

The Journal of the Australian Speleological Federation Inc.

CAVES

AUSTRALIA

NO. 236 MAY 2026

PAPUA NEW
GUINEA
EXPEDITION

AN EXTINCT
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A STORY
ALMOST A
CENTURY IN THE
MAKING

CAVES

AUSTRALIA

CAVES AUSTRALIA

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REQUEST FOR ARTICLES 2026

JANUARY, APRIL, JULY, OCTOBER

ISSUE DATES FOR 2026

FEBRUARY, MAY, AUGUST & NOVEMBER

MAGAZINE SUBSCRIPTION

DIGITAL CAVES AUSTRALIA IS INCLUDED WITHIN ASF MEMBERSHIP FEES.

COVER: BULLITA, DINGO CAVE, LIGHT SHOW - PHOTO BY ALAN PRYKE



Ben Hofmann suspects he may be being watched in Piano Cave, Walli - Photo by Ally Kelly



"I think I've found the leak, sir" Alek Meade inspects the plumbing in Ghormenghast, Junee Florentine - Photo by Cole Neering

No. 236 MAY 2026

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Laurie Jolliffe attempts to ascend Devils Pot (Mole Creek) like a salmon up a waterfall - Photo by Ally Kelly



North Tasmania Cave Rescue Training - Photo by Nadine Muresan

Editor's Report



Having a lot of fun at Potholes Buchan teaching CRV's SRT 1 training session - Photo by Bogdan Muresan

As Editor, one of the most rewarding feelings is receiving an article for the magazine. To receive the incredible number of contributions that have come in for this edition of *Caves Australia* has been absolutely phenomenal. It is exciting to see so many stories, reports, discoveries, and adventures being shared from across the country. A huge thank you to everyone who has contributed articles, photographs, and proofreading support for this issue.

From a caving perspective, it is inspiring to see just how much is happening around Australia from fossil discoveries and major expeditions to local trips, exploration, and new finds. The variety and depth of articles in this edition truly reflect the passion and dedication within our community.

I would love to encourage everyone to continue sharing information about upcoming trips and expeditions. If you are organising trips that are open to cavers from other states, please send through the details so we can help connect clubs and members across Australia and encourage greater collaboration within the community.

The ASF is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, and to mark the occasion, *Caves Australia* is planning a special November edition featuring stories from across the country. We are seeking detailed articles highlighting one or two dedicated cavers from each state, along with a short history and overview of each club and how it has evolved over the years.

We would also love to include as many historical and current photographs as possible.

At this stage, we are calling for expressions of interest from anyone willing to contribute an article, either as a tribute to an individual or as a club representative. Articles will be due in mid-October, giving contributors plenty of time to prepare submissions. If you would like to be involved, please contact Nadine at asf.cavesaustralia@gmail.com.

We are also now seeking contributions for the August edition of *Caves Australia*. Trip reports, discoveries, conservation projects, historical pieces, technical articles, club activities, and photography are all welcome. Whether it is a major expedition or a small local trip, every story helps showcase the diversity of caving across Australia.

Finally, I am always looking for high-quality filler images and potential front cover photographs for future editions. If you have images you would like to share, please send them through; your photos help bring the magazine to life and are always greatly appreciated.

Until next time—let's go caving!

Nadine Muresan

President's Report



A happy caver perusing the logbook on his way home from the Dome in Mullamullang - Photo by Steve Milner

Wow! I can't believe we're nearly halfway through 2026. It's been a real joy to see our members getting out and about over the last few months. There have been international expeditions to Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and New Zealand, to name just a few. Closer to home, there have also been multi-club expeditions around the country to places such as Mount Etna and Tasmania. I've even noticed some of the younger generation keen to organise more inter-club trips into the future, which is fantastic to see.

I'll have to admit I'm a bit jealous after I started my PhD studying cave spiders; there has been a bit less caving. Although I miss the lengthy expeditions I'm used to, the experience has also given me the opportunity to visit caves I've never visited closer to home that had always been there waiting. I've also found myself reflecting on the important role ASF cavers have played in the history of my research.

One genus, *Tartarus*, was first recorded in the ASF Newsletter - the original Caves Australia publication - in 1969 (Numbers 43 & 44), with the discovery later clarified by J. W. J. Lowry in a 1970 report (Number 47). The species was recorded from the Dome in Mullamullang Cave on the Nullarbor. Normally, this time of year would see me celebrating a birthday on an annual pilgrimage to the 'treeless plain'. The accompanying photo shows a much younger - and arguably less stressed - caver at Camp 1 during a trip to the base of the Dome. Sadly, no spiders were spotted then, and they haven't been seen there for quite some time. It is crazy to think how life can move in circles.

Speaking of learning, there have also been some excellent training events in SRT and rescue. It's great to see people continuing to refresh and develop their skills. The final hoorah for Brian Evans, as he leaves his post as Commissioner for the ACRC, culminated in a well-attended Cave Rescue Conference, coinciding with STC's rescue exercise. It was a great opportunity to share skills and experience from across the country.

We very much appreciate Brian's active and forward-thinking approach to this role over many years. Thank you for all your efforts in helping keep us safe and self-sufficient underground.

We are still seeking new volunteers to become understudies or replacements for some of our dedicated commissioners. ASF General Secretary, Janice has also had a surprising amount of interest from non-caver potential volunteers via our website Volunteer Now form, which was originally designed for members. Please consider your own talents and availability, and volunteer to help us fill important gaps in the Federation.

Our Membership Secretary, Rod, has also been following up on the Council's decision to investigate a possible transition to the commercial membership database, RevolutioniseSPORT. At this stage, please discuss the proposal within your clubs and direct any questions or concerns to Rod. We will work to get these answered by the company and pass the information back to clubs for consideration.

In some celebratory news, the first UNESCO International Day of Caves and Karst is slowly creeping up on 13 September. There will also be an in-person event in Slovenia from 10-13 September 2026, that will be attended by our International Relations Commissioner, Sil. I encourage everyone to think about how you might celebrate within your local caving communities. It's also a great opportunity to promote the Karst Conservation Fund through your club activities and messages.

Looking further ahead, the 34th ASF Conference is now less than a year away. I'm already excited and getting ready for tickets to go on sale on 20 June 2026 - first in, best dressed. The theme, "Rays Through the Razor Karst", promises to be memorable, and I'm certainly looking forward to escaping the southern winter for a jaunt through some of Chillagoe's spectacular caves. If you haven't been caving in Chillagoe before, you're in for a real treat.

As always, happy caving, and I can't wait to see you all underground soon!"

Andrew Stempel

Allison Irvin



Abseiling into Macropaedes - Photo by Kat Lo Surdo

With the wet season behind us and the skies cleared, Chillagoe has transformed into something special. The blue skies, warm days and cool nights are about as close to perfect caving weather as you'll find anywhere in Australia. And it's exactly the backdrop we're planning for the 34th ASF Conference.

The Chillagoe Caving Club is proud to be hosting what we're hoping will be a memorable week for the Australian speleological community. Join us from 20-26th June 2027, with pre-conference caving available from the 18th and post-conference caving through to the 28th for those who want to make the most of the trip.

We're putting together an agenda that makes the most of everything this remarkable karst landscape has to offer: a full programme of talks, workshops, challenging speleosports courses, and of course, plenty of caving. When the sun goes down, the fun doesn't stop either, with night time activities planned throughout the week.

Getting There

Chillagoe sits 210 km west of Cairns on a mostly sealed road (only about 3 km of unsealed road remains) and takes around three hours to drive. It's a scenic trip through the tablelands that sets the mood nicely for the week ahead.

Accommodation

There's a good range of accommodation to suit all budgets and preferences, including camping, caravan parks, bed and breakfasts, motel units, and cabins. Some accommodation providers even offer a free shuttle bus service from Cairns, which is worth looking into if you'd rather not drive.

Dining

Most accommodation providers can arrange meals, and there are two pubs and a takeaway in town. The conference will also be putting on a welcome barbecue on the evening of the 20th and a finale dinner to close out the week in style.

Services

Chillagoe is well set up for visitors. The general store and hardware store between them stock almost anything you could need, and there's a service station in town. There's also a health clinic with a resident nurse for peace of mind.

Things to Do

There's plenty to keep you busy beyond the caves. Take a dip at the Bogie Hole or the weir, explore the ruins of the old smelters, spend some time with the remarkable Aboriginal rock art, or take a walk out to Balancing Rock or the Castle lookout. And of course, caving, caving, caving!

Caving

The caves of Chillagoe are something else entirely. Trips will be tailored to suit all levels of experience and enthusiasm, from easy walk-throughs to seriously challenging expeditions. The caves sit at a constant temperature of around 20 degrees, so cotton overalls are all you need, no fancy suits required.

More details, including competitions and updates to the programme, are being added to the website regularly. Tickets are on sale now!

We can't wait to welcome the caving community to Chillagoe. Tickets on sale from 20th June 2026

<https://www.asfconference2027.com.au/>

By the Chillagoe Caving Club Conference Organising Committee.

KUBLA KHAN CAVE

Now permanently rigged

Dave Wools-Cobb

Kubla Khan cave is considered by many cavers to be Australia's best cave. It is at Mole Creek in Northern Tasmania, part of the Mole Creek Karst National Park and managed by Parks & Wildlife Tasmania (PWS). Kubla is approximately 5 km long, has massive chambers, has five major abseils, lots of climbing, truly magnificent speleothems including one stalagmite 18 m high, and nicely finishes with a 15-minute wade in extremely cold water and a prusik out to the surface: it's got it all!

Access to Kubla is by permit only, and you must nominate a Kubla Khan Accredited Guide. Kubla Guide's responsibilities mainly relate to protecting the cave and ensuring each group has minimal impact. They are not specifically the 'leader' of the group but usually take on this role as they explain aspects of the cave. Each Kubla Guide is expected to provide a brief report to PWS shortly after a trip. This report usually includes state of the cave, anything unusual noted (e.g. extra muddying), and any behavioural issues with the group.

Karstcare, an environmental group made up of cavers caring for caves and karst have contributed over 2800 hours of voluntary work over the past 26 years or so to Kubla Khan. This has involved cleaning of most of the route, installing 12 boot washing stations to reduce mud tracking, installing some matting, string lining to define parts of the route, fixed P-Hangers to minimise rope impact on the cave and many fixed tubular tapes to assist with climbs.

All Tasmanian A.S.F. conferences since 1993 have involved some type of project to take advantage of visiting cavers availability to assist with work in this cave. In return they got to see this magnificent cave!

The latest news is that after a suggestion by NC caver Jessica Bayles via Tasmanian Speleological Liaison Council (TSLC) the PWS have agreed to have Kubla permanently rigged. In January a Karstcare group on behalf of TSLC rigged all internal pitches and also

used the opportunity to replace all climbing tapes and positioned a few others to make the trip safer. All tapes and ropes are suitably marked, and it is intended to replace these every 5-years unless determined earlier on inspection.

No inferred responsibility may be assumed: as usual, it is an individual's responsibility for their safety within the cave. The egress pitch still requires rigging by each group if planning a through trip. A Karstcare rope is available for this pitch if adequate notice is given.

This whole project has been funded by Karstcare, and it is hoped that all cavers visiting Kubla will make a rope replacement donation to the Karstcare account. Most trips are expected to be a through trip, which takes between 8 and 16 hours depending on the group's plans for photography. However, with permanent rigging in place it makes it practical to conduct a bounce trip, or for a party to change their minds about continuing if something untoward should occur.



Rift bypass - Photo by Jessica Bayles

Each group's Leader (permit holder) is required to submit a trip report to PWS and preferably also the Karstcare coordinator. In future it is preferred if a note regarding condition of the infrastructure is also included, particularly any wear points of rigging.

A decision to replace rope or tape more often will depend on such reports.

If urgent action is required, please copy any report to:

Dave Wools-Cobb

molecreekkarstcare@wildcaretas.org.au

PH 0429143245 or whomever else may be Karstcare coordinator.

As a contribution towards replacement of tapes & ropes, brushes, etc, it is expected that "visitors" (not Guides) pay a \$10 donation per person.

This is best done before the trip, coordinated by the group's leader as a Direct Deposit into: Westpac KARSTCARE BSB 037-013 Acc 167140

Protocols

- Contact made to Kubla Accredited Guide by visiting club/leader about proposed Kubla Khan cave trip. This can be direct to Kubla Guide, via any Tasmanian A.S.F. Club or via PWS.
- Kubla Guide & Leader discuss group's preparedness & capability. Date determined.
- Leader given details of rope usage fee and bank acc:

Westpac Karstcare BSB 037-013 Acc 167140.

Decision on who provides egress rope.

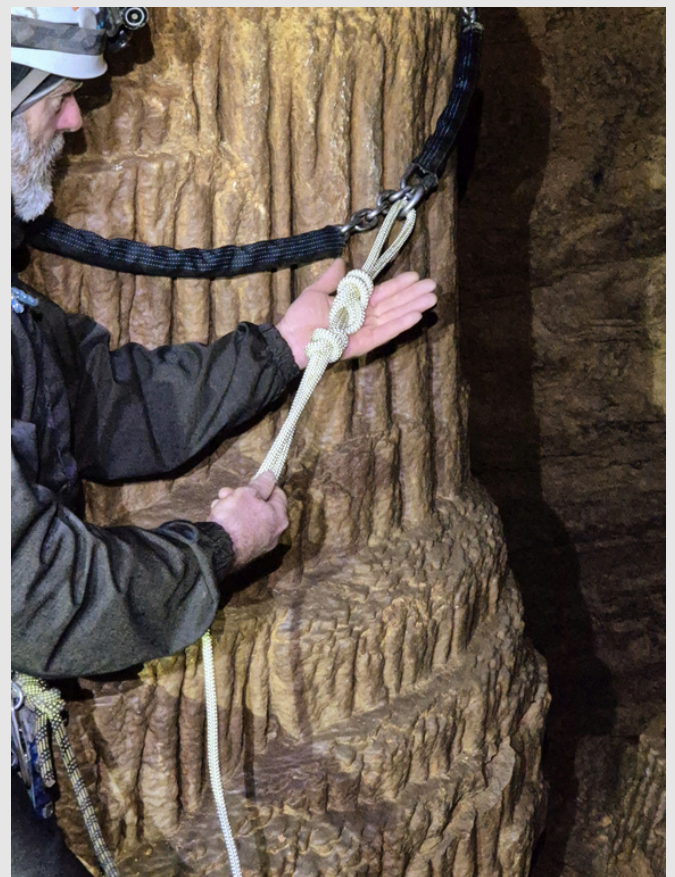
Club applies for permit with PWS:

Caving.bookings@parks.tas.gov.au

- PWS permit sent out, with Kubla Note sheet. Leader should ensure all participants are well prepared and actually read this Note Sheet!
- Arrangements made for key & its return
- Trip occurs
- Leader and Kubla Guide each submit a report to PWS.
- Karstcare notified of rope usage, any untoward issues and rope usage record sheet is completed.



