedication as Treasurer achieved an increase in the financial reserves of the Federation from being marginal to the comfortable position it is in today.

Susan White has also made a long-stand-



BRAND EVANS

ing and productive contribution to the ASF being on the board of Helictite for over 20 years, as well as concurrently chairing the Publications Commission for 15 of those years.

Of the ASF's 17 Commissions & Committees, four are currently chaired by women: Susan White for Helictite, Cathi Humphry-Hood as Library Commissioner, Sil Iannello for Social Media and Clare Buswell for Conservation. Also, the highly successful Cave Animal of the Year has been initiated and organised by Cathie Plowman.

Many others contribute formally and informally within the Commissions. Thank you all!

Sporting culture has certainly changed since the ASF began in 1956 with ever increasing numbers of women participating in caving. I look forward to seeing more of these women also taking on leadership and mentoring roles in the future and sharing their wealth of experience within clubs and the ASF.

(Thank you to Bob Kershaw for compiling the ASF's history and making this report possible)



# Women in Caving

## Sil Iannello

### Guest Editor



*Sil Iannello in Tailender, Mole Creek, Tasmania*

### **N**OW more than ever, let's celebrate Women in Caving!

How humbling it is to be able to produce a collection of stories which capture the true essence and passion of caving. In this issue of *Caves Australia*, we celebrate Women in Caving and showcase their caving journeys. The issue features a hand-selected bunch of fantastic women from across Australia, many of whom you will know and may have shared caving moments and experiences with. Their stories of how they fell in love with caves and caving will resonate with you, and hopefully inspire more women to take up caving — an empowering activity for women regardless of age, fitness, or experience.

Looking back over my caving life since 2009, I know I am a relative newcomer compared to many inspirational women who have been caving before me, some for more than 50 years. I have come to learn how integral women are to caving, especially those who continue to take the lead in speleology: cave science, exploration, leadership, rescue, and karst conservation.

My caving journey has taken me through twists and turns (pardon the pun) and has led me to explore, survey and research caves and their fauna.

I've recently had the opportunity to direct and produce a short documentary film about the fascinating Cave Cricket. Caving has also allowed me to form lasting friend-

ships with some great people, but most of all, caving has shaped my life. I am glad I pursued my instincts when I nudged a cave guide at Jenolan Caves many moons ago to ask the question 'What is a caver?'

For more on my caving journey you can tune into the Caving Podcast

<https://tinyurl.com/yxn74fsn>

I would like to thank all the women who have contributed to this fantastic issue and send a message to all future women cavers — I hope this edition inspires you to pursue caving and stick with it to the very end. For more on Women Cavers of Australia and their caving journeys go to [fussi.caves.org.au/newsletters.php](https://fussi.caves.org.au/newsletters.php)

Let's celebrate!

## Women in Caving Lyndsey Gray

**M**Y FIRST caving trip was to Wee Jasper with the Sydney Bush Walkers, in the late 1950s; this adventure motivated me to join the Sydney Speleological Society (SSS) in 1958 at the young age of 16.

At that time there were many social and other projects being pursued by members of that club. I was interested in the more serious exploration of caves and, in due course, participated in helping Peter Wellings with his cave detection device, assisting Neville Michie when he was developing his telephone system and helping Ben Nurse with surveying in Mammoth Cave within the Jenolan System in NSW.

Later, I was fortunate to help Ben Nurse again, with his Efflux project at Bungonia and I was involved in the SSS 1972 campaign to stop the Bungonia Gorge from damage by mining and dumping of subsequent waste.

We were, unfortunately, unsuccessful in preventing the extension of the quarry into the gorge to the northern edge of the slot canyon.

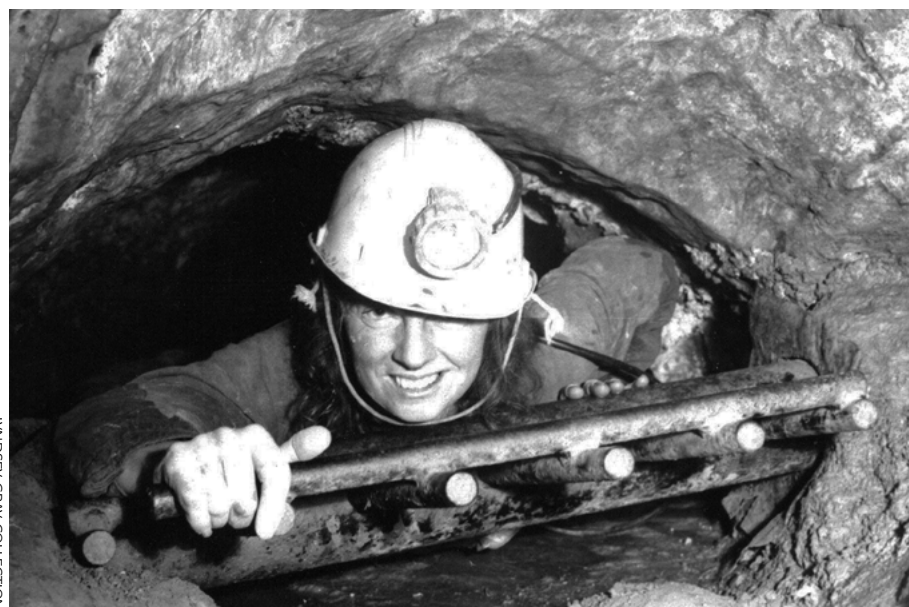
As a committee member of SSS I introduced a system where, to gain membership of the club, the prospective member had to put forward and complete a project. To participate in this, my project was 'Comparison Photography at Colong Caves,' documenting the damage done to formations over the years.

I was on the committee for many years, occupying many positions including editor of their publications.

I continued being a member of SSS until 1976 when I left NSW for another type of adventure: eighteen months of overseas travel. While overseas I caved with members of the Cave and Crag Club (Derbyshire UK) and the South Wales Caving Club (UK).

Visiting the continent for the following seven months, I ventured into the many tourist caves in France and Yugoslavia.

Upon returning to Australia in 1978, I decided to relocate to Tasmania and



LYNDESE GRAY COLLECTION

*Caving in NSW in the 1970s*

secured work at Savage River, an iron ore mining town on the West Coast.

I immediately joined the newly formed State Emergency Service and was a member of that unit until it closed down in 1996.

While I was at Savage River, a group of fellow outdoor types joined forces to bush walk, explore old mines and participate in recreational caving at Mole Creek.

In 1988 our group was contacted by APPM Forests management, who were working in the Mt Cripps area. While assessing the trees for logging they came across various holes and caves, so work was stopped and our 'small band of cavers' was asked to investigate these caves. We then formed the caving entity Savage River Caving Club Inc.

The wilderness and caves at Mt Cripps presented the opportunity of a lifetime — a new limestone area, awkward to get into and not previously explored.

The area is the only polygonal karst in Australia with an untouched temperate rainforest cover. Being older and wiser in life I decided that, with this unique situation in front of us, we should treat the area with respect.

The club decided to thoroughly explore the area, to position each cave, and to tag, survey and photograph all the findings.

In those days the GPS, digital camera and Disto had not been invented. Henry Shannon took on the job of surface surveying and when he left to move to Launceston I took over this job.

With my obsession for recording and documentation I was in my element working in the Mt Cripps area. With evidence of karst unique in the surrounding environment we were able to save the area from logging.

The club managed to have the area included in the Reynolds Falls Nature Recreation Area and the club has, up to present day, diverted any efforts to mine the limestone.

I am passionate to record Mt Cripps as an ecosystem with all that it entails. Our club members and visitors have had their eyes opened as to what is surrounding them.

I have invited various experts in their fields to visit the area to find, identify and document findings. We now have a comprehensive list not only of caves, but flora,



## JANICE MARCH

fauna, fungi, ferns, mosses and liverworts, birds, bones and fossils.

We have had megafauna finds in three of our caves; two different species of giant kangaroos and one giant wallaby. These finds are attributed to Stephen Blanden, Paul Darby and Deb Hunter. These fossils have been officially identified by palaeontologists who we invited to visit and confirm the findings.

### *Savage River Caving Club Journal: Speleopod*

I started to produce our Savage River Caving Club journal called *Speleopod* back in August 1990 and initially produced six issues. I offered to be editor again in 1999 and I remain in this position to the present day. I have produced 61 issues to date.

Other publications include:

■ 1996 with David Heap published: *Beyond*

*The Light, the Caves and Karst of Mt. Cripps*

■ 2007 with Paul Darby published *Beyond The Light, the Caves and Karst of Mt. Cripps, Eleven Years On.*

■ 2018 with Paul Darby published *Beyond The Light, the Caves and Karst of Mt. Cripps, 30 Years of Exploration*

I have produced three record books: *A decade of Caving, XV Years and then Some* and *A Record of Caving, 25 years*. I was instrumental in starting and then contributing to a series of publications titled *Tasmania Underground: Wilson River, Keith River and Eugenana*.

Over the years at Mt Cripps I have jointly found nine caves, 15 karst features and four landmarks, and surveyed 25 caves and one karst feature. With the surface surveying I have been involved with surveying some 37 km using a Suunto sighting compass, an

inclinometer and a 30 m tape.

Over the past 62 years of caving, I feel privileged to having seen much of Tasmania's natural beauty not only above ground, but below ground. Our cave systems are remarkable, and Mt Cripps stands alone in its uniqueness.

Although I have slowed down — age catches up with one — I am persisting with my recording and documentation on behalf of the Savage River Caving Club and loving it.

I have been a passionate member of this club for over 32 years, and I was awarded Life Membership in 2018. To this day our members are still exploring and finding caves at Mt Cripps and, health willing, I will be there.

*Editor's note:* The publications mentioned are available from the author, please contact Savage River Caving Club for details.

## Women in Caving Janice March

**‘CAVING has shaped my life in more ways than I care to admit.’**

After an Easter trip to Mt Etna while studying dentistry at the University of Queensland, I was pretty much hooked on caving.

I soon organised the next trip there with a different group from my UQ bushwalking club.

A bushwalking trip to Tasmania in 1992 proved to be life-changing after I contacted the ASF conference convenor and became involved with the post conference trips at Mole Creek where I met my husband Andrew.

While staying in Launceston for a day after that, I met my future employer and now business partner.

A week after moving to Launceston for this first job, I attended a meeting of the Northern Caverneers and spent the next few years regularly caving at Mole Creek and occasionally down south pushing my skills, buying better gear, learning how boring a surveying trip can be and how I liked to push tight spaces.

I had a ten-year break from caving while the children were young except for a yearly kid trip to easy caves — one child loved it, one didn't, but they are both outdoorsy which is the main thing.

In about 2010 I started caving again and



BEN LOVETT

*Paragon Vaults, Herberts Pot, Tasmania 2020*

there were a few new faces in the club to spice it up a bit. In 2013, the Southern Tasmanian Caverneers arranged a day of cave survey training after it was realised that there were very few digital maps of Mole Creek caves. Having always been interested in maps, I was hooked again.

Over several days in Kubla Khan and Genghis Khan caves, I honed my in-cave sketching skills and learned a fair bit about

that side of the surveying process.

It was far from boring and gave me another reason to go caving. My own project in a small multi-level cave called Hailie Selassie wasn't going so well, though.

I was entering all the data in the cave survey program Compass and getting some lovely line surveys on the screen that looked good when spun around, all multicoloured, but I just couldn't get the motivation to

learn how to use the Inkscape program that I needed to digitise the sketch in layers. The instructions looked so detailed, and my sketches were a mess after all the morphing and merging I'd done to them on Compass.

I had plenty of caving related distractions to blame for my procrastination. Helping with the organisation of the International Congress of Speleology for about three years and then the Devonport ASF Conference for another two years took up most of the spare time that I was willing to spend looking at a computer.

I was grateful for all the amazing people

I met and caving things I learnt from being involved with these two events, and I'd recommend at least attending caving conferences to everyone because it expands your knowledge and provides you with new contacts around the nation or the world, to possibly go caving with in the future.

The cartography salon at the ICS was an eye-opener for me.

I digress. Thankfully I was stuck at home for four weeks in April 2020 and the opportunity to learn to digitise a cave map was staring me in the face, so I took it. With help from other Tasmanian cavers more

advanced than me in their experience of computer drawing programs, I have mastered the Inkscape program enough to get a cave map ready and published. The online tutorials are really useful and there is still a lot more I could learn, but I'm feeling good and it's a useful skill that might see me caving in some areas further afield in the future.

**PS:** My most memorable trips are the most epic ones: The far end of Herberts Pot, Mini-Martin/Skyhook Pot, Arrakis. And I do enjoy the social atmosphere of a big southern cave search and rescue practice.

## Women in Caving

# Janine McKinnon

**C**AVING has been a big part of my life for most of the 40 years that I have been pursuing this less-than-mainstream activity.

It has shaped who I have become to a significant degree. I think. It has certainly given me a bag of skills I would have struggled to find elsewhere.

It has given me friendships and a sense of community. It has also required me to toughen up mentally, physically and socially, particularly in the early days.

### WHERE MY CAVING LIFE STARTED.

I do not come from a caving or outdoorsy background. I had to discover the wonderful world of outdoor pursuits myself. These weren't largely advertised or known about in the early 1970s as I reached university age. I did know about scuba diving from those TV shows of the 1960s, like *Seahunt* with Lloyd Bridges.

I wanted to scuba dive. So I did a course when I was 18 years old. What has this to do with caving, you wonder? Well, I had no idea caving existed, but after a couple of years of ocean diving, I discovered cave diving.

I and a couple of diving mates trained ourselves and started diving a few sumps in NSW. We went to SA and did the Cave Divers Association of Australia test to be certified as cave divers.

Then I discovered that caves have dry bits! I did a trip or two with NUCC (I think it was) as I was living in Canberra at the time and soon after, in 1979, I moved to Sydney and joined HCG, and later SUSS. My caving life had started.



JANINE MCKINNON COLLECTION

Coolamon Plains NSW, 1979

These were early SRT days and we all trained together, teaching ourselves how to do it, with mixed results. It worked well enough though, we thought. It wasn't that hard, as rebelay and tyroleans didn't exist yet and passing knots was as technically tricky as it got. Mind you, cowstails hadn't been invented yet, so that added an extra dimension of excitement on some pitch-heads.

Our caving was all sport caving. It was fun, and personally challenging. They were a great bunch of people who became friends.

I skied with them in winter, canyoned, bushwalked, and even picked up a husband along the way.

This might be a good point to touch on gender issues. After all, it was the 1970s and

beginning of the 1980s I am talking about here. Not exactly times of male/female social enlightenment.

I found my world of work a mixed bag of patronisation, sexism, some misogyny, a little sexual harassment, and some equality, and I was in a better environment than most of the female workforce found themselves in.

Caving was a breath of fresh air in comparison. Yes, the girls with big breasts got ogled a lot, and a few inappropriate comments were thrown our way from time to time, but it was pretty innocuous for the times, really.

You have to realise that the age of almost all the cavers was late teens to late 20s. Most retired from caving by their early 30s back then. It was a young person's (almost all





ADAM HOOPER

Rigging in Devils Pot, Mole Creek, Tasmania 2019

male) world. That was my experience, at least.

So I saw any sexist stuff thrown my way as immaturity rather than the intentional sexism I found elsewhere in the community. I found I was treated equally by all the guys I caved and did these other activities with. If I could do the job, then that's all that mattered.

Then Ric and I moved to Tasmania in 1981 and I had a big culture shock. I won't dwell on it but in the interests of honesty here I have to say that the misogyny I found (and I was the only regularly caving female) was more than unpleasant. It wasn't all the cavers of course — we had some wonderful caving buddies — but it was pervasive and not subtle. Still, battles have to be fought by someone. Eventually the culture changed and today it is irrelevant what sex you are. On a lot of trips I am the only female and I can't say I notice the fact.

There are so many avenues one can run down in the world of karst and caves. Sport caving, photography, exploration,

surveying, various scientific areas, training new cavers. The list goes on. I have been involved in many of these over the years.

I have been STC training officer at times. I like training new cavers, particularly in SRT. When you see someone get it right it is very rewarding, especially if you then go vertical caving with them regularly and don't have to wait hours as they prusik inefficiently up the pitches because they can do it well and have a well-tuned rig!

I have been involved in exploration projects, both wet and dry caving, and I have done a lot of surveying over the years. For many of the classic Tassie caves I have been on the survey team.

I like instruments. I used to be quite good with the Suunto compass and clino, but the new DistoX2 makes instruments a breeze. No more lying in the stream in 6°C water trying to get a shot along the passage. I rarely do book, only on solo cave dive surveys or short caves, as I am abysmally terrible at sketching. I totally lack the gene to draw. Back in the day the book person

also had to draft the map by hand and it really required someone with great skill.

Illustrator and Inkscape have made map-making available to all us lesser artistic types, so for the last 15-odd years, I have been able to produce maps digitally. Mind you, there are still levels of skill in this and my maps are accurate and serviceable but lack the artistic beauty of some others I have seen. I'll keep trying.

Exploration is very exciting and a major buzz when you actually find something significant. From my experience, though, a lot of time is spent grovelling in small, unpleasant places hoping for the big win. Sump diving for exploration is just more of the same but more so. The grovelling is grottier (in 6-8°C water in Tasmania) but the wins equally more exciting, I find. To surface in a chamber no-one else has seen (or is probably likely to) is an amazing feeling: a combination for me of excitement and trepidation — being alone beyond where anyone can reach you.

I have had to kiss a lot of frogs for that odd princess, though. I call myself 'Queen of the 30 m sumps' because I have spent a lot of time diving blind in small, dirty sumps that choke off after 30 m. The next one might go through... Optimism is definitely a requirement.

I did have a win in D'Entrecasteaux Passage in Exit Cave a few years back, around 2012 and 2014. Multiple dives over several trips and a couple of years resulted in about 1 km of new cave passage (sump and 'dry' cave). That was hard work, particularly the solo dives and exploration beyond the sumps, but very rewarding. I would be very happy to find something like that again. I gave a bit of an overview of those trips in some *Caves Australia* articles.

I am still actively caving and doing multi-pitch vertical caves. Carrying heavy cave packs with lots of rope is becoming harder now, though. I have had to start playing the 'pathetic old woman' card a bit in that respect. Unfortunately, in these egalitarian days, it doesn't work as well as I would hope.

I want to keep vertical caving as long as I can, so very soon bribery might need to be employed when heavy gear is being distributed. Some videos of different trips can be found for anyone interested here: <https://tinyurl.com/y9fjsodk>

Caving has given me so much. I sometimes wonder how differently my life would have gone if I had never discovered it. I doubt it would have been an improved version of a life. I expect caving to be a part of my life to the end, eventually the armchair variety. There is a lot you can contribute to the caving world without leaving your house.



## Women in Caving Jenny Whitby



GARY WHITBY

*The Three Amigos, Lechuguilla Cave, New Mexico, USA*

**YEARS BACK, my parents had honeymooned in the Blue Mountains and went to Jenolan Caves.**

They were given a book, *Blue Mountains and the Jenolan Caves: A Camera Study* written by Frank Hurley. I always remember being intrigued by the cave photos in this book as a child. This is where my fascination with caves was ignited. This book now proudly sits in my cave library collection today. My first ever visit to a cave was on a family trip when I was about eight years old. I went into the Lucas Cave at Jenolan, and still have the souvenir sew-on patch to

prove it! I remember more about the drive into Jenolan; there were 'sound horn' signs on the blind corners of the precipitous drops of the Five Mile Road which is carved into the hillside. My brother and I were scared, sitting silently in the back, fearing death should a car come at the same time we rounded a bend. Now that I'm a grown up, I love that drive into Jenolan.