Pleasure Dome Kubla Khan (Jessica Bayles) -
Photo by Dave Wools-Cobb



Cairn Hall pitch 1 - Photo by Jessica Bayles



Khyber pass rope - Photo by Jessica Bayles

YOUNG CAVERS MEETUP

Laurie Jolliffe



AIMED AT CAVERS 18-40
ALL ASF MEMBERS WELCOME



Searching for the young cavers meetup (lost) - Photo by Cole Neering

BUNGONIA 18-20 SEPT 2026

- Caving Saturday & Sunday
→ Beginner to Advanced trips
→ Horizontal & Vertical
- Friday & Saturday social nights
→ Dinner provided Saturday

RSVP & CONTACT INFO

Laurie Jolliffe (NUCC)
caving.nucc.anu@gmail.com

ESTIMATED COST

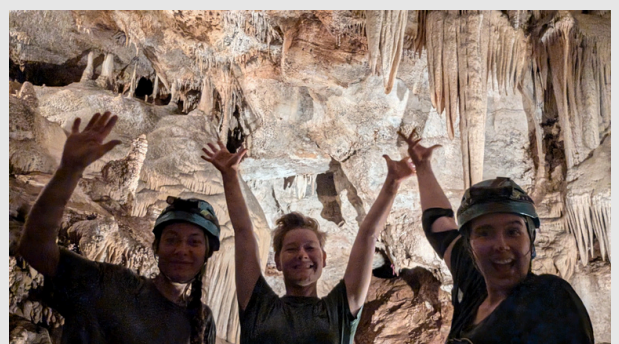
\$40 - inc. camping, saturday
dinner & misc trip costs



Mud included - Photo by Cole Neering



Gearwashing not included - Photo by Ally Kelly



This is not Bungonia (still lost) - Photo by Laurie Jolliffe

AUSTRALIAN CAVE ANIMALS WORD SEARCH

Tasmanian
Cave Spider
Hickmania troglodytes

To celebrate the
United Nations
International Day for
Biological Diversity
22 May

C V O U E H C S G S X N I Q T I U T L H
A C V W A P S H Q I I C N H J S H R A I
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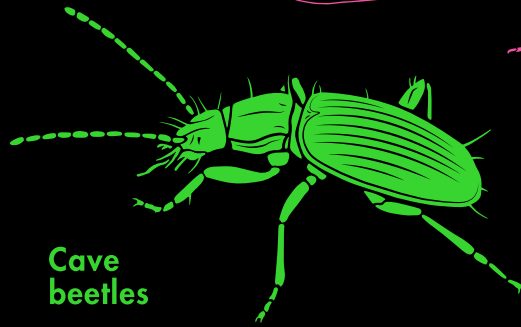
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|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 ANTENNAE | 10 EYELESS | 19 MATERNITY CAVE |
| 2 BENT WINGED BATS | 11 GHOST BAT | 20 PREY |
| 3 BIOSPELEOLOGY | 12 GLOWWORM | 21 SENSORY HAIRS |
| 4 CAVE CRICKETS | 13 GUANO | 22 SILK |
| 5 CAVE GUDGEON | 14 HABITAT | 23 TROGLOBITES |
| 6 CAVERNICOLE | 15 HICKMANIA TROGLODYTES | 24 UNDERGROUND |
| 7 CRUSTACEANS | 16 INVERTEBRATES | 25 WHITE NOSE |
| 8 ECHOLOCATION | 17 ISOPODS | |
| 9 EGG SAC | 18 LARVAL STAGE | |

Words can go in any direction. Words can
share letters as they cross over each other.

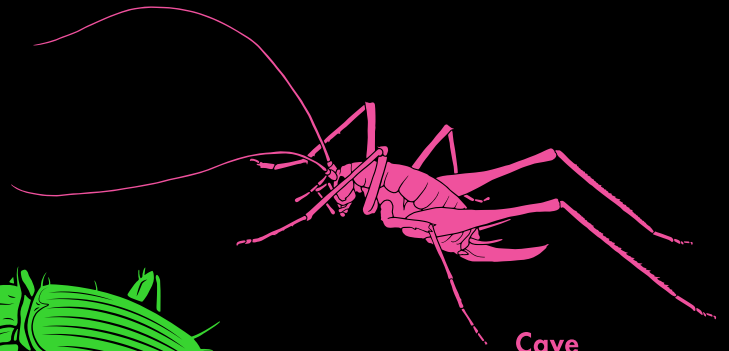


Ghost bat

Macroderma gigas



Cave beetles



Cave crickets

Raphidophoridae
family

ANTENNAE Antennae in insects are sensory organs located on the head, functioning primarily as 'noses' for smell and 'feelers' for touch. They are important for insects to find food, mates, and navigate their environment. Antennae may detect particular chemical molecules.

BENT-WINGED BATS Insect-eating bats from the *Miniopterus* genus that are commonly found in caves on the Australian mainland.

BIOSPELEOLOGY This is the science word for 'cave biology' and is the scientific study of the organisms that live in below-ground habitats (such as caves) and their ecosystems.

CAVE CRICKETS Cave crickets are wingless insects that live near the entrances of most caves in southern Australia. They have evolved to live in the darkness of caves and have no eyes, no wings and do not chirp. They use their long antennae and legs to find food.

CAVE GUDGEON This fish lives in caves and sinkholes, and only in the vicinity of North West Cape, Western Australia.

CAVERNICOLE An animal that lives in caves.

CRUSTACEANS A type of invertebrate animal—such as a crab, lobster, shrimp, or barnacle—that belongs to the arthropod family. They have a hard outer shell (exoskeleton), jointed legs, and segmented bodies. Some forms of crustaceans live only in water in caves that remain in total darkness.

ECHOLOCATION This is a biological navigation system used by bats to locate and identify objects by emitting sound-waves and listening to the returning echoes. By interpreting the timing and loudness of these echoes, bats can determine the distance, direction, speed, and size of prey and the location of cave walls in the darkness of caves.

EGG SAC The silken structure a spider builds to protect its eggs.

EYELESS Many cave animals do not have eyes, relying instead on senses like touch, smell and vibration. Cave animals have evolved to have no eyes as they are pointless when you live in world without light, and it is a waste of scarce food supplies to maintain a body part that is of no use.

HICKMANIA TROGLODYTES The scientific name of the Tasmanian Cave Spider which build horizontal webs up to one metre in diameter and may live for several decades.

ISOPODS In caves, isopods includes terrestrial slaters and unique aquatic groundwater species, often especially adapted for permanent darkness and with colourless bodies, absent eyes and extended limbs.

GHOST BAT The ghost bat is found in northern Australia and is the only Australian bat that preys on large vertebrates

GLOWWORM The larval stage of a small fly that produces light. There are eight species of glowworm in Australia.

GUANO Bat guano (faeces/poo) fuels unique, highly specialised ecosystems in Australian caves and, where it occurs, is a significant part of the cave food chain and often supports rare insect communities. Guano can also be significant for past climate research.

HABITAT The place where an organism (plant or animal) makes its home. Habitats are often under threat from human developments, and especially in caves, such as the Australian Nullarbor, which can be 'out of sight and out of mind'.

INVERTEBRATES Animals without a vertebral column (backbone), most Australian cave animals are invertebrates and include spiders, insects, beetles and worms.

LARVAL STAGE The immature and often worm-like form that many animals (especially insects, amphibians, and invertebrates) hatch into before undergoing metamorphosis into adults.

MATERNITY CAVE A specialised, warm, and humid cave environment used by female bats to congregate, give birth and raise their young (pups) during spring and summer.

PREY An animal that is hunted, caught and consumed for food by another animal (the predator).

SENSORY HAIRS These allow cave animals to 'see' and 'feel' in the darkness as they are sensitive to minute vibrations in the air or water, allowing cave animals to detect predators, prey and even social communications.

SILK This fibre is produced by glowworms and spiders as building material for their prey-catching webs and cocoons.

TROGLOBITES The term for animals who generally only live in caves and might have special adaptations for living underground.

UNDERGROUND Is where you'll find the dark world of caves that is home to many little-known cave animals. Often, not-known or little-known to science, let alone the wider community.

WHITE NOSE A deadly fungal disease has caused the deaths of thousands of bats in Europe, Asia and North America.

STOP THE PRESS!

Cavers can make a difference to save caves, karst and bats

Garry K. Smith



Melissa in the Ballroom chamber at Main Cave, Timor NSW - Photo by Garry K. Smith

On the 1 May 2026 EnergyCo released a revised plan for the alignment of the 5000 kV twin power line to avoid the caves and karst at Timor and Barry, NSW. This is a win for the speleological community amongst the ongoing karst battles currently underway in Australia.

So let's look at how this happened

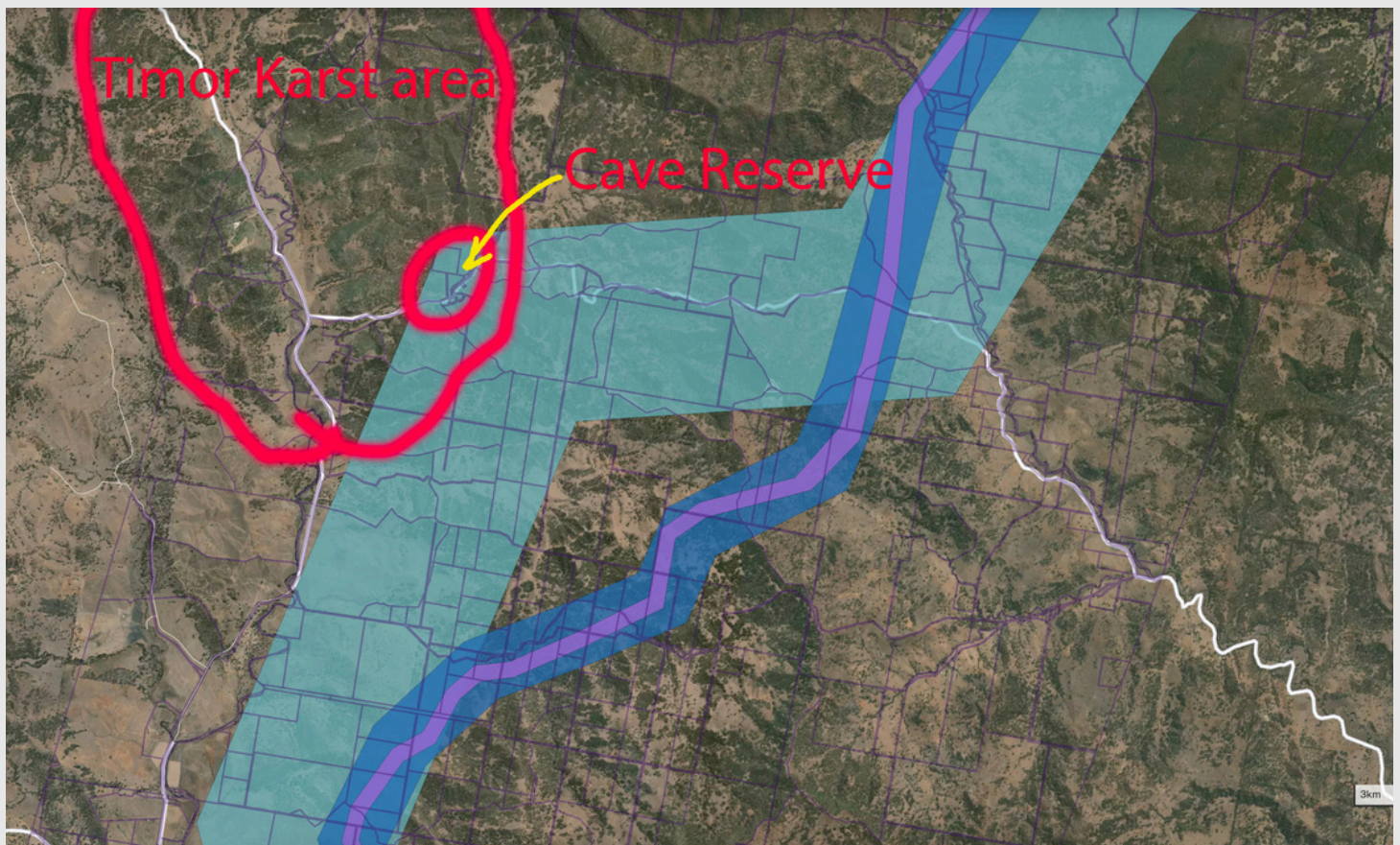
On the 2 December 2025, I was contacted by a Timor property owner, on whose land we have often gone caving and stayed at their shearers quarters! They alerted me to a proposal by EnergyCo (NSW government) to build twin tower transmission lines from Walcha to Muswellbrook that would cross Barry Station (Barry Caves), along Sergeants Gap Road and over Timor Caves, then follow Timor Road and Waverley Road all the way to Glenbawn Dam and on to Muswellbrook (Bayswater Power Station). This would mean a 140 m wide strip of totally cleared vegetation, construction of service roads (~670 km, 28 km exceeding 21% gradient) and construction of 80 m tall twin towers every 300-400 metres along the 220 km route. The preliminary route study corridor was 3 km wide and EnergyCo would then refine this down to a 1 km wide corridor in early 2026.

There were many aspects of this proposed development to consider: destruction of caves, destruction of the unique karst vegetation, loss of bat foraging vegetation, habitat loss of forest dwelling bats (e.g. Lesser Long-eared Bats roost under the beards of the grass trees, Bentwing and Horseshoe bats roost in the caves), erosion etc.

NHVSS members were notified and a flurry of emails followed. Submissions were hastily compiled as there was only a small window of time to provide "feedback" aka objections, before 12 December 2025. I had several phone conference meetings with EnergyCo's - New England Renewable Energy Zone (New England REZ) biodiversity and environmental consultants. The first on the 5 December 2025, and a second for 1.5 hour on the 8 December 2025, to present the case as to why power lines should not be constructed over or near karst.