People often ask me how I got into caving, well the answer was because we went white water rafting. Huh? When collecting a photo after a commercial white-water rafting trip down the Tully River south

of Cairns, we saw a flyer for a newly started adventure caving company, and we thought, 'Let's give that a go.' The trip was to some wild caves in Chillagoe. As it turned out, my husband Gary and I were their first customers and we were instantly bitten by the caving bug.

Once home, back in NSW, we then sought out information about caves and found a caving club and have never looked back.

Before I got into caving, I had been to tourist caves in Australia, China, New Zealand, USA and UK. Whether it be running







GARY WHITBY

*The 2002 expedition, Lechuguilla Cave, New Mexico, USA*

a beginners' trip, or participating in a recreational, survey or photographic trip, caving is something that I thoroughly enjoy. It's hard to pinpoint what draws one to caving and the lure of the underground. I think limestone soothes the soul. I often say caving is like being a little kid again, wanting to explore and find out what's around the next rockpile.

Then there's the sense of challenge and achievement at testing one's body and mind and being in tune with mother earth. Plus the sense of comradeship when your group returns to the surface after spending the journey together and sitting around at the end of the day talking about it, then reliving it at a slideshow at your next caving club meeting. Caving brings together people from all walks of life, and I have made many cave friends around the world.

I have been caving in every state in Australia, and also internationally. I've been on trips into five of the top ten longest caves in

the world (all from USA) being on survey/expeditions to Mammoth Cave, Jewel Cave, Wind Cave, Fisher Ridge and Lechuguilla. I have had the privilege of spending over a month of my life in Lechuguilla Cave in New Mexico, where both Gary and I have had the opportunity to join four separate eight-day trips into this amazing cave. Like the T-shirt says, Eat, Sleep, Cave — that sums up Lech; they were full-on survey exploration expeditions, long but rewarding days.

Closer to home, I have been on extended exploration and survey expeditions to Bullita NT and the Ning Bings in the Kimberley, WA. I have also arranged and participated in numerous trips to Tasmanian caves, and attended ASF conferences, and also the UIS Conference in Sydney. I was honoured to receive a Certificate of Merit at the 2013 ASF conference in Galong NSW for my contributions to speleology.

As a member of the Cave Conservancy

Hawaii and Hawaii Speleological Society, I have been a part of many exploration, survey, scientific, photographic and archaeological trips in the lava tubes (pyroducts) on the Big Island of Hawaii, annually since 2010.

These include surveying in the top four longest pyroducts in the world. My family also attended the 2016 International Vulcanospeleology Symposium in Hawaii. We had some remarkable trips in the USA in many states: California, Colorado, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, New Mexico, South Dakota, Hawaii and have attended several NSS conventions. This year would have been 20 years since my first NSS Convention and it was being held at the same place as it was 20 years ago in West Virginia, but due to COVID-19, it was held virtually this year, so I still got to attend.

Closer to home, Jenolan Caves is a second home to me, despite being a 4.25 hr drive away. I regularly lead trips there with my club, Illawarra Speleological Society. Being involved with discoveries of new cave passages at Jenolan over the years and surveying them is exciting.

The signature of first caretaker of the caves at Jenolan, Jeremiah Wilson (appointed 1867) got me interested in the history of the place, so now I am passionate about all aspects of Jenolan Caves.

I'm President of the Jenolan Caves Historical & Preservation Society and I do a lot of historical research and writing about Jenolan. I am a committee member of the Jenolan Cavers Cottage Association, but sadly our cottage burnt in the fires at Jenolan on 31st January 2019. As a member of the Jenolan Caves Survey Group I have been involved with mapping of the Jenolan show cave system. This was a great way to keep my caving hours up when I was pregnant!

My daughter's first introduction to caving was a six-hour survey trip of the Lucas Cave when she was just five weeks old. Kate is still a keen caver, now aged 11 — the next generation of female cavers.

In early 2020, the three of us travelled to the North Island of New Zealand, with some American caving friends, for a holiday which, of course, involved caving. I feel so fortunate to have arranged this trip especially now since COVID-19 changed the world in which we live. Who knows when we will be able to travel and go caving again, even within Australia or my own state, as caves in NSW National Parks are currently closed.

But even in these strange times I can still read, research, write and dream about caves and caving!



## Women in Caving

# A Tribute to Agnes Milowka

### 1981–2011: Passion, Daring, Adventure

**I**T DIDN'T take long for Ag to become hooked on blowing bubbles — after her first underwater breath she thought 'this is what I want to do with my life!'

Indeed, after that diving was at the very centre of her existence. Initially fascinated with reefs and fish, it wasn't long until the focus shifted to wrecks. Captivated not just by their sheer beauty but also by their stories and history, she went from being a keen and avid wreck diver to a maritime archaeologist and did a Graduate Diploma in Maritime Archaeology at Flinders University. Her desire to pursue untouched and pristine wrecks meant going ever deeper and having to play with more gear and gases to do so.

Ultimately though, it was caves, both wet and dry, that enthralled Ag, being most passionate about the exploration of never-before seen passage. Ag spent a year living and diving in Florida's cave country, where she got her first taste of laying line. It is a phenomenal feeling to reach a place that no other human has ever seen before and she was hooked.

Ag kept coming back to Florida and kept laying line in the caves. She laid several kilometres of line across a number of cave systems, the most significant of these being the connection from Peacock Spring to Baptizing Spring, and as a result extending the system by over 3 km.

Ag saw the far reaches of some of the most beautiful caves in the world in Australia, the US and the Bahamas. In Australia she became one of only a handful of divers to dive to the back end of Cocklebidy Cave, Australia's most notable cave dive site. In her home state of Victoria, she pushed through numerous sumps in order to discover in excess of 1500 m of dry cave passage, in what has become the deepest cave in the state.

Ag went where no person has gone before, exploring and pushing new cave



Agnes Milowka near Sump D3, Elk River

systems and bringing back images from her adventures.

She was also an underwater photographer and brought back images from her adventures and exploration. She was part of a National Geographic Team on a project to the Blue Holes of the Bahamas and worked as a stunt diver on the 3D James Cameron cave diving feature film *Sanctum*.

Tragically, Agnes passed away whilst diving in Tank Cave, South Australia, on the 27th of February 2011. At the time of her death, Ag was arguably one of the most active and elite cave divers in Australia, and her contribution to cave diving was incredible.

In recognition of Ag's achievements, The Agnes Milowka Memorial Environmental Science Award has been established by Mummu Media for underprivileged schools in the area of science, marine studies or exploration. Further to that, in May 2011,

Agnes Milowka posthumously received the Exploration Award, in recognition of the outstanding and dedicated service to the National Speleological Society Cave Diving Section.

She has also had several cave features named after her in Australia. Ag had a moving farewell ceremony in San Remo, near Phillip Island, which was attended by many hundreds of people. Ag was an extraordinary individual and is missed by everyone who knew her. However, her cave diving legacy lives on, and she will never be forgotten.

Donations to her charity are warmly welcome. For more information go to: <http://www.agnesmilowka.com/awards>

FUSSI Editor would like to thank Tom Aberdeen for providing this article based on Ag's biography, which can be read at <http://www.agnesmilowka.com/about-agnes/biography>



## Women in Caving

# Ciara Smart

**IS THERE any sport quite like caving?** A sport that combines human athleticism, teamwork and scientific meticulousness with the thrill of the purest modern form of exploration and discovery.

How could anything compare to the possibility of being the first human to lay eyes on a resplendent new chamber or to be the first to splash down a glittering stream-way passage?

Or to wallow in mud or breathtakingly cold water, performing ridiculous manoeuvres like 'roof sniffs' in the desperate hope of adding another metre, or maybe even kilometre, to a system?

I started my caving career only five years ago when I was living in Ireland. By luck I fell in with a fantastic club: Dublin City University Caving Club.

Ireland's caving scene hardened me to the cold, wet and tight side of caving. The club itself was raucous and often chaotic but very active and I travelled all over Europe caving with them across several years. Although we were frequently disorganised and often abseiled into the wrong cave or ran out of rope/hangers/food/alcohol, it was a great deal of fun and the university fully sponsored our international trips, allowing international caving on a student budget.

One of my fondest memories is driving continuously for 48 hours from Ireland to southern France, via two ferries and England, with five of us in a tiny hatchback and 500 m of rope strapped to the roof.

Back in Australia I began to transition out of the purely recreational side of caving. I gained my cave guide qualifications and



JOHN OXLEY

*North Island, New Zealand*

began teaching basic caving through the Scouts Association.

Meanwhile, I was active with Sydney University Speleological Society and I was beginning to catch the bug of exploration caving.

Add in a few exploratory trips to New Zealand, the thrill of discovering my first cave, an eye-opening trip to decorated caves in northern Tassie and I was totally, irredeemably hooked.

I've had some time off caving to focus on a significant Himalayan expedition and I now find myself in Tasmania caving with STC in an island state with unrivalled potential.

While pursuing cave projects can become an obsession, I have come to realise that you often learn as much from the people you cave with, as the cave itself.

Meanwhile, every time I head underground, I feel I am reset, emerging back into the light ready to appreciate the world anew.

I consider myself very fortunate to be so enthralled with a sport that has taken me to indescribably beautiful places all over the world with wonderful, interesting people.

I am excited about where caving will take me and about who I will cave with in the future.

## Women in Caving

# Megan Pryke

**I** WAS excited to receive an invitation from Sil Iannello (*FUSSI Newsletter* editor) to contribute to an article on the theme of women in caving.

When it came to getting words it felt a little too egotistical an act. Has this something to do with the nature of caving? Is the physical side of caving in itself a metaphor for the nature of this pursuit? Extraordinarily down to earth as you enter the realm of the underground.

I started caving in 1998 in the midst of SUSS's 50th celebrations. I have been lucky to be a caver for when travelling the world it makes you more than just a bog standard tourist.