Typical karst vegetation (Grass trees) at Timor - Photo by Garry K Smith



New Power line corridor now reduced down from a 3km strip (light blue and purple) to a 1km strip (dark blue and purple)

There was also much correspondence between myself, and NHVSS members Murray Dalton, Jodie Rutledge and several of the Timor land owners to ascertain their position and thoughts on the process. Murray Dalton was able to verify the correct limestone boundaries for Timor and Barry as opposed to the inaccurate NSW, DPI Geological Survey maps. Murray, Jodie and I individually made submissions to EnergyCo objecting to the powerline crossing the karst and proximity to the caves in both areas.

An onsite meeting was organised by the Timor action group "Protect the Valley" for the 10 April 2026, to involve politicians, residents and stakeholders (e.g. NHVSS). Murray was able to attend this day long meeting, despite many hours of driving to do so.

In attendance were Penny Sharpe (NSW Minister for Climate Change & Energy) and David Layzell (Local National Member), EnergyCo personnel plus about 40 local property owners.

They drove in convoy between the three stops at sites along the Timor Valley and up past the caves.

Murray was able to talk directly to Penny Sharpe for about 15 minutes during a car sharing rides between sites. Apparently, Penny was very receptive to what Murray had to say about the caves and karst, also divulging that she had caved many years ago at Wombeyan. At the Timor Caves Reserve the steep terrain and unique vegetation that would be destroyed were very obvious.

At each stop a speaker talked about the area and different aspects of the proposal, then Penny replied to any questions.

EnergyCo personnel indicated to Murray that they appreciated the information I had supplied to them earlier. It is good to hear that the consultants are listening to our feedback/objections re the need to protect karst and caves.



Sonia in Belfrey Cave - Timor - Photo by Garry K Smith

Murray's assessment of the day was, "the NSW government is committed to the New England Renewable Energy Hub, with a transmission line to get the energy from Walcha to the Bayswater Power Station infrastructure, and they would produce an EIS that cleared them of any responsibility."

Murray did a fantastic job in talking personally to the Ministers and EnergyCo personnel. Certainly his time spent on that day was worth more than a thousand emails and submissions.

The revised transmission corridor (now 1 km wide) for the New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) network infrastructure project was released on the EnergyCo NSW website on 1 May 2026.

The revised route is about 4 km to the south east of the Timor karst, and about 3 km to the west of Barry karst. All routes will reduce the foraging area for bats and habitat for other threatened species, however this revised 1 km wide corridor provides a reasonable buffer around the two karst areas.

Understandably there are still plenty of issues around destruction of vegetation and habitat, destruction and impact on farmland, aesthetics, erosion, endangered species etc, that are ongoing and many farmers/landowners are certainly not happy with the power line proposal.

An online petition was organised by the action group and the required 20,000+ signatures were received for the ePetition "Rejection of New Transmission Line Corridor from Walcha LGA to Bayswater". This means the issue will be debated in the NSW parliament on **Thursday 25th June 2026**. Once the debate has ended, a video will be uploaded to the parliament's Facebook page here:

www.facebook.com/NSWAssembly

Whatever the outcome of the NSW parliamentary debate, it appears we have shifted the proposed powerline alignment away from the two karst areas. So, an important win for the small speleological lobby with the 1 km wide final powerline corridor moved at least 3 km from the karst at Timor and Barry.



Sonia and Jodie beneath pool crystals on the ceiling in Main Cave, Timor - Photo by Garry K Smith

NATIONAL CAVE RESCUE WORKSHOP

Brian Evans



Group photo - Photo by Isabella Lowe

In late February, the Australian Cave Rescue Commission held its third national workshop for cave rescuers. Thirty-eight people attended, with at least two from each state but also representation from Ambulance Tasmania and Search and Rescue police from both Tasmania and NSW.

For many participants, sharing what we do with the paid agencies, and learning from their great experience in managing emergencies was the highlight.

VRA Rescue NSW also had Tony Hine, their manager for capability development (and the person who looks after the NSW Cave Rescue Squad) attending, and gave strong financial support to help Caves Australia run the event. A huge thanks is due to that organisation as it greatly reduced the financial donation each participant needed to make to participate. Tony also gave a presentation outlining possible future support for cave rescue across the country. Many participants were very interested in that potential.

Program highlights

Participants shared how their regional team prepares and trains its members, and there were reports about each of the five rescues in the last few years.

In 2024, NSW was involved in an extraction of a "stuck" caver at Jenolan, and activated again a few months later to support the extraction of an injured caver at Bungonia.

Also, in 2024 a team from central Queensland extracted an injured caver from the Mt Etna area. Then in 2025 an expedition involving mostly Chillagoe CC cavers put their recently practised rescue skills into action.

Finally, late in 2025, the Cave Diving Association of Australia's rescue and recovery group made a body recovery from Tank Cave in SA.

An afternoon practical session of capping in a nearby quarry was greatly appreciated, with both police forces being very impressed with the precision and safety of rock removal in a cave environment.



Dane explaining how mesh radios work, and how to use them
- Photo by Janice March



Enjoying de-obstruction practice in the rain – Photo by Allison Irvin

Tasmanian police and ambulance gave presentations on what they expect of the volunteer caver rescuers at an incident. There was an excellent session from Alan Jackson on "Taking Control", a reminder of the times when not making a decision is the same as making a bad one! Al Warild ran us through the approach to training that NSW uses and there were two sessions on communications systems that many were unfamiliar with - through-rock radio, e.g. Nicola or CaveLink and its relevance to a hasty team in a large cave was brought to us by Henry Garratt and a newly developed mesh radio system (instead of laying wires, a series of repeater 'nodes' are placed at intervals; and then text communication can reach all operators in the cave) from Dane Evans. These were two that I was particularly passionate to share: fast delivery of communication to a casualty in the deep and challenging caves of (especially) southern Tasmania are likely to make an enormous difference to any injured or missing cavers there, and several states have insufficient Michie phones, or find the voice transmissions ineffective because of noise from water and text systems are likely to solve both of those problems.

Another practical session involving teams extracting a dummy from a challenging squeeze created much laughter and co-operation, but may also help when one of our groups is faced with that problem. People also had a chance to set up their phones to talk to the mesh radios - invaluable for those working in "the wet way" of KD for Saturday where it was the primary communication method.

We finished with some sessions on the skills caver rescuers need, and some suggestions on how the ACRC can best support ongoing cave rescue preparedness.



A nasty squeeze! – Photo by Heather Siebert



The TasPol dummy is trapped in a tight squeeze. Perhaps one of these rescuers will extract it? – Photo by Ciara Smart



The NSW Police listening with fascination to Bec Foxen from Ambulance Tasmania talking about "what the paramedics expect of caver-rescuers" – Photo by Allison Irvin

People's highlights

- Bec Foxen's (Ambulance Tasmania) "moon blanket" demonstration of using a rescue blanket.
- The chance of building a relationship with VRA Rescue. "Tony was very impressive!"
- Getting to know other caver rescuers and emergency services workers; networking; catching up with everyone's enthusiasm.
- Learning of the different perspectives and challenges of groups around Australia.
- The recap on recent rescues.
- Mesh radios; capping.
- Brendan Moore's, (CDAA) presentation on the cave diving recovery and analysis process.
- "The wonderful, respectful banter amongst everyone in the caving community."
- Personally, my highlight was sharing time and enthusiasm with others passionate about cave rescue – what a dedicated, hard-working bundle of cavers we have around this country, putting in the preparation to be ready for a cave rescue!



There are many thanks due, but, in this journal, the most important is: "to Caves Australia members for supporting this workshop. It really helps ensure our preparedness for cave rescue is as good as it can be, across the country."

Farewell

Brian announced his retirement as ACRC commissioner after eight years and announced that Bogdan (Bo) Muresan (many will know!) is taking over the role, with great knowledge and lots of experience in teaching cave rescue skills around the country.



Brian trying to explain the international framework that supports our preparedness – Photo by David Taberner



The casualty being moved through the cave on Saturday - Photo by unknown

Niggly Cave Grows Again

Stephen Fordyce



The scale of the mastercave in Niggly - Photo by Alex Motyka

Introduction

In the Junee-Florentine (JF) area of southern Tasmania, the Niggly exploration project has been running hot. Wins at “Mastercave or Bust” have become absurdly frequent! In case you’ve been living under a rock (an eminently honourable excuse in this community), JF-237 Niggly Cave/Delta Variant is part of the JF-36 Growling Swallet system, which is the deepest cave system in Australia at a bit over 400 m. Or at least, it might be – a recent STC expedition to Mt Anne has brought that into question, but that’s a different story which is not mine to tell.

After negotiating most of the vertical in a very short time, the cave goes horizontal, with several kilometres of railway tunnel stream passage (“mastercave”) and a bunch more side-leads. We typically do three nights underground each trip, to give two days working at the extremities.



El Dorado, under 800 W of light! - Photo by Alex Motyka

Breakthroughs in 2025

On Valentines Day 2025, after eight years of project work and four years of focus in this area, the downstream terminal rockpile was bypassed (via a dig in a draughting side passage) and 1.2 km of gigantic streamway cave “El Dorado” was explored. Blame for that name is mine, and I had to pull rank to apply it! Luckily nobody on the trip (a good mix of veterans from STC, NC, VSA, SUSS) knew it was already in use in northern Tassie until it was too late, so plausible deniability was legitimate.

After spending a bunch of time away in early 2025, I wasn’t able to get back to Tassie for a while, so the locals were unchained and left to run free. They did another two camping trips and some daytrips before winter weather made it a bit dicey – the access to El Dorado has a crux with only 40 cm of airspace above the river, and Niggly is known to flood to epic proportions. The 20 m high mudbanks are a sobering and annoying reminder! They bagged kilometres (no kidding!) of interesting side leads and found a way past where the February breakthrough team had got stuck in the Florence Rockpile at the end of El Dorado. Yep, it’s named after the ill-fated tunnel boring machine from Snowy Hydro 2.0 (credit to Alex Motyka for that gem of a name). Fortunately, the new mastercave was found at the very end of the trip, and cool heads graciously agreed to save it nine months for a summer trip with plenty of advance notice.



Council of war in the Florence Rockpile - Photo by Alex Motyka

The side leads in El Dorado were very interesting – with the Valentine Streamway in just the right location and with the right amount of water to correspond to Sesame Cave. I ran two Sesame dive projects in 2021 and 2022 with many people helping, but, tellingly, few of those coming on more than one trip. It is truly horrible getting to the Sesame Sump, the more so with dive gear (and camping gear). The sump was written off as too tight (and too damn miserable), but with a possible dig in zero visibility if you were desperate enough. When plotted together, the new bits of Niggly came within an eye-popping 15 m of Sesame, and the sump at the Niggly side of the gap was reckoned to be (just) diveable. Further downstream in El Dorado, the Myopia side passage was confirmed to be carrying water from current project Voltera Swallet, and the gap narrowed to about 60 m. Either connection would be extremely cool.

Over winter Alan Jackson worked on greatly improving the rigging, and plans were concocted for the Best Ever Niggly Trip (BENT). I also decided that I would make this trip my last. It has been a great ride, but after running 24x 4-day camping trips my motivation is flagging, and I would like to direct my energy towards other things (including other Mastercave or Bust projects in the JF).



The cinema became a most excellent feature of Niggly camping trips - Photo by Alice Kelly

2026 Extensions

Australia Day 2026 provided a suitable long weekend, and luckily natural attrition brought the team down to a vaguely manageable eight people. NUCC put in a solid contingent, having earned their stripes across multiple trips through the year. They were about as boisterous as at the ASF Conference in Buchan (very), while being extremely good value, and helping to install a beacon at the terminal dig in Voltera - which was programmed to spew light, noise and VHF radio signals towards Myopia in Niggly.

As always, a camping trip requires a theme song, in this case the deliciously whiney "One Hand in My Pocket" by Alanis Morissette, which has a line for every situation (what caver can't identify with "I'm brave, but I'm chickenshit"?!). We also gave the Niggly cinema a last screening: *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (it was most bodacious). While getting our faff on, we also surveyed in the detector locations from a while back – this will allow depth data during a big flood to be used to very accurately determine relative heights of survey stations 1.5 km apart. And feed into a more robust cave depth number.



Cocoon Ridge - Photo by Alex Motyka



Obligatory pre-dive photo - Photo by Lauren Joliffe

Our first proper day was connection pushes (if the mastercave went bigtime, nobody was going to want to stop!). two separate teams headed to Myopia (over 3 km and 3 hrs from camp) to try to observe some kind of signal from the beacon in Voltera, and get a feel for just how much digging would be required to reach it. Sadly, despite careful listening, no signals were received – but a completely definitive write-off will have to wait until the beacon is retrieved and log data confirms it was actually beaconing.

Fortunately, the dive team had better luck, and after a very short, shallow and grovelly (but no digging required) dive I was able to tie onto the guideline left in Sesame four years before, and a commemorative marker with initials of the whole Niggly team was placed next to the corresponding Sesame one. The survey error was remarkably accurate – within a couple of metres over 5 km cave distance! A plethora of Growling Swallet/Niggly/Delta Variant/Sesame through-trip combinations await some future masochistic diver (and a long-suffering support team). Detailed reports including dive notes are published for each trip in the *Speleo Spiel*.

Finally, our second full day underground was dedicated to the rarest of all things: a guaranteed win at Mastercave or Bust. To give everyone something to do (and for extra accuracy and some learning opportunities) we ran two survey and sketching teams in parallel – this worked surprisingly well although really needs three in parallel for resolution of systematic discrepancies, sigh. We followed the river at base level: it was not huge here (a mere 3 m square in cross section) but there were hints of big fossil passage above. After 200 m the mastercave stream disappeared into rockpile, which was pushed enthusiastically but could not be made to go.

However, a little way back, the rockpile provided an easy climb up into gargantuan mud-covered passage (the “Doonamancers Lair” – ask the NUCCers) and we negotiated assorted epic mudbank climbs, finding a 10m pitch back down to the stream. Since that would effectively be game over for this trip, we poked about, finding a hole back down to the stream. A handline was rigged and we were off again.

The character of the stream had changed – it was fast flowing, with a clean-washed limestone bed (streams in the JF almost always have dolerite pebbles on the bottom) and more gradient than previously. There were places where it would be a bit scary to keep your feet. Only a few minutes later, the stream cascaded into a large pool and went around the corner. An in-the-water approach seemed rather like it would be a one-way trip, so with considerable effort we negotiated some nasty choss to traverse around the rapids and gain a poolside platform.



Henry inspects the Most Non-Triumphant Sump pool - Photo by Stephen Fordyce

Henry did some epic manoeuvres to somehow (and without swimming) traverse around the corner and confirm the pool was ringed by solid rock walls – so it was named the Most Non-Triumphant Sump (thanks Bill and Ted). It's a big sump, looks deep and while probably fine thanks to the large cross-sectional area, the inward current was somewhat intimidating (especially for climbing back out of the water!). There was some delicious (bitter?) irony to discovering such a spectacular sump on my last trip, especially with dive gear sitting back at camp. From a diver's perspective, it's a Most Triumphant sump really.

Above the sump was a steep ramp across a rock bridge and up a mud slope leading to a suspicious patch of black 10 m above, where the high level giant passage development seemed to be. With our ever-present mini-shovel, it was doable initially, but gradually morphed into near-insanity, and even Henry agreed that a return with aid climbing kit would be wise. It was getting pretty late anyway, and with a three hour slog back to camp we called it a day. The haul of mastercave was satisfying but somewhat modest at about 250 m – I guess the bonanza on the breakthrough trip was always going to be hard to beat. Camp was gained, sleep was had, faffing was done, 250 m of heavy-bagged SRT was completed, and many of us returned rather happily to the mainland furnace to enjoy some extended recovery time.

The Tasmanians had a weekend off and went back again!

Project stalwarts Ciara and Henry were joined by Jemma for an assault on the near-insanity mudbank. They successfully gained the top (leaving a rope in place) and stomped off through giant mud-floored fossil mastercave. Unfortunately it seemed to crap out after 200 m, and thanks to this and some recurring and rather inconvenient bodily functions, the team headed out a day early.



Camp faffing - Photo by Alex Motyka

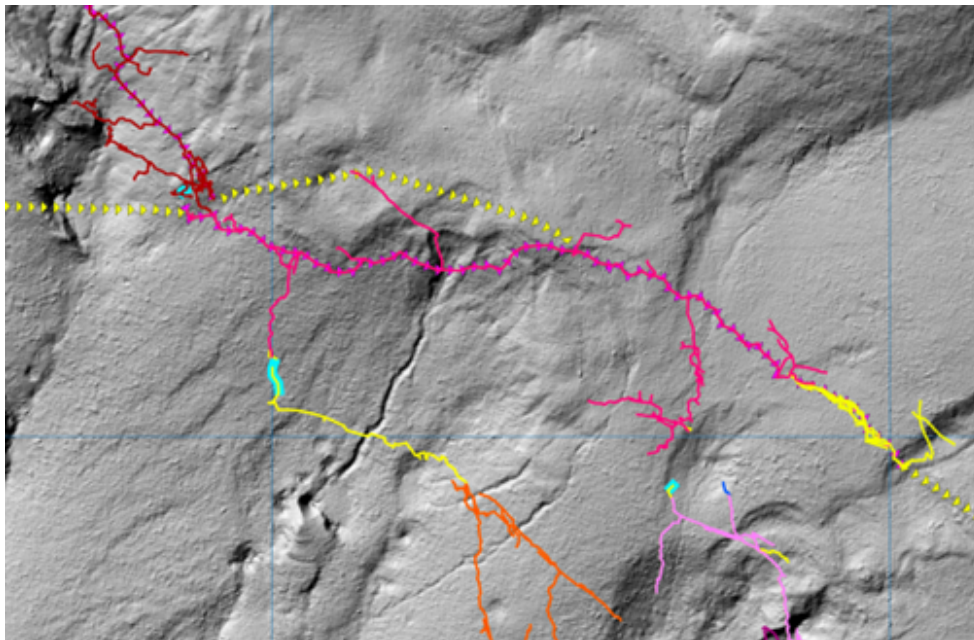


Henry up a (different) near-insanity mud bank, contemplating self-arrest possibilities with the crowbar - Photo by Stephen Fordyce

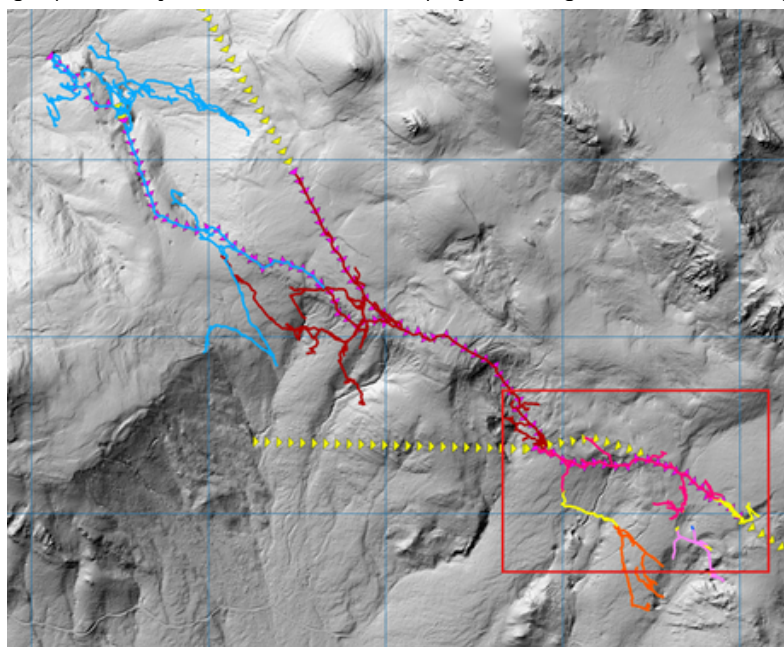
At time of writing, it's a bit early to say what the future might hold for the Niggly project, but I dare say there is at least a trip or two left in it to mop up some obscure/unpleasant leads, and double check with fresh eyes. Never say never, but for the moment, retirement from the project is sitting pretty well with me. Yes I would like to dive the Most Non-Triumphant Sump, but it would be a huge effort on top of a huge effort to tackle it properly, especially at the tail end of such a long project. So I reckon someone else can have that dubious glory. Maybe it would be best dived from the other side anyway, ha!

Postscript

Some readers may be surprised at the lack of fanfare about an Australian cave depth record, especially considering my track record in the fanfare department. Even apart from the Mt Anne developments, some Niggly loop closures thanks to new entrances and resurveying had produced some results that were, umm, embarrassing... Especially when the previously claimed record was 401 m. Fortunately, the El Dorado breakthrough has definitely got the cave deeper than the Dreamtime Sump in Growling Swallet (the somewhat confusing previous deepest point), and the cave is definitely over 400 m. Ahem, now. With all this new downstream mastercave, new connections and strategic resurveys, there is more data crunching to be done ahead of publishing a very robust depth number and a very long and boring explanation on how it has come about. Stay tuned, but don't hold your breath.



The current state of play, with pre-breakthrough Niggly in maroon, 2025 additions in dark pink, 2026 additions in yellow (mastercave with magenta arrows, theorised with yellow arrows). Sesame in orange/yellow and blue background for sump. Voltera in light pink with yellow and blue new this project. 1 km grid shown - Photo by Stephen Fordyce



The entire system (Growling Swallet in blue), red rectangle showing state of play map - Photo by Stephen Fordyce

I first poked at the Niggly downstream terminal rockpile nine years ago, and have driven the Niggly project at it in the last five years since Atlantis was proclaimed finished, spending 13x 4-day camping trips on the breakthrough (plus some effort on earlier trips). While also being a convenient excuse to brag(!), I want to highlight just how much effort may be required for a breakthrough, and encourage others to go for that one more push. Not to mention some luck, being painfully systematic, using any/all tricks and tools, ignoring the ye of little faith, and of course having people to do it with. It's always dangerous to list people, but here's my best shot (roughly in order of appearance) at those on this project who made the slog out to the Meru Rockpile and beyond.

- Petr Smejkal
- Andreas Klocker
- Stephen Fordyce
- Serena Benjamin
- Andrew Terhell
- David Rueda Roca
- Sandy Varin
- David Bardi
- Ben Armstrong
- Stefan Eberhard
- Pat Eberhard
- Gabriel Kinzler
- Alan Jackson
- Ciara Smart
- Karina Anders
- Keith Chatterton
- David Myles
- Oxana Repina
- Jemma Herbert
- Lachlan Bailey
- Henry Garratt
- Bogdan (Bo) Muresan
- Brendan Moore
- Kynan Bonnice
- Ashlee Bastiaansen
- Eleanor March
- Alex Motyka
- Ben Honan
- Ben Hofmann
- Lauren Joliffe
- Alice Kelly
- Cole Neering
- Carl Walsh



Just one of many awesome Niggly teams - Photo by Ciara Smart



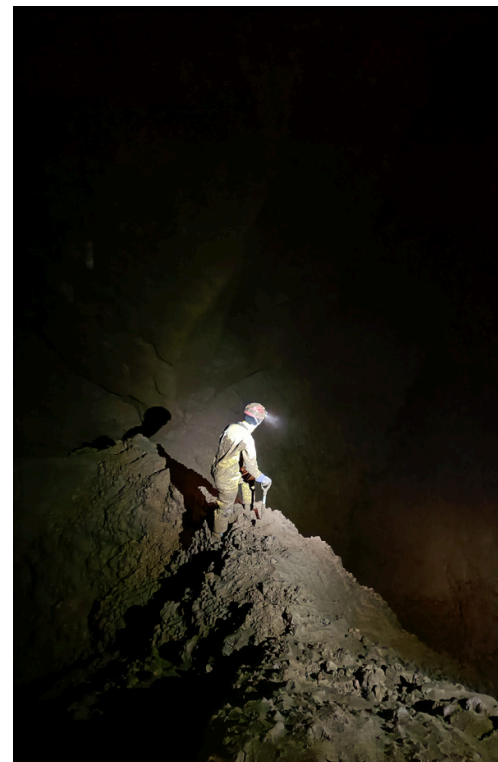
The breakthrough team - Photo by Bogdan Muresan



The frog suit in action - Photo by Alex Motyka



Mastercave with ceiling detail - Photo by Alex Motyka



Kynan contemplates his retreat - Photo by Stephen Fordyce



Some idiot building the beacon - Photo by Nadia Wu



The reduced-size mastercave near Florence Rockpile - Photo by Alex Motyka



Mastercave scored - Photo by Alex Motyka

NZ MULTI-DAY SAREX, 2026

Brian Evans, Jemma Herbert, Henry Garratt, Ciara Smart, Karina Anders

Photos by unknown but permission given to use



Debrief time. Sarah was police, and in the incident manager role for much of the exercise. She was loud and frequent in saying, "cavers are the experts, and you in the cave have the best understanding of what should happen. Just tell us frequently!"

Brian

Our friends across the ditch have a national organisation they call CaveSAR. They get multiple calls each year to find or extract cavers, and many of their caves are BIG (many kilometres of surveyed passage, >1000 m deep, and cold) so they have great experience and a mature organisation.

They invite us over to train with them, and we've had their members over for two of our cave rescue workshops, and for training and exercises. Their big one, though, is the multiday SAREx, held in the deep caves around Nelson, and running over three days – it's an opportunity for them (and us) to practice with a large team, large scale incident management, and many people underground!

Australians have travelled over to participate for at least the last three: 2019, 2023 and 2026. For this one, we had: Matt Dunwoodie and Keith Chatterton from Victoria, although Matt now lives in Motueka and Keith visits NZ for much of every year; Janice March from northern Tasmania; Dane and Ruth Evans and myself from NSW and Jemma Herbert, Henry Garratt, Ciara Smart and Karina Anders from southern Tasmania. There were a few others who expressed interest but were unable to commit this year.

CaveSAR has a strong organisational commitment to getting "the people who are actively caving" underground and putting the less fit, or even just not currently active, in surface roles. They have a strong relationship with their SAR Police and managing 100+ people requires many surface roles!

Jemma, Henry, Ciara and Karina had been awarded an ACRC grant in mid 2025, to travel to attend both the NSW major exercise in October and this NZ exercise. They've kindly given us this report.

SAR INCIDENT ACTION PLAN (INITIAL)			
Operation name: Deep Cave Sarex		Date: 6th March	Initial Response Period
Subject's name: Jane		Time from: 0700 Time to: 1700	Goal: To safely rescue the injured party
Incident Control: Sarah		Liason: Kip	Situation Summary: (Brief circumstances and action taken) 6:50pm on 6th March Jane has fallen 6m down a climb while exiting clearance stream in Tomo Marua cave - Ellis Basin.
Planning: Dane/Michele	Intelligence: Dane/Michele	Operations: Bee	Resources: (WHO will do it?)
Objectives: (WHAT do you want to achieve?)		Strategies: (HOW are you going to achieve your objectives?)	
Establish common F/B ✓ - cave - michele coordinate		Fly rescue ✓ - michele line & coordinate in cave - lead.	
Planning for next improved & not opposite		- Heavy team	
Locate injured party & ext condition		- Fly team & gear to Ellis hut	
Establish F/B ✓		heli:	
Establish hel spots - water - food & water		- ext Hel spots - location - water - enter & exit to site - get gear to sites	
		heli: Cavers. Heli: water - Sub	

REQUIREMENTS

Incident management's understanding of the problems and the solutions! This is a part of the operation that we cavers need to understand!



Janice on night shift at the Cave Entrance management team.

Jemma, Henry, Ciara, Karina

Over three days in early March 2026, four of us from STC headed over to join more than 100 cavers and support personnel for New Zealand's triennial deep cave search and rescue exercise, held in Tomo Thyme, an alpine cave in the Ellis Basin. The exercise was a serious undertaking, with Police, LandSAR, the Fire Service, and helicopter operators all involved.

From the incident command at the base of the mountain, we were choppered up to the Elis Basin, which was exciting and spectacular. From there we were gradually dribbled into the cave as required. An Australian team, led by Ciara, was assembled on Friday afternoon and tasked with setting up a rehydration hotspot and assisting with stretcher carries. Armed with 20 litres of water, electrolytes, soups, hot chocolate, coffee and foam mats, we descended seven pitches to the massive boulder chamber of Kortakay. We arrived to slight chaos because the casualty and hasty team got lost, and ended up starting the exercise higher in the cave than planned. When we arrived, the stretcher was already moving toward Kortakay, reportedly just "15 minutes away". This set off a rapid reshuffling of hotspot location and sleeping arrangements. We ended up camping overnight in Kortakay itself, which, being a massive boulder field, wasn't exactly comfortable, but we mostly managed a surprisingly decent nap during the mandatory 1 am-4 am shutdown.

The following morning, we were re-tasked across a range of roles. Jemma led a mixed NZ-Australian team, later joined by Henry, to rig pitches 6 and 2, using NZ-style dual tension systems on pulse bolts. Karina and Dane rigged a counterweight system with a human redirect on Pitch 5, navigating the stretcher through a tight slot. Ciara bounced between derigging Michie wire, stretcher teams and gear shuttling.