You share something in common with an activity that is not, as a percentage of the population, that popular.

With a group of seven cavers I visited France. After being tested on our vertical skills by demonstrating one-on-one rope pick off rescue, we got into the Gouffre Berger. While this is an iconic cave, being the first cave to be proven to be one kilometre deep, due to rain risk we did the first half kilometre down. In the US, Alan and I went canyoning one year. We hooked up with a group of cavers. Using our SRT kit we did a few canyons bounce style which avoided long walk outs. For some, heading back up rope is drudgery. However, I have learnt to enjoy it. The challenge, the exercise, the extra time to enjoy views from a different perspective while ascending up rope.

My caving mentor is Carol Layton. Carol taught me about SRT efficiency and having gear set up to achieve this. Being the same height, I simply copied Carol's set-up. Caving can suit smaller people with good flexibility and strength. Being a woman is not a disadvantage other than adding a more anatomically correct funnel product (such as a she-wee) or wide mouth pee bottle to your pack for trips that are going to take a long time.

Caving can be like yoga around rocks. It stretches your muscles, it is weight bearing exercise and can be aerobic. For the most



*Under Storey Cave, New Zealand*

part, you can take things at your own pace which makes it an inherently safe activity compared to competitive ball sports where speed contributes to the severity of injuries. The only way to get caving fit is to go caving. Crawling may seem undignified to some. A good crawl exercises core muscles, which is a foundation for good posture.

Navigating through a cave can be daunting. While I am an experienced caver, I have done so many caves that remembering a specific route through a cave I find I need visual triggers to recall the order of obstacles. I like to have a small bushwalking compass in my kit as a way to confirm direction of predominant travel.

I love the dry savannah country and over the decade I have spent a lot of time

in the top end of Australia and also more recently the Nullarbor. Alan, my husband, and I have also spent a lot of time caving on the north island of New Zealand. Last January I discovered a streamway cave which has a few very nicely decorated chambers, a pleasant surprise after the hundreds of metres of crawling through a water trough! I have been involved with the discovery and mapping of a lot of new passage within caves and also unknown or forgotten caves. However, no achievements are ever truly solo and the greater community of cavers has to be acknowledged.

Cavers are truly the most down to earth people I know and have had the privilege of being around and getting underground with for so many years.



# Women in Caving

## Clare Buswell

**‘We are trying to work out who has the smaller set of tits,’ said Mark. ‘You or Aimee.’**

Aimee and I looked at each other. Clearly, we were wanted for our bodies. We both roared with laughter. As a pickup line, it was bad.

This was, however, really about fitting through some chest-crunching space that the blokes couldn’t manage. Caving’s like that if you are a woman, tolerated if you can fit through things and then ya have to cook dinner.

The Nullarbor is one of my favourite caving areas, but as every caver will attest, competition for that spot is fierce as each caving area is different.

There are the amazing karst landscapes and caves of Slovenia, the Peak District in England, the ice caves in Austria, then there is cave art — Niaux in France or Bullita or the Nullarbor. Then there are bugs and bats!

That’s the reason why caving and speleology has been a passion of mine for 40-odd years.

Karst landscapes never cease to amaze me, with massive underground rivers like the Reka of the Škocjan caves or the sand dune in Mullamulang Cave. What’s not to love? What places on the earth can you explore knowing that you are somewhere where few have been before or you witness the presence of past histories via archaeology, cave art or even graffiti? You can cave your way around the world, via the underground given the speleological community’s warm welcomes.

After years of introducing and training up hundreds of people to go caving, my caving passions are wide-ranging. I’ve been fortunate that caving has given me the skills to be the Safety Officer and by default the training person within FUSSI for a long time. (Let’s face it, who else wants the responsibility for other’s lives?)

Building self-rescue resilience has also been a passion of mine, but it is hard work when there is such a turnover of cavers, particularly within a university club.



*Bag hauling in the Eagles Nest System, Yarrangobilly, NSW*

Within the safety role, my motto has been to provide safe, friendly and fun caving opportunities, as I believe cave and karst environments are something that everyone should experience. They are not the privileged domain of paleontologists, biologists, commercial tour operators or the able-bodied.

I have a long-term interest in cave management, caver access and cave conservation, always hot topics in a country hell-bent on destroying natural environments.

In the wider context of conservation battles in Australia, cavers have fought some of the earliest and longest campaigns. For example, the battle to save Mt Etna Caves in Queensland started in 1962, ending in 2008 when it was finally gazetted in a National Park.

I was involved with the unsuccessful attempt by SA cavers, and many cavers from interstate, to save Sellicks Hill Quarry Cave, south of Adelaide in 1993-94 — endless hours of meetings, research, co-ordinating legal representation, writing articles in newsletters and much more.

To this day, I refuse to buy any cement products, lime for soil pH conditioning or road base from this quarry. In 2018, the company that owns it, Southern Quarries, placed plans for a further extension of its activities at Sellicks with the Department of Energy and Mines. Public consultation closed in March 2019 and we await further developments.

There seems to be a correlation between the hours spent caving and the hours spent writing about it in my life. I have been the long-term editor of the *FUSSI Newsletter* and a short-term editor, issue numbers 127-136, of *Caves Australia*. Now Sil asks me to write for this special issue!

So I got to thinking about another passion of mine and that is the gender imbalance that pervades caving and speleology in this country. Why women are almost invisible, rarely heard and acknowledged are questions I have consistently asked myself over my years spent caving.

I’m tired of looking at caving expedition photos with one or two women and ten men in them or going to caving club meet-

ings where I am one of three women in a group of 15 men.

So I went looking for a few stats. I started with the ASF's awards to see if my observations about it being so male dominated was true. Why the ASF awards, I hear you ask? Because of Edie Smith. The Edie Smith Award, one of, if not the ASF's most prestigious, is named after the first woman to become president of a caving club in Australia, the Canberra Speleological Society. She was elected as its president in 1958, four years after the club was formed<sup>1</sup>. She served in that position for one year and became its secretary in 1960. Edie was, according to records, a prime mover and driver of the club's speleological activities<sup>2</sup>. She was the first woman to graduate as a geologist from the University of Tasmania<sup>3</sup>. She was a life member of TCC, becoming its vice president in 1954<sup>4</sup>. Edie was passionate about caves: involved in survey work, exploration, vertical work, digging, and arguing for their protection<sup>5</sup>. Edie Smith died in 1967.

The Edie Smith Award was first presented to Dr Aola Richards<sup>6</sup> and Ted Lane for their joint 10-year editorship of *Helictite* in 1972. It has since been awarded 31 times: 28 times to men and three times to women. The last time it was awarded to a woman was in 2007, to Grace Matts. The ASF award,



Edie Smith at Wee Jasper Caves 1959

the Certificate of Merit, which is for 'valuable service to speleology above normal involvement', has been awarded 103 times: 88 times to men and 15 times to women. So what is going on here? Are we not passionate enough? We need our many voices heard and our faces seen. If we do nothing, then women's contributions to speleology will continue to be marginalised, lost and forgotten, and those expedition photos of a couple of women and ten blokes will continue. So, I put out a challenge: run some women's focused events during the Wom-

en's International Year of Caves and Karst in 2021. Put on your sequined overalls; all the better to shine a light on the caves and karst that inspires so much of our passion.

## REFERENCES

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- 2 Norman Poulter, Dr. Albert Goede. 'Who was Edie Smith'. Paper presented at the 23rd ASF Conference: A Cave Odyssey. Bathurst. 2001. <https://tinyurl.com/y22hgxxv>
- 3 This was in 1949. Ibid. p.4
- 4 Ibid. p.4
- 5 In particular Punchbowl Cave.
- 6 Aola Richards. Worked at the School of Biological Sciences, discipline of Entomology, UNSW. There were only four women employed at the school when she joined in 1965. When she retired 33 years later in 1994, there were only two. On her retirement to London her position was not replaced. She was a world-renowned entomologist, studying, glow-worms, cave crickets and ladybugs. Her collection went to CSIRO, Canberra. Croker, Graham. Entomological Era Closes at UNSW. *Uniken* No. 4. 31 March 1994. UNSW Public Affairs Unit.

## Women in Caving Stephanie Blake

**W**HEN I heard about the opportunity to write about women and caving, I thought it was a great opportunity to talk about the first time I went caving.

About 15 years ago I was working as a counsellor with young women who had experienced significant trauma in their lives. I was running a weekly group for young women aged between 14 and 16 that went for ten weeks. We often used activities in group work, as challenging activities in a supportive environment can be very therapeutic.

I'd never been caving — but I thought that it could be a good activity to do with the group. Before the group started, we let all the young women know that we would be doing a day of caving at about week five of the group.

One of my clients said, 'No way — you'll never get me in a cave.' I said that was absolutely fine, but we hoped she'd come on the day and she could stay above ground. We were able to organise an outdoor-ed person to take us — it was also my first-time caving and we went to Britannia Creek.



DANIEL TREACY

On the day all the young women went into the cave and had a fantastic time, supporting each other. One young woman said it was the best time she had ever had. It was amazing for me as a worker to see how

much the young women enjoyed it and got from it.

Two years later I was still working with the young woman who initially thought she'd never go caving.

I was at the County Court with her and she was about to give evidence against a family member. She turned to me and said, 'It will be OK — once I went through that cave I knew I could do anything.' It was such a powerful experience for me — the confidence and resilience the young woman had gained by facing her fears in a supported way.

About ten years later I joined RMIT Outdoor Club and started going caving. I was having a difficult time in my life as a 24-hour carer for a family member. I found that caving was a great way to have space away from the hard stuff.

I find I am very 'in the moment' when caving — it really is like being in another world. I love the way caving challenges and also delights (the amazing formations etc.) and the teamwork, care and patience that cavers have for each other.