Things mostly ran smoothly, but as can be expected there were some challenges to help us learn! We had issues with a radio that only cooperated under very specific conditions, and our casualty Scotty was briefly hauled face-down across a scree slope, which wasn't ideal. After somewhere between 20 and 30 hours underground, we surfaced to an amazing hot meal and well-earned rest.

It's always interesting to see the differences in our systems. NZ uses more stretcher carrying rather than passing, uses 3:1 pulley systems more often, requires dual tension independent systems, and makes use of dedicated stretcher-moving teams. Not all of this is directly transferable to our context, but there are definitely things to be learnt.

We're grateful to the Australian Cave Rescue Commission for contributing to our flights, without which the trip wouldn't have been possible. We hope that the skills we've picked up, people we met, and relationships built ultimately make all of our rescue capability stronger.



Brian on comms at Forward Base on Friday



Feeding time at the hotspot in Kortakay



Kortakay looks a lovely place for a lie-down!

A couple of individual observations Ciara

The NZ SARex is a very large and complicated affair, with over 100 individuals present and heavy operational support including communications (Starlink, radio, Michie phones and CaveLink), catering and helicopter support. Many agencies attend, including Police, LandSAR and the Fire service. This year 80 cavers went underground (including 17 women). On the surface, Incident Control was managed from a command centre in a police truck parked below the mountain, with a forward base at a hut about 30 minutes away from the cave, and a further base stationed at the cave entrance. Janice took on the graveyard shift at the cave entrance all night, and Ruth and Brian also took roles in Incident Management.

The first rescue teams went underground on Friday morning, and the last emerged about 10 pm on Saturday night. Team entry is staged, and many of people sleep underground during the compulsory curfew of 1 am-4 am.

This year about 31 people slept underground in an unplanned hotspot which ended up being a suboptimal boulder field. The patient was extracted from about -200 m along a route that involved multiple pitches and interesting stretcher carrying sections. All up, the exercise was a brilliant display of teamwork, interagency communication and technical rescue rigging skills.

Henry

I had a ride in the stretcher, for the whole stretcher carry section of Kortakay. The Aspiring stretcher is much less comfortable than the Petzl Nest! I was being carried mostly horizontally, occasionally almost vertically and really noticed how much less supportive it was especially when in the vertical position.



Command post



At the hydration station in Kortakay. There was very little water available in the cave, this time, so this was all carried in – much by our Aussie team!



With two separate ropes, one with a 3:1 pulley system, plus an access line, there's a lot of rigging at the head of each pitch.



Rigging inside the cave



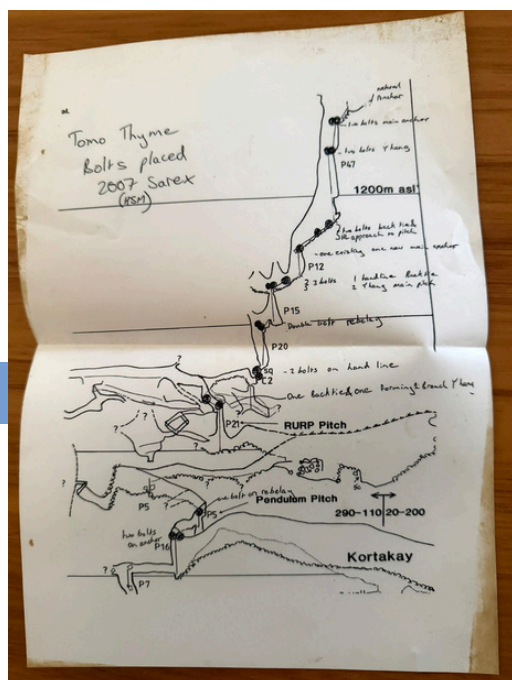
It's a privilege having helicopter support to get gear and people to the cave. The alternate is a four hour walk up a typical NZ hill – steep. It's probably only 900 vertical metres?

Karina

Interestingly, in NZ they carry the stretcher more than pass, advantages are that it is much quicker but the disadvantages include tiring the stretcher carriers (this is ok if you can switch out the people more regularly but not if you don't have the man power). I also thought it was interesting carrying the stretcher up quite steep rocky slopes while stretcher carriers had to carry and climb the rocks. In Tasmania, we might be more likely to build long Tyroleanes.

Jemma

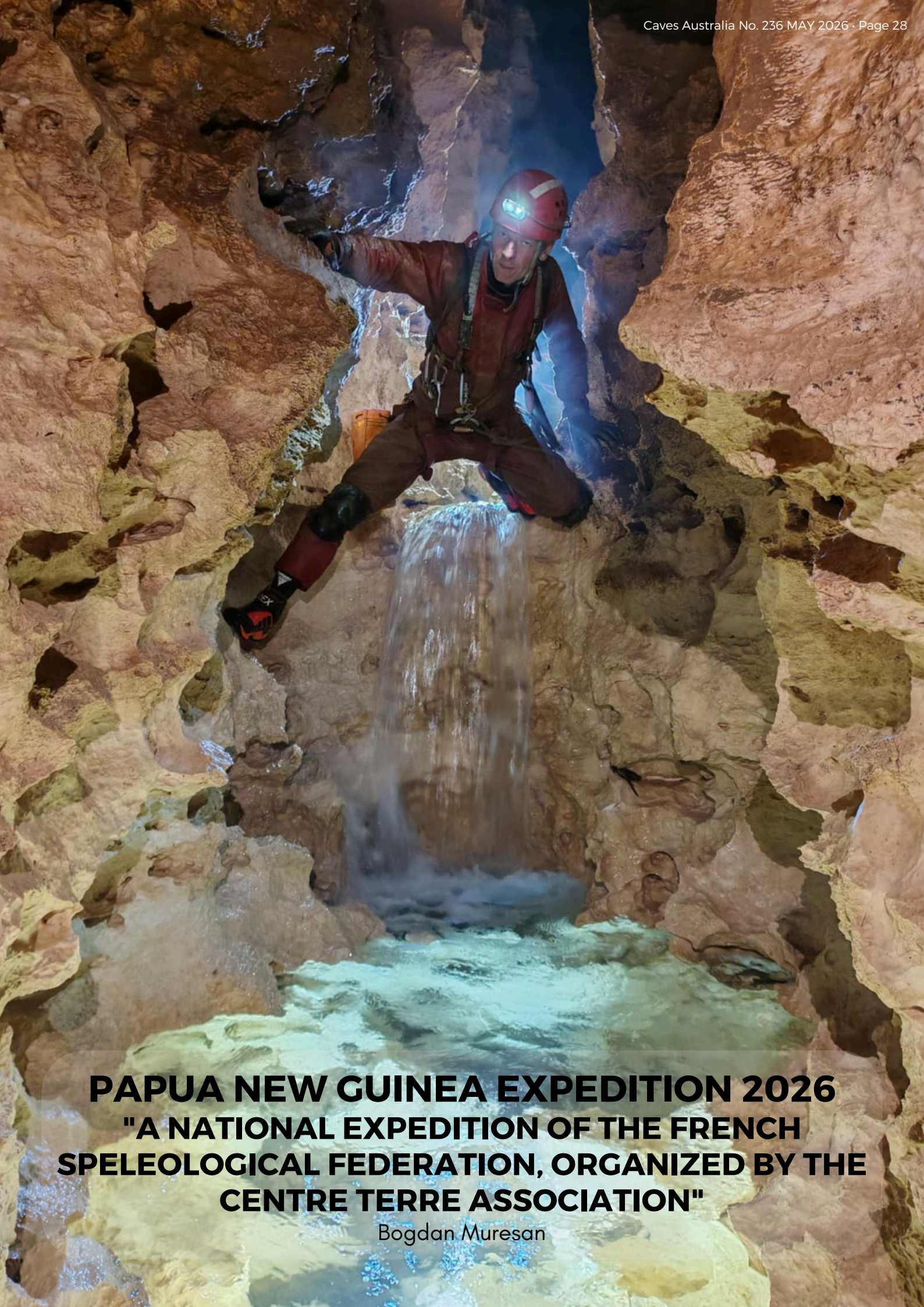
I really liked the diversity of underground roles that they make use of. Not everyone is a rigging team. There are dedicated stretcher moving teams that just provide the manpower needed on each section so rigging teams can leapfrog each other and keep rigging. They also have ropes separate to rigging gear, which is a bit more versatile than our all in one bags.



A sketched elevation of this part of the cave.



Sorting gear as people leave the helicopters on Sunday morning



PAPUA NEW GUINEA EXPEDITION 2026
"A NATIONAL EXPEDITION OF THE FRENCH
SPELEOLOGICAL FEDERATION, ORGANIZED BY THE
CENTRE TERRE ASSOCIATION"

Bogdan Muresan



© www.centre-terre.fr

In 2024 I travelled to France for a caving course run by the French Cave Rescue Commission. During this course I met Bernard Turte which is the head of the SSF (French cave rescue commission) and also the president of a French caving club called Centre Terre. Later, during the course he told me that in 2026 they are running a caving expedition in PNG and it would be good if I wanted to join the expedition as it's close to Australia. I didn't think much about it as at that moment I didn't know much about PNG caving or about Centre Terre.

Later I learned more about Centre Terre and I joined the club. This club and these cavers are organising big caving expeditions every few years around the globe. They've ran multiple large-scale expeditions together from south America to Southeast Asia. Last year as I was having an emailing conversation with Bernard about cave rescue stuff he mentioned that he has difficulties finding a reliable contact person in PNG and that they have to send about two tones of gear ahead of the expedition to a reliable contact on the ground. It just so happened that one of the members of our club (Cave Rescue Victoria), Jed has relatives in Kimbe, PNG. I immediately contacted Jed and then put him in contact with Bernard. From there Bernard got put in contact with multiple people in Kimbe and the operation was underway. Only at this point did I start to think that I might want to join the expedition. I decided that I will join, and Tom asked if he could come as well and so, both of us went for a three week rotation in the jungle.

The whole expedition lasted three months with multiple three weeks rotations in the jungle. A core of organisers stayed for the whole three months but other than that most people came and stayed in three weeks sections.

We chose the last rotation partly because we were both busy in January and partly because we were thinking that by the end will most likely be more caving and less surface exploration.

This expedition was the first expedition ran by Centre Terre in PNG but not the first caving expedition in the area and not the first French caving expedition in the area. Over the years multiple expeditions were organised, most of them French. An Australian and an English one happened as well and Australian cavers have participated in previous French expeditions with great success. This expedition focused on the Nakanay Mountains, on the New Britain island in the Pomio district. There are multiple cave systems and resurgences in the area, and the biggest resurgence is Mayang resurgence. The aim of this expedition was to find the cave passages behind this resurgence. The Mayang has a flow rate of more than 10 cubic meters per second at its lowest and up to 30 cubic meters per second in the rainy season. It is one of the biggest resurgences in the world.



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Although PNG is very close to Australia it still took us six days to get from Melbourne to the jungle base camp. And that didn't involve any hiking. Luckily when we booked the flights other cavers have already arrived and so we had some local knowledge about the flights. Everyone who arrived before us in Port Moresby was delayed over night for the connecting flights and so we allowed two days for this sort of drama. Our journey began on Monday morning at 3.30 am in Melbourne. From Melbourne we flew to Brisbane with no delay. From Brisbane we flew to Port Moresby with no delay. From Port Moresby we flew to Rabaul with ONLY 20 minutes delay. Apparently unheard of. We were the only ones not delayed majorly in Port Moresby. We were lucky, I guess. We left home in the morning, and we arrived in Rabaul for dinner. The next day the missions started. We were tasked with buying more food and some odd supplies. As they were building the camps and helipads up the mountain, they broke two chainsaw chains and we had to go and buy some spares. Not an easy task in Rabaul especially when the chainsaws in question are not of a popular brand. On the day we were meant to take the ferry towards our next stop we got a message from Camp 2, up the mountain saying that they broke the pull start mechanism on the only generator that they had in the camp. We had two hours to go and try to find a spare part. Two generators were bought from Rabaul, one for each camp in January.

We went back to the shop with receipts asking if they had any warranty. With a big smile they guy said, "No warranty". They are some strange brand made in China. We then asked about spare parts and again with a big smile the guy said, "We don't sell spare parts". We were left with little choice, so we decided to buy the smallest generator that they had on stock and then walk with it back to our hotel, 2 km away. By the time we did this and got back to the hotel the rest of the cavers that flew in from Europe arrived. By 2 pm that day we all took the ferry to Palimal. It was eight of us. The ferry ride took 17 hours and apparently was the fastest so far. One of the other groups took 30 hours to get there due to the propeller getting stuck in the mooring line somehow. We arrived the next morning in Palimal and spent the day buying some more food supplies. Finally, the next morning on Saturday at 6 am Tom and I were the first ones to get on a small boat and cross the bay to the small village of Galowe. The others were to follow with another two boats carrying gear, food and two barrels of helicopter fuel. We were to go to one camp, called Camp 2 and the rest were to go to another camp, called Camp 3.



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We arrived in Galowe and we quickly got surrounded by loads of kids and locals. It was 7 o'clock but it felt like the whole village was awake. A few minutes later we heard the helicopter and the kids started to cheer and yell in excitement. A small helicopter landed and to our relief the pilot was an Australian from Brisbane. After a short talk and a short safety induction we climbed aboard with our bags and supplies that we had to take up to Camp 2. The jungle mountain was right in front of us and we quickly climbed from sea level to 900 m altitude where the Camp 2 was located. On our way we crossed the very deep and impressive Galowe River.



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Streams of water were pouring in the Galowe from both sides, some from underground some from steep canyons. We later learned that about 80 percent of the Galowe water is supplied by the Mayang resurgence and that not long upstream from this resurgence the river is dry.

We landed in a small opening in the jungle, and we quickly got out of the helicopter and got our bags out. On the ground Bernard was waiting and he along with a translator got into the helicopter and took off. We were on the first out of 22 different flight rotations on that day.



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Seemingly a nightmare, the flight plan for the day was carefully orchestrated in order to move people and supplies up and down the mountain, scout the jungle and relocate Camp 1 and move supplies uphill from Camp 1 to an advanced camp near our biggest cave. The rest of the day was spent getting to know the people and the camp and setting up our sleeping arrangements.