## Women in Caving

# Ann-Marie Meredith



ADAM SPILLANE

*Goa Tarip, Ujoh Bilang, East Kalimantan*

**I** STARTED caving in July 1987 with our former ASF president, John Cugley. John and I were in Rover Scouts together and as he had been caving for a few years, I thought I'd go along and check it out.

My first cave was Block Cave in the Leeuwin Naturalist National Park (LNNP) in the south west of Western Australia.

I remember feeling quite nervous in this first subterranean encounter, but by the end of the weekend, hitting my straps and feeling that being underground was the most natural thing in the world.

By the following year, I was helping John lead scouting trips in the LNNP on a monthly basis. The WA Scout Association formed a State Branch Caving Commission and John was appointed inaugural Branch Commissioner, with myself as Secretary. Our monthly caving weekends continued with gusto until it was becoming apparent access to the wide range of wild caves we were visiting was about to be cut off to us

with the implementation of the LNNP Cave Permit System. The only way we could continue to visit these caves was to become members of an ASF caving group, so six of we Scout Cave Trip Leaders made the eventual pilgrimage over to WASG.

It was when I joined WASG in 1993 that I really started my caving journey. New caving areas were opened up to me, new techniques were learned (I was ascending using prusik knots up until that point...), and new friends were made to head underground with.

I started caving in karst areas north of Perth and learned how to survey, but the highlight of my first year in WASG was my very first trip out to the Nullarbor in September 1993. A small group of WASG cavers joined a larger national expedition at Old Homestead Cave and it was here that I discovered my passion for exploration.

During the week we were out on the Nullarbor, Max Hall took us to a large doline

recently located by the late John Carlisle. We abseiled down and found a note left by Carlisle stating that the doline was 'blind'. Despite that, we had a look around and pushed a few leads, one of which eventually lead to an enormous Mullamulang-like tunnel literally covered with undisturbed 'coffee and cream' deposits throughout. That long prusik back up to the surface was all the sweeter for knowing we had just discovered the next great Nullarbor cave. We decided to name the cave Carlisle Cave after John Carlisle and thus begun my love for and long association with the Nullarbor.

Shortly after that Nullarbor trip, I travelled to Bali and Java for a holiday. Wayne Tyson had been running caving expeditions in the central part of Java and asked if I would take some photos of the karst in the western area I would be travelling through. I started making enquiries about caves in the area when I got there and found a local lad who took me to a large nearby cave.

I did a sketch of the cave to show Wayne when I got back as well as taking photos of the karst.

Wayne convinced me to run an expedition there myself so I proceeded to put a small Australian team together. At that stage, the protocol for foreigners running caving expeditions in Java was to arrange permits through a local Indonesian caver by the name of Robbie Koh. Koh would organise everything and arrange for all the obligatory meetings with dignitaries, etc.

Wayne had emailed Koh to say he was coming to Java with me to the new area and had received a Christmas card from him saying he was looking forward to seeing Wayne in July. We then lost contact with Robbie Koh.

Armed with nothing more formal than Wayne's Christmas card from Koh, I decided to proceed with the expedition and we made our way to Blitar in East Java for a month-long expedition in July of 1994. The local lad I met the previous year had organised a minivan to transport us from his uncle, who decided he would take a month off work and accompany us.

Despite this man being one of the most unpleasant human beings I have ever had the disservice of encountering, his presence ended up serving us well as he was high up in the Indonesian military. Thus we had some 'grease' to mitigate the fact we had no formal permission to be in Indonesia running a foreign caving expedition.

Overall, the expedition was very successful as we surveyed and mapped over 10 km of cave passage in two separate areas. I had started learning Bahasa Indonesian as part of my university degree the previous semester which was extremely helpful as most people could not speak English. It did mean I spent more time above ground than the others talking to locals and getting permission to enter areas, but my team did an awesome job underground.

I remember one day dropping a survey team at an outflow and telling them they were not to come back until they had connected with a nearby cave we suspected was part of the same system.

Not only did they make the connection, they found another entrance to boot. One thing about that expedition I am particularly proud of is that I was the first (and to date only) Western Australian woman to lead an overseas caving expedition and to my knowledge, only the second Australian woman. Come on girls — we've got some catching up to do.

In July 1998, I got a call from the late Lyndsay Hatcher to see if I would be interested in helping him out getting some scientists in and out pit entrance caves in the



Surveying at Road Runner, Bullita, NT

LNNP. I readily agreed and travelled down to meet the group. Tim Flannery and Rhys Jones had partnered up to conduct a huge research project to try to determine when and how the megafauna died out. This research led to the publication of Tim's famous book *The Future Eaters* and changed our understanding of how long Aboriginal people had been in this great country.

The guys were great fun and I ended up being dubbed 'Madame Lash' by Rhys Jones as I harnessed them up each day to abseil into the caves they were collecting samples from.

On the last day of the LNNP field trip, Tim Flannery found a small frog down the bottom of one of the entrances. He seemed quite distressed that this little frog had fallen in and would subsequently die and insisted that I prusik back up with the little critter. Fortunately, he then found a small

colony of the said frog, so I was saved the trip.

In 2003, I went along with a small delegation of cavers to meet with the managing director of what is now Department of Parks and Wildlife WA to push a case for better protection of the Nullarbor karst. We were informed there was a National Rangelands Project about to get underway which was looking at providing funding for such causes and that the one the Nullarbor would fall under was in a couple of weeks in Kalgoorlie.

As I was the only one who could get the time off work, I hastily contacted the organiser and arranged to have myself included as a last-minute registration. The week was spent workshopping the many environmental issues facing a huge area which covered the WA Goldfields and Nullarbor Plain. Five pots of funding were up



## ANN-MARIE MEREDITH

for grabs. The first four went to the power players of pastoralists, Aboriginal groups and environmentalists and the fringe players were jostling for the final pot of funding.

As I had only just returned from living and working in the Goldfields for the past few years, I had a great time connecting with the other delegates who all knew someone I knew from my time there.

When it looked like I might miss out on my mission of getting the caves over the line, I hurled my hand down on the table and appealing to the room cried out, 'Come on guys, what about the caves?' Everyone laughed and agreed that would be the final project.

I ended up going on three field trips to the Nullarbor with land managers, scientists and Aboriginal elders to do the ground-work for what eventually became the first management plan for the western karst of the Nullarbor Plain.

Over the years I have combined caving with my other great love of grassroots backpacking and I have lots of caving and travelling tales to share over a glass of wine by a campfire — from mistakenly being feted as a VIP by a minibus driver after visiting the famous Cango Caves in South Africa as a guest of the Cave Manager, to having Raúl Castro asking after my welfare after breaking my ankle on a caving trip in a remote part of Cuba. I think one of the highlights of my many adventures, though, is being invited to cave on a private property in Guatemala and going into a small cave which had only that morning been uncovered and was unvisited by humans since ancient Mayan times. The floor was literally littered with ancient Mayan artefacts and it was a very special experience indeed.

In June 2015, Denis Marsh made a pitch for volunteers to join the committee organising the 2017 UIS Congress in Sydney. I

had heard about the Congress and was keen to be involved in some way. As I scanned the job list, I decided that the marketing role would suit me best and put my hand up. From that point on I was involved in an ever-increasing whirlwind of meetings, social media posts, e-bulletin production and the organising and worldwide distribution of promotional materials. It was a crazy time but one I am very proud to have been a part of. Together with a core group of dedicated cavers, we managed to pull off a highly successful international caving congress and firmly put Australia on the caving community map.

At the 2017 Congress, I met British caver Adam Spillane who had been looking at a karst area in East Kalimantan where I did a reccie with Rauleigh Webb in 1995. He had done his research as to whether anyone had previously visited the area and found my report published in the *Western Caver* but also discovered no-one else had visited the area since.

At the time of the reccie, access to the caves in the area was extremely difficult as individual Dayak families controlled them and their highly lucrative birds' nest contents. Rauleigh and I were taken to one large cave, but we were then held in suspicion by the other family groups and hence not able to gain access to any of the other caves.

This was not helped by the fact that no-one spoke English, Rauleigh spoke no Bahasa and I came down with a malarial type fever within half an hour of arriving at the tiny village and could barely put a sentence together in English half of the time. Yet we still managed to assess the area as to its potential and I wrote it up upon returning home. After discussions with other Indonesian cavers who were at the Congress, it appeared that the access issues

preventing an expedition in 1995 may have been resolved, so we planned to do a fresh reccie the following year.

Adam and I met up in Kalimantan in July 2018 and spent three weeks in the Long Bangun and Long Apari region of East Kalimantan.

We visited several caves in various parts of the region and discovered that the access issues of previous years had recently been circumvented by the Indonesian Government providing funding for independent birds' nest towers following years of civil unrest surrounding control of the caves.

We decided there was definitely potential for a small expedition to survey and map what we knew was there and do further exploration of the area.

On the very last day, we managed to locate one of the two Dayak men who had taken Rauleigh and myself into the field back in 1995. He remembered us as we were the first foreigners he had seen in his village. It was an extremely special and emotional time. Adam and I returned to Ujoh Bilang in 2019 with Australian caver, Cath Hemley, for a small-scale expedition and were planning on returning again in 2020 with a bigger team to continue what I expect will be a life-long project given the amount of productive karst. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has put a hold on our plans temporarily.

After caving for over 30 years in many karst areas in Australia as well as overseas, I consider myself so fortunate to have had the experiences I have had and met the wonderful people I have met over the years. To me, caving is very much a huge part of my life and I cannot envisage a life without it. So, whilst there are exciting new karst areas to explore and good people to explore them with, I can't imagine I'll be hanging up the old boots for quite some time to come.



Nullarbor Plain

## Women in Caving

# Cath Hemley

**T**HERE WAS a moment. I was inching along through a flattener, just following the soles of the boots in front of me.

The place was Bungonia, it was a Rover Speleological Society (RSS) annual Ranger Guide Caving Weekend, and it was my first real caving experience. The ceiling was low enough that I couldn't turn my head with the helmet on unless I lined it up just right in the right spot. I had to keep my boots partly stretched so they wouldn't get wedged as I pushed myself along a little at a time. It was a very slow process, there was probably chatter, maybe some grunts and a little cursing going on around me.