The next morning we had a briefing so that all the new people are up to speed with what's been done and what is the plan for the weeks ahead. We learned that we are on the opposite side of the river in relation to Mayang resurgence which made little sense at that moment. Camp 1 has been established on the same side as Mayang and have been prospecting the area for almost two months and found no caves. That's why, on the helicopter day Camp 1 has been relocated on the same side as us but further upstream and the new location called Camp 3. Also our advanced camp was named "Camp du Big Bag" after the large helicopter bag that we used to transport all the supplies up there. It was going to be a reason to smile for the next three weeks at every radio communication as some of the French cavers would always miss pronounce the English words and call it "Camp du Big Mac", "Camp du Gross Bag" or "Camp du Big Sac", etc.



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We had multiple projects happening over the next weeks. A big 100 m deep doline was found with caves both upstream and downstream. This is where the Camp Big Bag was established. These caves had to be rigged, explored, surveyed and photographed. We were ten cavers and two local helpers in the camp. We split in two groups of five and the first five went up to Camp Big Bag for three days to work on the downstream cave. They called it Ralapusa. Tom and I stayed at Camp 2 and our mission was to start cutting a trail towards Camp 3 located some 3 km away in a straight line. The jungle was much more forgiving than we expected it to be, and we quickly realised that the sun, the mosquitos and insects were not really a problem. The problem would turn out to be the steep and slippery terrain and the everyday rain. After three days of cutting trail and crossing multiple steep canyons we got within 500 m of Camp 3. Camp 3 did the rest, and a path was finally opened. This path was crucial as we had to exchange gear multiple times but more than that for rescue purposes. We had the rescue stretcher in our camp and if needed we had to have a quick way of reaching the others.

After cutting trail it was finally our turn to go caving. We packed a light caving bag each and the five of us went camping up at Camp Big Bag. As Tom put it, we went camping while camping.



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The other team had descended and explore the 100 meters deep megadoline of Ralapusa. They'd explored, rigged, surveyed and photographed the downstream cave until they ran out of rope. An attempt was made in the upstream cave but after about 50 m in they reached a 25 m waterfall and stopped. The aerial survey showed that upstream of this megadoline was, not far, a deep canyon that just disappears. Almost certain that turns into the cave that was upstream in the megadoline. The decision was made to try to explore the canyon and the suspected cave from the canyon down towards the megadoline. This was our mission for the next few days. As it turned out this was not a canyon that you just walk or scramble into. It was an 80 m descent to the canyon floor.

Our team, that Bernard called "the anglophone team", was composed of two French guys, a Canadian girl and me and Tom, the two Australians. After a short discussion the role of each member was decided, as you would expect, by the oldest team member Serj.



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Although he is almost 70 years old and the slowest at going up the hill, Serj is a SRT instructor and a great cave photographer.

Ten years ago, on a Patagonia expedition he walked 100 km with a broken foot and 3 broken ribs after a fall in a cave. A truly impressive caver. Him and Jessica, our Canadian caver, and expedition nurse were going to be the photography team. Tom and I were going to be the survey team and Laurant, a middle-aged cave diver, was going to deal with the rigging. We started the survey at the top of the canyon and, as expected at the bottom of the canyon we found a cave entrance. We entered the cave and continued our work: Laurant ahead, Tom and I following with the survey and Serj and Jessica last, taking their time with photography. The cave was impressive, large cross section tunnel shaped passages, going almost horizontal, clean limestone floor, impressive decorations and large tree trunks stuck along the walls. We spent all day documenting this cave and, as expected we eventually ended up in the Ralapusa megadoline. Later the French decided to name this cave Valngau, a local word. We ascended the doline in the dark and got back to our camp pretty tired but with about 600 m of new cave, surveyed, rigged and photographed.

Our mission was accomplished. The next day, after radioing in that we accomplished our mission and ran out of rigging rope we got told that the other team will come up with the film crew, film the cave and then de-rig and continue the push in the downstream cave.

The next team up had a little surprise. The day in between our teams we had a heavier rain up the mountain and when they went to Ralapusa some of the water pools were up to 6 m higher than before and lots of rigging was under water. A scary reminder that we are in an area with very high rainfall, and we are exploring new cave systems with no previous data on how fast they flood. They spent their time re-rigging parts of the cave at a higher level to hopefully avoid high water levels. During this time we explored and surveyed a smaller cave in a canyon below the Camp 1, we descended 500 vertical meters to the Galowe River to drop off a few activated carbon blocks (they trap the dye in the water) and explored other three smaller canyons.



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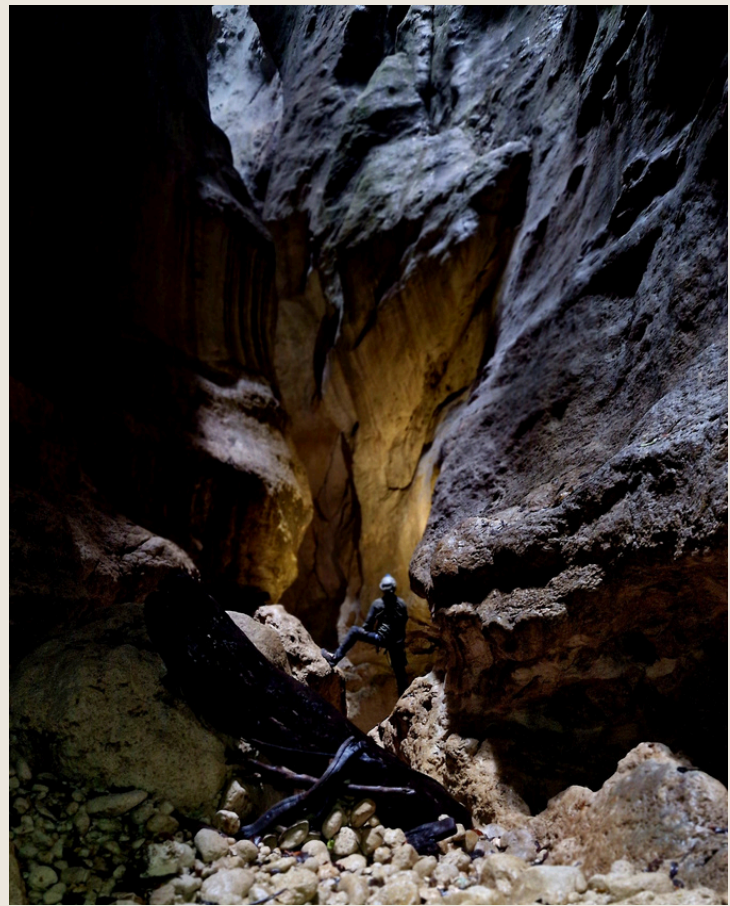
We then spent the rest of our time having two more trips in downstream Ralapusa where eventually we stopped due to lack of time. The cave keeps going down towards the Galowe river. We did two trips to the Mayang resurgence and built a new helipad at the Camp Big Bag in preparation for the next expedition.

At the end of the expedition that involved 40 people from ten different nations we were unsuccessful in finding and entering the Mayang system. This is a big project, and this was only the first step. We explored kilometres of jungle, found and documented six new caves and surveyed more than 5 km of new caves. We found a promising system that is 1770 m long so far and has a depth of 302 metres. We had multiple scientists looking at jungle and cave fauna, hydrology and geology and we had a full filming crew that's currently working on producing a documentary about the expedition.

Although we haven't reached our goal it was a successful expedition and a big step towards our goal. The Australian crew, Bogdan Muresan and Tom Elms were proudly supported by the VSA and ASF, each contributing with \$500 dollars towards our costs. Although the expedition had a massive budget, Tom and I spend more than \$7000 each and the help from the community was greatly appreciated. Thank you ASF and VSA for supporting our endeavours.

An expedition that could not have achieved its objectives without the essential support of numerous partners and sponsors visible here:

<https://www.centre-terre.fr/mayang2026-partenaires.php>
whom the entire Centre Terre team warmly thanks for their trust and support.



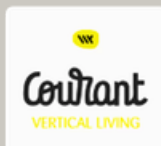
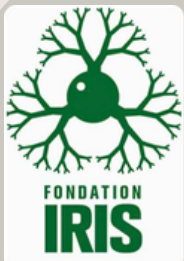
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Papua New Guinea - A different perspective on the expedition

Written and photos by Tom Elms



Camp 2's communal shelterion

On my first night in advanced camp, I fell out of my hammock and tore the bug netting wide open; not ideal in the insect-infested Papua New Guinean rainforest. I tried tying it closed, but it did little to keep the mosquitoes out. With nothing on hand to repair it properly, I ended up having to stitch it back together using a bamboo needle and thread pulled from a rope.

Caving is not comfortable. We often place ourselves in cold, wet, dark, and physically demanding environments that require constant problem solving and usually end in exhaustion. But this discomfort is usually temporary. A few hours, maybe a few days, and then you're back to civilisation. Hot showers, air conditioning, fresh food. This was not something Bo and I got to enjoy throughout our expedition in the Nakanai Mountains.

At sea level on the island of New Britain, temperatures sit between 30 and 32 degrees with humidity around 90 percent. Even at our jungle camp, 1000 metres up and hidden beneath the canopy, it never really felt cool, sitting between 24 and 26 degrees with the same high humidity. Sitting still, you could exist comfortably enough in a t-shirt and shorts, but as soon as you moved you would be immediately drenched in sweat. In that environment, comfort becomes a necessity, not a luxury, and even small improvements can make the difference between coping and struggling.

We needed dry places to cook, eat and sleep if we were going to last a month. The rainforest doesn't make that easy. As soon as the sun goes down, it comes alive with insects. Winged and crawling things emerge from everywhere, filling the night with noise and finding their way onto every surface. Every time you unrolled a dry bag or opened a tent fly, you half expected to find something crawling inside. Thankfully, the first team in had already built a solid base. Our main living area was a large 8 by 10 metre shelter with a central table made from slabs of timber. A huge clear tarp formed the roof, letting in plenty of light during the day while keeping everything dry when it rained; which it often did. There was almost never any wind in the jungle, so walls weren't necessary. The space felt open, bright, and, by comparison, comfortable.



Aerial view of the mega doline Ralapusa



The blue tarp shelter at Camp Big Bag



Bamboo chairs and tables constructed at Camp Big Bag

Figuring out a sleeping system that actually worked in the jungle was another challenge. My main concerns were water and insects. To deal with both, I decided to build a raised tent platform on stilts. Getting off the ground would reduce the number of insects wandering into my tent off the jungle floor, and give me clearance above any water if it rained heavily. Others took a similar approach with hammocks, often building support structures underneath them for extra comfort. I found a cleared area that had previously been used by one of the French cavers. They'd abandoned it after a tree fell nearby during the night. I figured the danger had passed. It hadn't entirely, as on one of our last nights, a substantial branch came crashing down just a few metres from my tent.

Building my own platform felt like a chance to live out a few bushcraft fantasies. I began by measuring the area and cut six timber stakes, shaped the ends into points, and drove them into the ground. Then I tied three support beams across and began laying bamboo over the top. But the more I moved around the platform and disturbed the jungle floor, the more I created another problem; a growing mud pit. Walking back and forth over the same patch of ground quickly turned it into a bog, and it would only be a matter of time before that mud ended up inside the tent.

The solution was to build a smaller entry platform, which would serve as a place to step up out of the mud, clean boots, and leave bags and equipment off the ground. It was a simple addition, but it made a big difference. The full platform took nearly two days to complete. When it was finished, it measured about 2.5 by 2.5 metres, which was large enough to fit my tent with a bit of extra room. More importantly, I didn't have to climb down into the tent. I could sit on the edge of the platform and shuffle straight in. The project ended up being a highlight, and the platform served me well.

Life at Camp 2 was relatively comfortable, and living there felt easy. Advanced camp, however, was something else entirely. The system we had come to explore, Ralapusa, was a two hour walk away, involving roughly 500 metres of elevation gain before dropping nearly 100 metres into a doline. Carrying ropes and gear along that route was exhausting and took a serious toll before we even reached the cave. To make it workable, we established an advanced camp closer to the system, which we named Camp Big Bag. The name came from a large bulk lifting bag I had bought in Palmalmal, originally intended for carrying sand, but repurposed to transport food and shelter supplies up the mountain by helicopter.



Camp Big Bag hammocks



Tom constructing his tent platform at Camp 2



Bamboo chairs at Camp Big Bag

Advanced camp was like going camping while already camping. Everything was reduced again, and most of the comforts of Camp 2 disappeared. We took less, had less, and tried to function in even worse conditions than you were already used to, while still committing to long, demanding days underground. Our first visit was underwhelming. Five hammocks were strung up beneath a tarp, alongside a few food sacks and a stove. There was not even a table. People sat on the ground or on small, rotting logs. We fixed that quickly, building a table, which I promptly broke, followed by a sturdier version with matching chairs made from branches and bamboo. It made a noticeable difference to morale and comfort, simply having somewhere to sit that was not the ground.

Everything was stripped back. We carried only the bare minimum: a 35 litre pack with a cave suit, SRT kit, helmet,



Tom's tent platform and entry platform

sleeping bag, a change of underwear, a toothbrush, and a spare shirt for up to three days. Coming back from the cave wet and filthy, there was no real way to clean yourself or your gear. A three by three metre tarp collected rainwater which was our only drinking supply. If it didn't rain, it didn't refill, so every drop mattered. At the end of a day underground, the goal was simply to get dry enough and keep your hands clean enough not to ruin your sleeping gear.

Despite the discomfort, I surprised myself with how quickly I got used to having less, and how little I actually needed. Food, water, somewhere to sleep, and a good team around me became enough. The constant effort and discomfort didn't take away from the experience, it added to it. It made every trip into the cave feel earned, and that made it all the more meaningful.



Tom's Camp 2 sleep setup with tent platform and entry platform



Tom wearing his favourite VSA T-shirt

AN EXTINCT ECHIDNA THE SIZE OF A SMALL CHILD ONCE ROAMED VICTORIA, NEW FOSSIL SHOWS

Tim Ziegler



Giant long-beaked echidna (*Megalibgwilia owenii*). Chris Edser/Museums Victoria. [CC BY-NC](#)

Those who venture into Foul Air Cave, below Buchan township in eastern Victoria, quickly realise how it got its ominous name. In its deepest chambers, bacteria consume oxygen and excrete organic gases to produce a toxic stench.

The cave is also a natural pitfall trap. Its water-worn entrance offers no escape to any creature unlucky enough to tumble in. The smell of death clings to your nostrils as you navigate vertiginous drops and calf-deep, sucking mud.

Tens to hundreds of thousands of years ago during the Pleistocene Epoch, Foul Air Cave accumulated remains of diverse, often-giant mammals known collectively as Australia's megafauna.

One of these mammals was the giant echidna *Megalibgwilia owenii*, as we report in a new paper published in April, in *Alcheringa: An Australasian Journal of Palaeontology*. We recognised this extinct monotreme, twice the size of Australian echidnas today, from a newly identified fossil collected almost 120 years ago.