I was warm with the exertion; however, the rock was cool beneath me. The boots in front of me had paused, and I just had this moment. While I waited, I started thinking. 'Hmm, I have no idea what is above me; there is 10, maybe 20, maybe 100 metres of rock and dirt hanging just above me, maybe even a mountain. It is just sitting above me, hanging there, weighing down, above me.' I remember taking a deep breath, assessed my body, assessed my space, banged my helmet a couple of times, contemplated this some more.

Finally, I relaxed, I did a mental shrug, 'You know what, I am OK with that.' Since then I have been hooked. I grew up in Brownies, Guides, Ranger Guides and eventually Rangers. I wasn't one of the girls crazy about badges and awards, crafts were definitely not my thing. It was always about my friends and the outdoors for me. Through Guiding I had some amazing experiences that I probably would never have had the opportunity to do growing up; hiking, camping, gliding, abseiling, kayaking and caving.

To me caving is just another way of exploring the wonders of the outdoors, maybe a form of extreme hiking, in the dark. I have been caving now for well over a decade, have made many amazing friends across Australia and the world, particularly caving in Victoria with the Victorian Speleological Association and now with the



CATH HEMLEY

*Post mud wallow, Trog Dip, Victoria*

Northern Caverneers in Tasmania. It has been a privilege to visit some amazing caves in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Italy, Western Australia, and Indonesia.

As cavers, we know caves and caving are special, and they are complicated. There are so many facets. To me, seeing and learning about the unique environments that are rarely seen and trying to understand them is amazing and humbling. There is the skill and art of surveying, though I make a great laser target rather than an artist. The physical challenge of moving through

difficult and alien environments, especially problem solving for my personal strengths and weaknesses, and the friendships you strengthen, supporting each other through such challenges.

The technical skills involved in SRT. Trying to capture a little of the beauty and action in a quick photo with little light. The geeking out over new tech and ideas; lights, batteries, survey instruments, mapping. There are many things I love about caving; ultimately, though, I think it is the mystery. Just where does that go? What is around that corner?



# Women in Caving

## Anna Jackson

### NOTES FROM DAD — ALAN JACKSON (STC)

Anna's first real caving was at age five (a few easy horizontal things). Then she ramped it up with a Midnight Hole-Mystery Creek Cave through trip just before she turned six. Since then she's done the Slaughterhouse Pot to Growling Swallet through trip, bottomed Owl Pot (~220 m), Tassy Pot (~240 m with a 70 m pitch), Mini Martin (~210 m, with a 110 m pitch), Big Tree Pot (~190 m with a 90 m pitch), been half way down both Khazad-Dum and Niggly Cave, done a couple of Kubla Khan through trips and joined expeditions to Thailand and the Bunda Cliffs/Nullarbor. She's 14 currently.

### INTERVIEW WITH ANNA JACKSON, August 17, 2020

**Sil:** What are your earliest memories from when you started caving?

**Anna:** I don't really remember too much from back then, but I do have a memory of going through Midnight Hole and doing the Matchbox Squeeze. I was caving with Serena Benjamin and I went through the squeeze quite easily, but Serena was getting a little stuck and I was unsure what was going on, [Anna Laughing] as I thought it was fine and that she could get through easily.

**Sil:** What fascinates you about caves and how did you get started?

**Anna:** My dad is the main reason for all my outdoor activities, yeah, he dragged me along when I was a little kid, so it became kinda normal for me to cave. I am not one hundred percent sure what makes me go back to caving all the time. It's kinda the same with my rock climbing — you get a thrill out of the achievements when you make them. It's always nice when I can see the approval in other people's eyes. Sometimes, I am a bit anxious when it comes to other people's opinions normally, so it's always nice when dad tells me how well I have done something. [Anna smiling and feeling joy] it makes me go yay!



ALAN JACKSON

Schrödingers Bat, Nullarbor, South Australia 2019

**Sil:** Do you have a favourite cave and one you like to go back to?

**Anna:** I don't have a particular one, but Kubla Khan is always amazing to go to. It's a really pretty cave and I love how easy-going the cave is. You can walk around and not have to worry too much about things, you can just walk around and take in the environment and everything around it. Also, the boot washing stations for some reason, I really enjoy those [Laughter]. I have done Kubla Khan a few times, each time with my dad.

**Sil:** How far have you gone in Kubla Khan?

**Anna:** I think I've been to the end each time [Laughter] I am not very well-versed, I don't look at the maps or anything [Laughter] I kinda just go where everyone else is going. However, I have been to all the good spots, Silk Shop and Pleasure Dome, those kinda places.

**Sil:** What's your worst cave, Anna, one which you're not in a hurry to go back to anytime soon?

**Anna:** Most of my caving trips have been quite enjoyable, but there was one time when I was in Khazad-Dum, Tasmania and it was really wet that day, and we were on our way out of the cave and the water was everywhere [Laughing] and I was getting really wet. I was soaked as I was prusiking my way up and so I ended up going up underneath my dad [Anna Laughing] so he could stop me from getting wet. So yeah, it certainly was a very miserable prusiking trip. But otherwise it was quite fun.

**Sil:** Do you have a favourite cave animal?

**Anna:** Most definitely the cave spider. [Anna smiling] Whenever I see them, I always walk up to them and examine them, they're so beautiful [Anna smiling] you know... The way they hold themselves and walk around. I have a friend who is terrified of spiders. I have deliberately showed her some of the pictures of the cave spiders and she is just freaked out [Anna with a cheeky grin]. I say to her "there's nothing wrong with them, why are you getting so freaked out." [Anna laughing]

**Sil:** Mine are the cave cricket, as you know already [Sil smiling]

**Anna:** Ew yuck. [Anna pulling a disgusted face gesture] I am not fond of cave crickets, they are too unpredictable [Anna pulling a disgusted face gesture and cringing at the idea of cave crickets] I do think they are a little stupid sometimes, because they will freak out and jump into the water. [Anna smiling] I speak to them and say "what are you doing, you're killing yourself, [Anna laughing] sure I dislike you, but you don't need to kill yourself."

**Sil:** What caving friendships have you made along the way, since starting caving at a young age?

**Anna:** Well there are not many people my age who do caving, but there are a few people who I trust quite a lot. One of those people is Gabriel Kinzler, I cave with him a fair bit. I first met Gabriel caving in Wolf Hole, Tasmania. Normally, my dad helps me with everything and does everything for me which is always a nice perk [Anna Laughing]. However, these days Gabriel tends to help me get up tall spots because I am still a little stubby, which is annoying. [Laughing]

**Sil:** The thrill of finding, naming and exploring new caves ('Rocky Hollow' in the JF with Nelly) tell me a little about that?

**Anna:** [Laughing] Yeah... that's a cave Nelly named. Nelly is Gavin Brett's daughter, my dad when he used to find all sorts of caves and caved a lot, Gavin was his main partner. Nelly has been a very good friend of mine since we were very little. So the story goes, some people including my dad, where going down Pooshooter and Gavin wasn't going down, so we were all hanging out and started looking for caves, as Gavin was pretty determined to find a cave further up the hill. Nelly found a hole first, so she went around looking for a rock to throw down the hole, cause... it's obviously what we wanted to do [Anna Laughing], you just have to do it. In the process of Nelly finding the rock, she found another hole, which was another entrance to the same cave. We later on went inside the cave, and it was really cool. Nelly doesn't know how to abseil or prusik, so she had to use one of the ladders. It was kinda exciting to go in somewhere where nobody had been before. There were spiderwebs and everything, that were undisturbed, so basically, everywhere you stepped things just fell down. There was also wood everywhere and lots of leaves that had fallen in the cave over time.



Ready for Mini Martin, Ida Bay, Tasmania 2019

**Sil:** From what your dad has described you have done some big abseils in caves. How do you prepare for something like that? Do you get nervous at all? or is it exciting?

**Anna:** Well, I can describe when dad said we were going to do Mini Martin, which has a 110 m pitch. He said that it's really big and because it's the entrance, it's going to be quite open. That was his plan to expose me to those kinds of exposures and prepare me for the Nullarbor, because the Nullarbor is very exposed! But ... Mini Martin, I didn't really feel terribly worried about what was going to happen, I was like ok, that's a lot bigger than I normally go. But honestly, I didn't really feel any sort of fear at all or not wanting to do it beforehand or when it was happening, I just wondered how pretty it looked. It's kinda weird, but when I went over the cliffs for the first time on the Nullarbor, my dad said he was expecting me to be a little bit freaked out. I just found it interesting, I surprised myself by not going 'Oh my god!' [Anna Laughing]

**Sil:** Have you been in a cave and found something which you thought was awesome? Tell me about that?

**Anna:** Yeah, there was a cave, Schrödinger's Bat, on the Nullarbor, which has massive bat poo at the front, yeah that was fun to crawl through [Laughter]. Later, in the cave there were yellowy and white flowstone

and the way it came out was in these big spikes, they were really, really cool because they were everywhere and the broken bits, which we were allowed to pick up, were like big, thick glass.

**Sil:** Anna can you tell me the story about 'Gritty Knickers' cave?

**Anna:** [Laughing] This was on the Nullarbor, we got to name the cave. It was a new one and interesting, and it also looked like it was going to go. We were in there with Mieké Polman-Short, and I can't remember exactly how it happened but ahh, Mieké got a bunch of silt and other kinda of things dumped down the back of her overalls, and they got all the way in and everywhere [Laughter] and she said 'You've gotten it all the way down in my undies.' [Anna Laughing], and my dad's like 'So you have some Gritty Knickers.' [Anna Laughing] and so we decided to name it that.