And the specimen is enough to verify for the first time that this species once roamed Ice Age Victoria, spanning a 1,000 kilometre gap in its previously known distribution.

Scores of ancient bones

The first scientific expeditions to Foul Air Cave were made in 1906-7 by Frank Palmer Spry who worked for what's now called Museums Victoria, local caves curator Francis Moon, and geologist Thomas Sergeant Hall.

They were among the first to enter the cave. They encountered scores of fossil bones loosely buried in damp earth, including powerful, clawed mega-marsupial palorchestids and predatory marsupial "lions".

They deposited their finds in the state collection, now housed at Melbourne Museum.

Over a century later, the fossils of Foul Air Cave have granted us a further insight into deep time.



Megalibgwilia owenii - right lateral, Foul Air Cave, Buchan Source - Museums Victoria



Comparing fossil and modern echidna skulls. Left to right: Owen's giant echidna (*Megalibgwilia owenii*); western long-beaked echidna (*Zaglossus bruijnii*); short-beaked echidna (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*). Museums Victoria, [CC BY](#)

A robust creature

Previously described fossils of *Megalibgwilia owenii* derive from a handful of sites in Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and New South Wales. They're sparse, too: one well-preserved skeleton, four skulls of varying completeness, and a range of isolated bones.

Together, they illustrate a robust mammal a metre long and weighing in at 15 kilograms – roughly as big as a four-year-old child.

The meaning of its name is straightforward. *Mega-libgwil-ia* joins the ancient Greek prefix “mega-”, meaning large or mighty, with “libgwil”, the name for the echidna in the language of the Wemba Wemba people of northern Victoria and south-eastern NSW.



Megalibgwilia owenii - ventral, Foul Air Cave, Buchan Source - Museums Victoria

We can combine this with the species epithet *owenii* (acknowledging prolific 19th century anatomist [Sir Richard Owen](#)) to coin a common name: “Owen's giant echidna”.

Using its fossil remains as a guide, Owen's giant echidna most resembled the long-beaked echidna (*Zaglossus*), which today occupies the wet tropical cloud forests of New Guinea. Its broad limbs and shoulders bore prominent bony scars indicating it was more heavily muscled than other monotremes. It also had a wide, long and straight untoothed beak, with bony ridges across its palate.

This suite of differences implies *Megalibgwilia* was adapted to a different lifestyle than its modern relatives. One can imagine it tearing to pieces fallen logs or digging hard soils to seek out moth and beetle larvae, rather than feeding on termites or earthworms.

A fossil awaits its finder

Our new fossil came to light during the systematic documentation and maintenance of thousands of fossil bones, teeth, and skeletons preserved by Museums Victoria.

But even this obscure seven centimetre fragment of skull was sufficient to identify the unique proportions of *M. owenii* – especially when we examined material in museum collections across Australia.

As well as identifying the fossil, we also researched its connection to Foul Air Cave by drawing on collection notes, hand-drawn maps, diaries and public newspaper archives.

These historical ephemera established Spry as the fossil's collector. And they inspired a return to the cave in his footsteps.

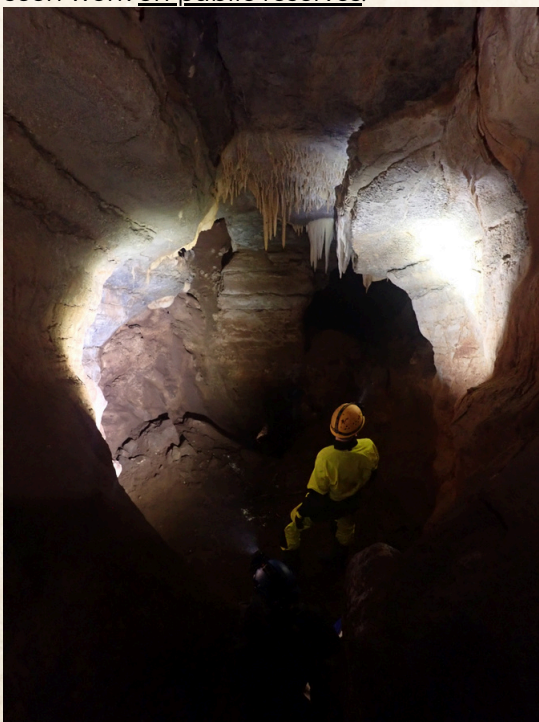
Ready for re-examination

Spry and Moon wore their everyday outfits of breeches, jacket and waistcoat for their fossicking. They lit their path with candles or kerosene lamps, and entrusted their life to stiff, heavy nautical rope. The trained geologist Hall never ventured into the cave himself. Under those conditions, who would judge him?

By comparison, modern caving is a technical affair. Brilliant headlamps illuminate entire caverns. Heavy-duty nylon oversuits protect from skin-shredding rocky surfaces. And the climbing ropes and devices are strong enough to suspend a small car.

The collaboration between Spry, Moon and Hall combined an informed perspective, fluent local knowledge, and technical know-how to succeed. Despite obvious advances in technology and disciplinary knowledge, our success is rooted in the same foundation as theirs – curiosity and community spirit.

During my own investigations at Buchan, families spanning generations have shared local history and acted as subterranean guides. Parks Victoria rangers have facilitated and overseen work on public reserves.



Descending the near-vertical passages of Foul Air Cave - Photo by Stella Nikolaevsky

Recreational cavers from the Victorian Speleological Association have been a wellspring of enthusiastic support.

The long residence of this specimen in Victoria's state collection epitomises how, thanks to past work, palaeontological discoveries arise from "collection-based" fieldwork as often as investigations outdoors.

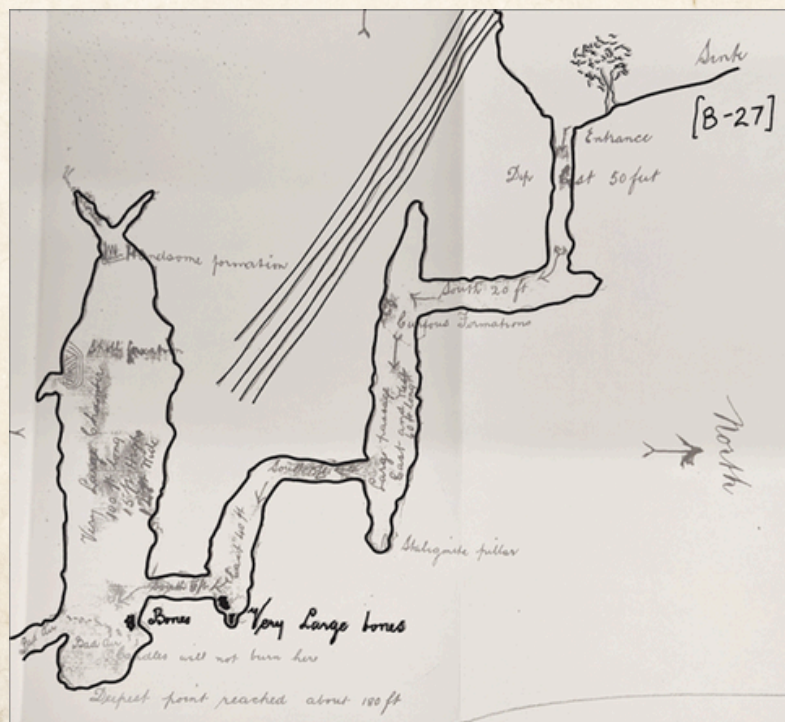
And if one illuminating specimen can lie unnoticed across a century, why not others?

Sparse fossil bones of large, slender echidnas, seemingly distinct from *Megalibgwilia owenii*, have been noted from Victoria and South Australia. These warrant re-examination to test if Owen's giant echidna adapted to different conditions over space or time, or if another unknown species co-occupied the landscape.

The latter option is intriguing in light of the proposition that *Zaglossus* may even have occupied northern Australia until as late as the 20th century.

If true, then surely one of its ancestors awaits recognition – either among the landscape or preserved carefully among the nation's public scientific assets.

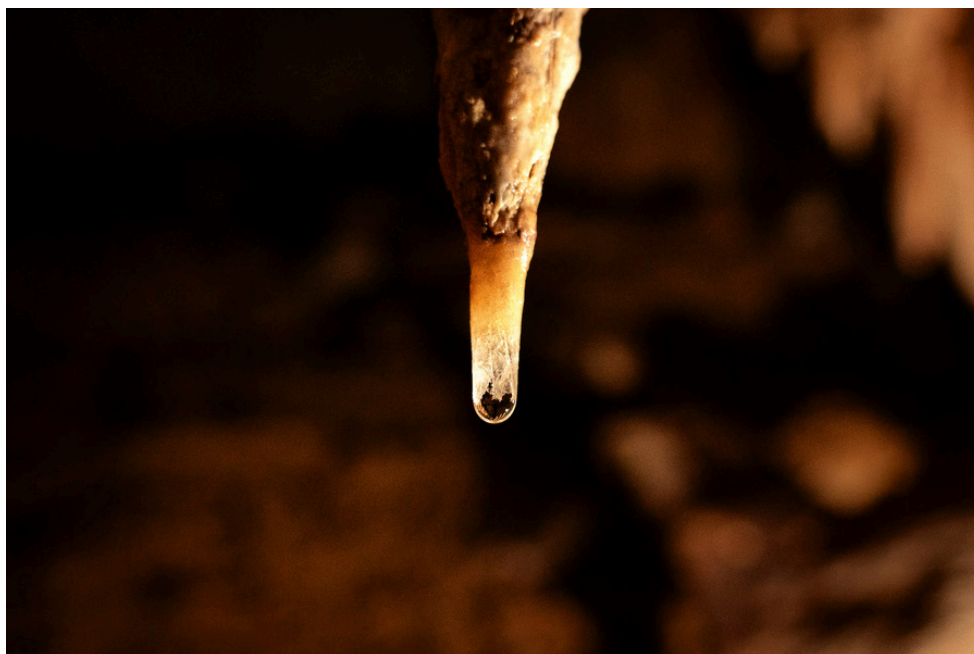
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A sketched cross-section of Foul Air Cave made in 1906-7, showing original locations of fossil deposits. Museums Victoria, Author provided (no reuse)

CCC visit to Mount Etna Caves

Bethany Morgan



Stalactite closeup - Photo by Katrina Lo Surdo

This year the Chillagoe Caving Club took the opportunity to experience something different with a trip South to Central Queensland over the Easter long weekend. 20-odd members took advantage of the extra-long weekend and travelled to The Caves township, 20 kms North of Rockhampton. They were treated to a blend of vertical, sporty and highly decorated caves on both Mount Etna and Limestone Ridge, all walking distance from camp!

Weather wise, it was perfect. Not too hot, not too cold, just right - other than some wild wind in the evenings which put our tents to the test. One rogue tent took off across the grass like a tumbleweed before being secured with some well-practiced knots!

We split into two groups of eight and ten, the ladies outnumbering the fellas by a mile. The majority of caves had fun, sporty entrances including some tight vertical pitches which challenged us all both physically and mentally, while providing a great opportunity for us to put our technical skills to use.



Aragonite Flower, Valkyries - Photo by Bethany Morgan

The recent rainfall in the region meant that the usually dusty, relatively dry caves were slightly muddy underfoot and rock at times quite slippery! Great care was taken by all to help each other manoeuvre safely through the caves and leave no trace as much as possible. Many of us took advantage of photographic opportunities which resulted in some phenomenal shots being captured, while others simply sat back and took it all in. Many "WOW's" were heard echoing throughout the caves.

Our eyes feasted on thousands of exquisite speleothems including helictites, giant shawls, glistening walls of flowstone, Aragonite flowers, layers upon layers of crystal and mineral deposits and a cave which has a CO₂ pit right underneath a giant 'Cinema' screen - Elysium - a fascinating cave with endless geological wonders.



Entrance to Elysium, Anne Bartuschat starts the 25 m tight descent - Photo by Wendy Lander



Valkyries - Photo by Bethany Morgan



Broken Stalactite Resurrection - Photo by Bethany Morgan

One cave which is appropriately named 'Straw Palace', has to have the highest concentration of straws and stalactites in one little chamber that I have seen in my 30-odd years of caving—absolutely breathtaking! Another interesting cave—Valkyries, is a very humid cave with many sections we did not get a chance to explore this time. This cave contains some rare formations including araganite flowers which seemingly pop out of the wall, just like an orchid growing off the side of a tree. A chamber containing stalactites, stalagmites and a mass of crystal-clear helictites, closely resembling noodles and that seem to defy all physics and logic. However I'm sure there is a perfectly good explanation for their "random" growth patterns.

As always, I enjoy the profound realisation that hidden beneath what appears to be an uninviting, sharp mass of grey pointy limestone, is an entire world and ecosystem that exists so majestically in the dark depths, away from man's gaze. A world that answers many questions about

science and our geological history, while simultaneously invoking many more questions to those who seek to understand.

The highlight and conclusion of the weekend was gaining access to 'Resurrection Cave'. This cave holds great significance in the Mount Etna area and access is heavily restricted to protect its vast, delicate formations. The cave was first ever entered on Easter Sunday hence the name 'Resurrection'. As the group finally prepared to leave the cave and say our farewells, I shared a poem with the group which I had jotted down in the caves whilst enjoying some moments of silence. I admit it was well out of my comfort zone, but we all shed a happy tear or two together, realizing our mutual appreciation for the subterranean world and the friendships and bonds which are formed whilst exploring them. A truly unique and awesome weekend. Here is the poem. Enjoy!



Giant shawl, resurrection - Photo by Bethany Morgan



Cave noodles helictites Valkyries - Photo by Bethany Morgan



Matthew Hall holding a light behind a giant shawl, Resurrection - Photo by Katrina Lo Surdo

An Awesome Cave

The sun comes up. The gear goes on. And then we pick a cave.
We set upon our journey, feeling full of life and brave.

Often times we clamber over limestone far and high,
Searching for an entrance, one would think is trying to hide.

The unique scent of cave plants makes you think you're getting near,
You hear a shout, "I've found the tag!", - It's music to your ears.

We gather round, we prep ourselves and do a final count.
Our eyes adjust, we look around, and take in our surrounds.

The air feels cool. Inhale deep... an all familiar smell,
Distinctive blends of dirt and bats in which these caves do dwell.

Treading oh so carefully so as not to leave a trace,
You try to let your presence leave no marks upon this place.

In awe we look and wonder at how all these caves have formed,
Phreatic tubes and caverns, dripping straws and giant shawls.