**Sil:** You have a little brother named Ben who's eight, what's caving like with Ben?

**Anna:** Yeah... Ben has been down Midnight Hole a couple of times and came into Wolf Hole with us recently. [Anna Laughing] He's kinda annoying sometimes, only because my dad normally like, babies me, when it comes to helping me put my gear on and those sorts of things and then all of a sudden Ben's there, and I am like... [Humour] What about me?, What about you helping me? I have to do things by myself now [Laughing] I guess it's probably for the best, but at the same time, I am still a little bit annoyed at him.

**Sil:** What next for you Anna? Do you have any cave trips coming up?

**Anna:** Nothing planned yet, unless my dad has got something new in store for me. Normally, I get presented with an idea and if I think it's cool, I'll agree, and we go. Shortly though, my dad wants to take me to Niggly Cave, at some stage. I have been down part way, but dad wants to take me there for an overnight trip, which I am not sure I am keen on. Purely because it means I am going to have to have powdered milk [Anna & Sil burst out laughing]. Of all the things, that is my problem, I dunno, it just doesn't taste very nice.

**Sil:** what about being cold in the cave? [Laughing]

**Anna:** Um, no [laughing] I think the only thing is, it might be a little horrible to get back into my soggy clothing in the morning, but I'll survive.



## Women in Caving

# Pamela Howard

**W**HEN ASKED by a teenage girl if she will like caving or if it is scary I always have the same answer, 'You will either love it and cannot get enough, or you will say 'been there, done that but I am happy to not cave again'.

These are the two types of responses I have seen in 17 years of being the Leader in Charge for State Caving Events for Girl Guides NSW, ACT & NT.

I have been a member of Girl Guides Australia since 1990 when I joined as a Brownie. In the late 1990s, once I was in the 14-17 years age group, Senior Guides, there was an event on our NSW State calendar called the State Annual Caving Weekend for Senior Guides and Olaves (18-30 years).

As it was held that year in my local area at Bungonia Caves in NSW, and my Guide friends and I loved an outdoor adventure, we had our Leader sign us up.

We all fell into the first response bracket for sure as we attended every year from that time on. I personally lived for this event each year and looked forward to climbing into harder caves as my skills increased.

As a teenage girl, I felt all powerful and awesome dressed in my overalls and harness, heading off to a full day's caving with the instructors, who I thought were very cool people! And at the end of the day I felt as though I had conquered Everest.

From the very beginning of this annual event in 1990, Girl Guides has worked closely with the Rover Speleological Society, who came on board to run the caving activities. RSS, while initially born in Scouts Australia in the Rovers section (18-25 years old), had moved under the ASF umbrella in the early days.

The majority of RSS members to this day come from, or still are, members of Scouts Australia and Girl Guides Australia. Coming from these similar leadership backgrounds, RSS members have a strong focus on training and working with youth to introduce safe and minimal impact caving practices.

In 2004, as a 20-year-old Senior Guide



*Pamela Howard, Bungonia, NSW 2008*

Leader, I received a phone call from our State Outdoors Advisor asking if I could take over running the State Caving Events, as the current Leader in Charge was finishing up. I could not say yes quickly enough!

Leading Region events and working on State Teams was something I already had some experience in but this was like being offered my dream job.

That first year I co-ran the event with the outgoing Leader in Charge and by the end of the weekend RSS had no trouble encouraging me to also join them.

When you combine the caving humour with the Scouts and Guides connections it is a very addictive mix. In those first years there was hardly a trip that I missed, and my skills progressed from being led to being a leader.

Running caving events for non-ASF groups has many challenges and each year without fail some hurdle appears in front of me just when I think everything is ready to go. There has been the Girl Guide insurance company, who, one year, the week before the event, decided that caving was too risky

to cover but potholing was approved as safe.

The time the campsite booked our party of 60 in with 200 rogaining participants on the same site. The year that a request came through to send a film crew to camp to produce the training video on working with children with special needs, and these producers had never camped before, let alone caved. And then there was the year that RSS ran a special event for the offsite activity for the International Guide Jamboree based in Sydney, only for me to then find out after committing us, that I was due with my first baby that month (luckily, he waited another two weeks to arrive, but my camp first aider was a very nervous woman).

But the benefits far outweigh the challenges. I estimate in my time as Leader in Charge that our RSS team has introduced over 600 girls and young women to caving. A third of these are the first variety of Girl Guide cavers and come back many years in a row. And before me there were 13 previous events not included in these figures.

This is one of the few, maybe only, channels for young women to try caving. The es-





PAMELA HOWARD COLLECTION

25th Annual Girl Guides NSW &amp; ACT State Caving Weekend, Bungonia, NSW

sence of adventure for these girls and young women is trying the unknown in difficult circumstances.

RSS believes that the Girl Guide weekend is successful due to the lasting memories created through laughter and tears whilst caving — a heady mixture of fear and learning during physical activity, while being safe and supported by friends and leaders. They know it is going to be hard but they choose to try it anyway. And even if they chose that caving is not for them, it still creates a lasting memory and experience.

Each year the event books out within two days. We take usually 45 Senior Guides and their Leaders, and Olaves, and have 15-20 RSS members in attendance. I plan participants into skill groups and assign them to caves and RSS Leaders.

Through this fine planning I ensure that girls are challenged but not exceeding their abilities and keep a high ratio of RSS to Guides.

Over 20 years later I still live for this event. Just like myself, many women have joined ASF clubs through attending this event, and while most are in RSS, a number have also moved within Australia and internationally so maybe check and see if you have any in your club.

At times the female count in RSS is so high we have had many a female-only trip. My attitude has been never to conform to what some expect of a woman. I believe in

following your passions and interests; do not set limitations; drive down barriers; and sometimes shock people a little.

I admit that I do love the shock factor it has on many when you say you are a speleologist. I trained and worked in the high fashion industry for many years, loving dressing up, while spending my weekends caving, camping and driving my loud, aggressive country ute.

My fashion (and very fashionable) workmates did not understand my need to climb around underground getting dirty and wearing (gulp!) hiking boots; older generation Guide Leaders have told me on many occasions my ute was inappropriate for a Girl Guide Leader, and friends in my ute circle think Guides is girly.

I once left a job in fashion for a position on a sheep station in the outback and it was something my workmates could not comprehend.

My parents have been the drivers behind my life's varied experiences. They always extended the same opportunities to me as my brothers and I never heard that I could not do something because I was a female. My father made sure I could help rebuild an engine as an important skill before giving me my first driving lesson.

The members in RSS are my caving family, my closest friends, and my actual family, with both my very supportive and patient husband getting involved with running the

Guide caving events and joining us on trips, and my brother being a member of the club.

The RSS members from my early days are still there and each year we welcome more to the club. I love the mix of experience and young fresh excitement that RSS has.

RSS works hard as a team to bring new young people into the Australian caving community by training them in appropriate caving methods.

I am passionate to play my part in introducing caving into the next generation and in turn ensuring the future of caving and cave conservation in Australia. I believe in the need to pass on all the skills and knowledge, that all our clubs work so hard at preserving, to our young cavers to ensure the work is not wasted and the legacy left from those who explored before us can live on.

In my personal caving there is so much more I want to see and try. Soon the time will come to pass on the Girl Guide Caving Events Leader in Charge role to another very capable young women in caving/Girl Guides, and then I will go searching for my next role or project.

But for now, I continue to welcome our next generation of cavers. I am proud of what I have built this up to over the years and I am honoured to leave my little mark on the caving community in Australia and in the fond memories of many young women.



## Women in Caving

# Nina Birss

**M**Y FIRST experiences in caving were back in 2012. At this time, I was just starting out in my career as a professional outdoors girl.

Yes, it's a career that exists and it's amazing. I was completing a degree in Nature Tourism and Outdoor Education that taught me rock climbing, bushwalking, sea kayaking, words like phyllode, macropod, passerine and the leadership skills necessary to guide groups through the variety of landscapes and weather that Australia has to offer, safely.

I was also involved in groups which participated in Urbex, (the exploration of the urban environment, e.g., of abandoned houses, factories) and spent most of my weekends gallivanting around Victoria and SA putting my new skills and knowledge into practice.

The VSA was the first caving club I joined and, at the time, this eclectic crew and the strange hobby that is speleology was exactly 'my jam'.

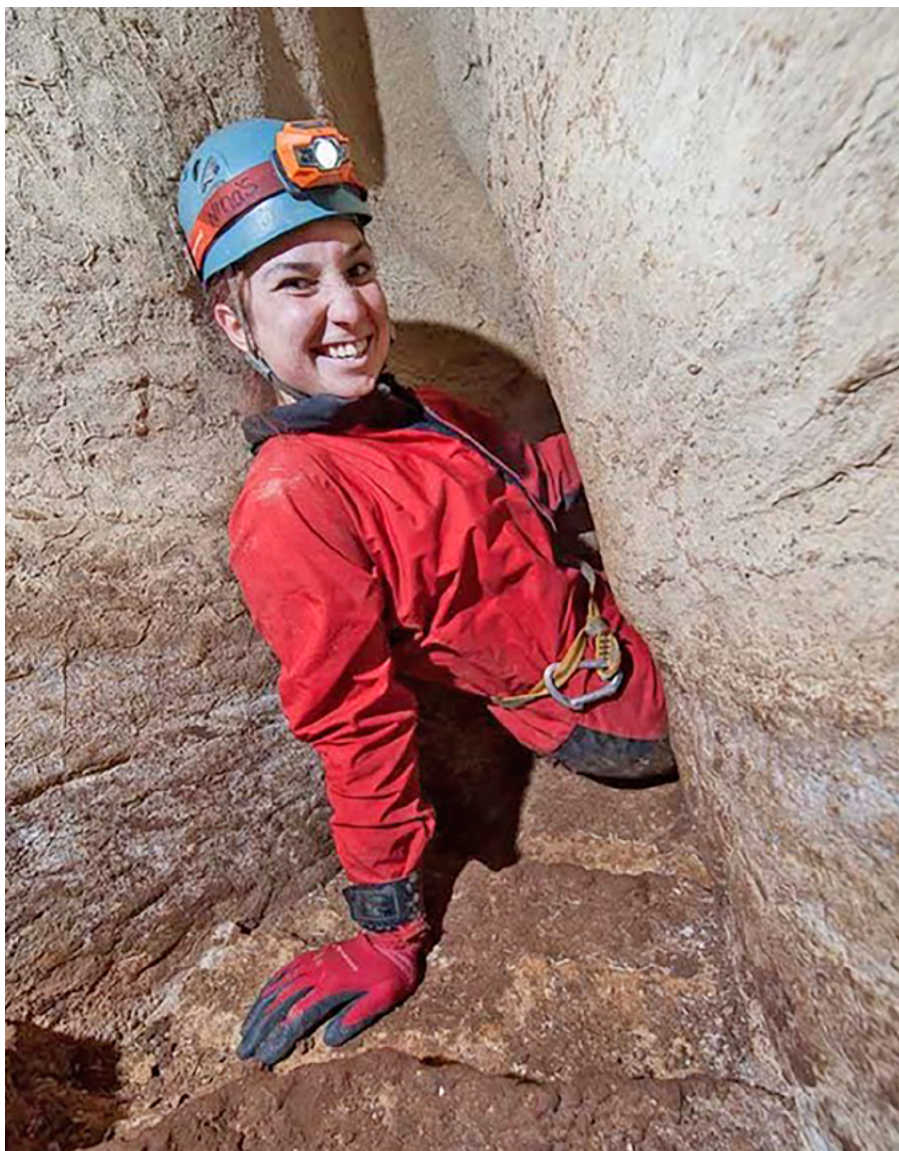
As a typical Victorian my caving began with trips to Buchan, Mt Gambier and Naracoorte. My progression into vertical caving came easily given my experience in hanging about on ropes above ground (although it was alarmingly different once underground).

Still to this day I'm a little unnerved by just how much a static rope can stretch when it's wet, muddy and supported by slimy stalactites.

Soon after joining the VSA I was asked along to a number of special trips featuring Kubla Khan in Tassie and Exponential Pot in Buchan, both permit caves with fantastic decorations.

I also participated in an international venture to Thailand with a UK club to assist in mapping and surveying. But the most special trips are always the ones where I'm carrying a scuba tank for some reason.

My caving experience is somewhat fragmented thanks to my various other life pursuits. The largest of these breaks was when I moved to the Scottish Highlands



LIZ ROGERS

*Exponential Pot, Victoria 2016*

and took up white water rafting. Although other hiatuses have seen me escaping to live on an 'outback' property near Chinchilla in Queensland and working as a tour guide on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. But that's not to say I haven't spent a fair amount of time spelunking. To keep things short and sweet I've picked a couple of my best stories to share with you.

**The favourite cave I've ever visited?**

Kubla Khan! How can I not say this was one of my favourites? It was the first time I had visited any Tassie caves and Kubla Khan was just spectacular. Our adventure was made even more hilarious and incredible by the insane leeches and photo shoots of someone wearing a bikini in a paddling pool midway through the cave. We ran around in our socks in the Pleasure Dome, a mansion-sized room filled floor to ceiling

with glittering decorations and flowstones; the socks were to ensure our cleanliness and I learnt a terrible lesson about eating muddy M&Ms. I'm sure there's a trip report somewhere if you're after more details, or you can simply leave these shenanigans up to your imagination.

**Worst cave?** Drik Drik. Not because it was a bad cave; I do remember some spectacular passages and decorations and it was fun helping with some explorations and digging. It was the exhaustion and mud.

I just remember being knackered as usual for the return journey and struggling to come up with more efficient ways of crossing the sticky sinking mud. The more effort you put in the harder it was. Walking, rolling, crawling, doing the worm. The only way forward was just to keep sticking on. Just to make things better, we completed this journey while also lugging around a huge heavy and awkward Pelican case of camera gear which often accompanied us on trips in those days. No surprise that the camera had gotten damp on this trip, so we didn't even use it.

**Most interesting exploration?** Being convinced by Peter Freeman that he's got this great hypothetical lead he'd like to explore. After clambering down through Rubble Pot right to the very bottom, we sat looking at this narrow slot where Peter explained to me just how much he was convinced, according to previous surveys, relationships between local hydrology and geology that there was a potential lead worth investigating if only one was willing and able to get down there and have a look.

I recall feeling like a starfish that had been turned into a floppy disk and slipped into a very awkward place. The slot was only about 30 cm wide, 2 or 3 metres deep and 1 or 2 metres long. And although a disjointed cartwheel manoeuvre allowed me to glimpse that the floor level lead did not exist, it was the climb out, fighting gravity, a lack of space and any holds that had me considering who's more crazy — Peter for saying this was worthwhile, or me for believing him.

**What does caving mean for me today?** I love the science of it, the geology and mapping, the flora and fauna, the strangeness of the world right under our feet that we know so little about. I love the adventure of it, the 12-hour expeditions where you feel like you've been underground for days living off chocolate bars, and the joy that comes with resurfacing.

I love the crowd of people that it attracts. I love problem solving that comes with accessing these places, whether it's the rigging, planning, mapping or even just the moves that your body needs to make to fit through a tight space. As a guide and Outdoor Educator, I regularly find myself interacting with people who have somehow developed a couch-orientated life. To many it's a wild and foreign concept that someone like myself or my friends actually exist and do what we do every day. When they ask 'why?' my answers vary just as much as the seasons do.

But I love that simply meeting me and hearing my stories is often the inspiration they remember for many years, and often

pushes them to try new and adventurous things in their own ways.

For so long I admired those who had been around for long enough to be designing and engineering their own lights and in some ways, I was dependent upon theirs to gain a larger glimpse of where I was.

'Big' was how I described any chamber where my little head torch couldn't fully reach. This trusty little head torch has lit my way on so many after-dark camping trips, bush walks, abseils and other strategic after-dark mountain retreats.

But to me, the darkness underground has a much heavier quality about it. So just before I was asked to write this article, I bought a Scurion. Yup. I'm so excited by this lifelong achievement I set for myself. Larger than buying my first PFD, or my first set of rock-climbing cams or having my own mountain bike.

A Scurion has always been this investment that I've held in my mind as the one and only step into the professionalism of caving. And now I finally have one. It's pink.

The biggest 'Thank you' to the special people who introduced me to this world, and through their own passions have inspired me to find mine: Sil Iannello, Peter Freeman, and a shout-out to a very long time ago, Dr. Ruth Lawrence. To the cave divers, Stephen Fordyce and Liz Rogers, may the weight of your tanks forever frustrate the Sherpas you enlist and continue to deter all who are not dedicated. There are so many opportunities for me to explore simply by being willing to carry that useless crap with me.

## Women in Caving Dee Trewartha

**A**PPARENTLY, it takes an unusual type of woman to crawl around in the dirt underground, abseil, camp in remote areas, face the perils of underground streams, endure long treks with a wayward GPS, and someone else's camp cooking.

For me, these things are what life is for. Adventure, nature, and the wild places. Caving is a special kind of wild. The impenetrable dark and the complete silence is primal and comforting. The long crawls through dust and dirt, the squeezes, the beautiful fossils where the ocean fauna or the creatures long passed from the surface wait timelessly deep below the ground, the sudden opening into vast chambers, the magical crystals, stalactites, helictites, underground rivers. There are few places un-



spoiled and uncluttered by human beings on this earth and the ancient underground is one such place for me.

As a woman in the current gender climate, it can take courage to partake in

physically demanding activities, but more I think it takes resilience. The constant proving of your own capabilities to yourself and the world can become exhausting over time. The caving community has been welcoming and encouraging, accepting and fun, whether in recreational, rescue or scientific endeavours.

It has only been five years of speleology, but I have done so many great things, had so many interesting opportunities and been to so many great places and met so many awesome people! I am looking forward to my next five years of caving and I have no idea what they hold for me but I'm certain it will be good! Besides, caving has all the good things; spiders, bats, pseudo scorpions, glow-worms, fossils, crystals, great company, and it doesn't even matter if it rains.



## Women in Caving

# Lauren Hayes

**W**AKING UP, half on my sleeping mat, half on the dirt, I wondered where I was.

It was cold, dark and all of my muscles ached. Then it hit me, after 16 hours straight of hiking and caving the previous day, we were not even halfway through Stormy Pot, the deepest cave in New Zealand.

It was the morning of New Year's Eve and we still had a long day ahead of us to reach our next camp, Salvation Hall. We wanted to make sure that we made it to camp within the year.

Spending three days travelling through the Stormy Pot-Nettlebed system from the top of Mt Arthur to the bottom of the Pierce Valley was a trip that I will never forget. It was my first multiday cave and one of the hardest, but most rewarding experiences of my life.

After reaching our next camp at 10 pm on day two, all I wanted to do was fall asleep, but I forced myself to stay awake to celebrate at midnight perched atop a cliff at Salvation Hall, something that I would have never imaged when I started caving just over five years ago.

I began caving with the RMIT Outdoors club in my first year of university. I was lucky enough to meet some amazing people in the club who were happy to show me the ropes (literally) and teach me SRT.

While I spent my first year mostly caving around Buchan in Victoria, I became truly hooked after visiting Jenolan and Yarrangobilly caves. I love the feeling of exploration when caving and the amazement when I visit incredibly decorated chambers. Convincing myself to do duck unders and roof sniffs is one of the most challenging aspects of caving for me. However, knowing that so few people get to visit these amazing places makes it all worth it.

I have now completed two caving trips to



LEWIS CAREY

*Starlight Cave, Takaka Hill Karst, New Zealand*

New Zealand caving mostly in Takaka and Waitomo, both places that I would return to in a heartbeat. The next caving destination at the top of my list is Tassie. Over the

next few years, I hope to be able to cave in many different countries and continue to encourage others, (particularly women), to upskill in the sport.

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