A sparkle here, a column there, we look in fascination,
Indescribable beauty in these countless cave formations.

We cling and crawl and duck and squeeze, until we reach the pitch,
We get on rope and descend down, it goes without a hitch.

The magnitude and scale at times, too great to comprehend.
A world where space and time itself would seem to never end.

We stop to sit in silence, not a breath or word is said,
We share this profound moment where no thoughts dwell in our head.

Just taking in the darkness thinking how this cave must be,
Here before and after human life will ever be.

We think about those cavers long before us who explored,
Bravely going places that no man had gone before.

We share so many laughs and help each other on the way,
Comradery strong among the group, some lifelong friendships made.

We feel a sense of sadness as we head back to reality,
The body aches, the heart is full, the mind is full of clarity.

Our spirits are elated, great new memories we have made,
High fives and cheers as we reflect on such an awesome Cave!



Helictites, straw palace - Photo by
Bethany Morgan



Helictites, straw palace - Photo by
Bethany Morgan

A Story Almost a Century in the Making

Brittany Meers

My entry into this amazing story was completely accidental, and since then, I have learned so much from various friends, family and interested people about the legendary story of Brian O'Brien. This serves as trip report as well as the backstory for all the younger cavers or newer ones who, like me, were not previously familiar with Brian and his extraordinary life and achievements.

1953 - Brian's Tale

These series of events began back in December of 1953 when a 19 year old Brian and his friend Fred Stewart decided to hitchhike their way to Yarrangobilly to continue their work on mapping various caves and exploring some newer found caves. One of these was what is now East Deep Creek, one of these Crown Jewels of recreational caving at Yarrangobilly. The famed chamber requiring detrogging was reportedly found by Brian on this trip.

"In the East Deep Creek, down through the maze of fallen rocks that made an entrance, I found a way into a great big new and lovely cavern. I was entranced at the pure white crystals glittering in my lamplight, but when I climbed back up into the maze of cold muddy rocks, I could not find the critically small entry way out again."
(Brian in his opening address at the 2003 ASF Conference)

For many of us recreational cavers, this chamber is one to tick off the southeast NSW cave bucket list. The entrance to the upper section of East Deep Creek is as Brian describes, critically small, and now contains one of the most whinged about gates in NSW. If someone listened to my sound effects and language when I unlock this gate, one might think I was wrestling a bear.

At the time, no gate existed as a marker for Brian and so he found himself "lost, quite thoroughly". His companion Fred exited the cave after about 30 minutes of finding nothing but muddy rock pile, and briefly re-entered to search for Brian after he didn't surface. Being unsuccessful, he left to return to caves house to get some help.

At the realisation that he was lost, Brian began the process of trying to navigate his way out, and spent roughly eight hours attempting different routes. He dimmed his carbide lamp so as to conserve his light. He then came to a sheer drop requiring a climb.



Brian's lamp hanging in the place it was left 73 years ago - Photo by Jason Moule

"I came to a sheer drop, and hooked the lamp in the roof while I climbed down. Even with two hands free for climbing, I lost my grip and fell about 10 feet, on my bum."
(Brian in his opening address at the 2003 ASF Conference)

Brian couldn't climb back up to reach his lamp and so in a bid to get it down he took off his suit and tried to knock it down, accidentally extinguishing the flame.

"Miners' carbide lamps were a commonly used light source for cavers in the 1950s and 1960s (and beyond) as they were rugged, reliable and economical to use. In Australia, most cavers preferred hand lamps. These were usually around 150 mm tall, 80-100 mm in diameter and equipped with a handle and a wire hook that was handy for hanging the lamp from a convenient rock, or perhaps a pit prop if you were a miner. With careful use, the lamps could last for around eight hours before needing a refill of water and fresh calcium carbide. A significant disadvantage of carbide hand lamps (in my view) is that they were bulky and only left one hand free for climbing, unless it could be hung somewhere while making a critical move. This is a key point in understanding how O'Brien came to be lost in EDC." Comment from John Brush.

Brian spent the next three days trying to navigate his way in complete darkness. He described tossing rocks and listening for the impact to ascertain any drops and "sitz-bummed" his way around the cave. He also described his methods of staying calm, reciting poetry and singing songs to keep himself sharp in the dark.



Time to go collect a lamp! - Photo by Brittany Meers

Unbeknownst to Brian, Fred had managed to gather quite the party to search for Brian, around 70 people with half of them being in the cave at any one time. The East Deep Creek cave is so hard to navigate that Brian's brother aptly described it that 40 men searching the cave for three days couldn't even find each other except at the entrance.

After much existential consideration, Brian heard voices and so he yelled back.

"Somebody yelled out, 'O'Brien is that you.' And he thought, 'Who else would it be?'" (Ros O'Brien recounting her father's story)

Brian was then escorted from the cave, with the party still taking many a wrong turn and managing to find themselves again with ample light. He managed to hitch a ride with a friendly Snowy Stockman on the back of his horse back to Caves House where he was reunited with family, friends and the rest of the world.

Amongst the party who helped search for Brian were six members of the Canberra Alpine Club (CAC). They joined the search effort on the third day and had some previous caving experience, though none at Yarrangobilly. After searching for about two hours, three of the CAC members - Jim Webb, Vic Pickering and Jack Leslie managed to locate O'Brien and everyone emerged from the cave about one hour later.

The Yarrangobilly incident sparked a deeper interest in caves in the Canberra area and within months, the CAC cavers and several others discussed the feasibility of forming a separate caving group in Canberra.

Their plans came to fruition at the end of October 1954, when the Canberra Speleological Society was established during a weekend trip to Cleitmore and The Big Hole. CSS's second trip, to the Cooleman Plain karst area two weeks later, took place exactly one year after O'Brien's rescue in East Deep Creek Cave.

For anyone interested, Brian's full recount of the incident in his opening address for the 2003 ASF conference is an incredible read and a very good description of his experiences in the cave.

Brian went on to live an extraordinary life, he became the founding president of the ASF. He was also a distinguished astrophysicist who worked with the US space agency, NASA and is notable for designing an experiment to monitor dust in the moon's atmosphere which was carried on board Apollo 11. He also had a beautiful family, all of whom supported the project of finding and extracting his lamp from the cave.

2015-2017 – The New Search Efforts

Brian's carbide lamp remained in East Deep Creek despite a search party he organised with Fred to find it not too long after the incident. Phil Fleming also took up the mantle of searching for the lamp around 2015 and searched the cave in locations based on Brian's descriptions of where it was left.

This part of the story starts with correspondence between Brian and the late John Dunkley AM. Brian was planning a visit to Sydney the following month to give a talk to SUSS and had contacted John to request maps of Upper East Deep Creek cave and photos of the decorated area of the cave.

Brian's request to John was:

"So, I'm interested if possible of photos looking from a distance down at the outstanding crystalline cascade with a small terrace half way up. Think of that glittering in my carbide lamp light from a distance enticing me down from the rocks. I'm also interested still in finding my carbide lamp. I left it hooked into the rock roof, an armstretch across from the top of the rock overhang, about 10-12 foot above a muddy floor with at least one very bloody rock on which my buttocks landed when I fell climbing down with the lamp turned down to only a bubble of light."

From reading this and from talking to Brian it was concluded (mistakenly) that the lamp was located hung up in the roof of the cave above a decorated, crystal pool. There is only one part of the cave that remotely fits that description - the western end of the upper level before the detrog area. Brian was a good salesman, he convinced HCG that the lamp was still in the cave, although experience would suggest that at some stage in the preceding 60 years someone would have found and souvenired it.

Following further correspondence with Brian and a short meeting with him at Yarrangobilly in October 2015, HCG commenced a search in East Deep Creek Cave for the lamp. SUSS joined the search effort in early 2016. The HCG/SUSS searches are described in *Calcite* 47.

The first search in October 2015 by HCG focused on the area above the dry crystal pool before the detrog area is reached. For the next search in January 2016 HCG were joined by SUSS and set about once more searching around the crystal pool area. Nothing there fitted Brian's description of where he hooked the lamp. The searchers had concluded by now that the lamp, if it was still in the cave, was likely to be in the upper breakdown levels back towards the gate.

So, attention now switched to the largely unknown and little visited "Shattered Passage" area of the cave. Not only did this area match the description by Brian of where he became lost, but it had been reported that he was found by rescuers a short distance inside Shattered Passage.

During the following trip in March 2016 Deborah Johnston (SUSS) and Phil Fleming (HCG) accessed Shattered Passage by climbing above the gate chamber to locate a cold, hazardous, muddy, low area with lots of broken rock and deep plunging floor holes. It fitted the description by Brian of where he had been when his lamp went out. But despite a search of the area no sign of a lamp. SUSS and HCG had a further search in Shattered Passage in January 2017 but was again unsuccessful. The conclusion was that there remained more of Shattered Passage to explore and the lamp was quite possibly there but enthusiasm for further searching was waning. Meanwhile for HCG, priorities switched to the exploration of an exciting new discovery in Y-395 Boulder Mother Cave at West Deep Creek, so the search for Brian's carbide lamp was parked.



Jason admiring the lamp while Brittany does some rock gardening before dropping the rope - Photo by John Brush

2021- The Recovery

In May of 2021, I found myself on a trip with Lachlan Bailey, Alex Motyka, David Mason and Penny Sze heading into Upper East Deep Creek with the goal of sight-seeing in the detrog chamber. Lachlan assured me he knew the way there and it was very simple to follow the "roof canyons" in the ceiling, what a shocker: it was not that easy.

We managed to take a wrong turn off the regular track and ended in a chamber above the main route. This chamber had a distinctive ceiling, a massive flat breakdown boulder that roofed a room of sharp mountainous boulders with gaps and holes between them all leading back down to where, we didn't know at the time.

Lachlan assured me that this didn't feel familiar but we all decided to have a thorough look around to make sure we didn't miss the way on. Alex pointed out a faint painted arrow pointing in a direction towards a large muddy bank. Being a new caver at the time, I saw this red mud bank that was loose and I thought "oooooh! Could this be a sign of water flowing in from the surface?!".



Brittany Meers showing Brian's grandson, Bobby Cafagna and Brian's Daughter, Ros O'Brien, the lamp they have heard so much about -
Photo by Jason Moule

I leisurely yelled out that I was going for a climb and an explore and with the acknowledgement from the group, off I went. It led me up into a chamber that had many ways off it and so I called to the group that I had found a chamber with lead possibilities and so they followed.

Upon further inspections of my surroundings, I noticed something very obviously man-made, a cylindrical object hanging from a flake of rock in the ceiling about three metres off the ground. I yelled to Lachlan that I needed him to come see this and that I thought it looked like an old light of some sort (new caver and all, I didn't have much knowledge of what I was looking at). Lachlan Bailey, the cave nerd, excitably came to look and said "Oh, I think I know what that is!" Then ensued story time and the excitement of finding something that far more experienced cavers had been looking quite some time for.

We took many photos and made mental notes of the route along the way back so as to come find it again. In the years that followed, many people were informed of the lamps existence and recovery and so was born the idea of removing it from the cave. Many meetings with National Parks and Wildlife Services and the Kosciuszko Speleological Reference Group established a plan and got in touch with Brian's daughter Ros.

2025 - Route Confirmation

Lachlan and I took our time on getting back to confirm the route purely due to life and his PhD commitments, but in August 2025 we finally managed to get down there to retrace our steps. I can truly say that East Deep Creek could use a new survey. The rock pile is extensive and it took us four hours to find our way back to the lamp. We would often leave our packs at the top of a climb with the aim to come back and get them if we found anything promising.

More than once we would turn a corner around a rock and find our packs on the ground in front of us, leaving us needing a sit down and snack to stop our spinning heads.

Each time, we'd climb back down and deem it "the wrong chamber". We did find ourselves eventually in the right chamber with the distinctive big flat roof. I took a seat for a bit and Lachlan went for a climb. As I sat snacking on my standard sour worm cave snack I hear "FOUND IT" in the far off darkness.

I climbed up the steep muddy bank from my memory and low and behold, there it was. Lachlan and I took various measurements, photos, notes on the space, the route and the lamp and exited with the sense of success.

February 2026 - The Final Removal

After many Zoom meetings and various discussions on plans, a removal expedition party was assembled to finally remove the lamp. Sadly, Lachlan was unable to attend but was there in spirit and his role in the lead up can not be understated. The team was purposefully chosen for everyone's areas of expertise: John Brush (CSS) for his extensive knowledge of carbide lamps and their restoration and his knowledge of the Yarrangobilly area (not much information on the Yarrangobilly Karst doesn't have John's name somewhere in it). Phil Fleming (HCG) for his knowledge on the chemical compounds possibly remaining inside the lamp and his dedication to the searches in the 2010s. Jason Moule (HCG) for his displayed caving skills and relationship with NPWS through his extensive project work in Y395, and somehow I have ended up being an instrumental part being the only one who knew the route and location of the lamp.

A massive thank you to NPWS and Matt White for the amazing roast dinner we had the night before we set out, over which, we discussed the logistics and the plan. A break down room existed above the lamp where it was decided to rig a rope in order to get up to the lamp safely and be able to lower it into an extension pole with a catch-bag on the end of it. Then a safety inspection of the lamp was to be undertaken before packaging it to take it back out of the cave.



Time to attempt to open the lamp! Sadly this was deemed too fragile and was left for the expert hands of the conservator -
Photo by Brittany Meers

Ros and her son Bobby arrived at an ungodly hour of the morning after their trek all the way from Perth, to Sydney and then a six hour drive to Yarrangobilly all on the Friday night. We decided that we would not remove the lamp from the cave until after 12 pm so as to let them get some extra sleep instead of coming in with us straight away in the morning and waiting however long it took at the entrance.

We set off around 8:30 am and began our walk in. We diligently marked the track with lots of flagging tape so that the film crew, Matt and some of his staff and the O'Briens could find their way to the entrance later in the morning. We arrived at the entrance around 9:30 am and suited up and took many photos for the film crew of our entrance into the cave.

The first challenge of the day was to reliably find my way back to the lamp. I only had a few moments where I second guessed my position in the cave but as all cavers know, it only takes one particular-shaped rock to reassure the mental compass. All in all, the lamp was only a linear 200 m from the entrance but the navigation and climbing up and down makes it seem a lot further. We got to the lamp without a hitch for Phil to exclaim that it's no wonder he never found it, it was not where he expected it to be.

From a few photos and some assessment, we decided on the roles for everyone. John was to use the extension pole to hold the catch bag as he'd practiced it in his shed, Jason was the team photographer since he brought his quality camera.

Phil and I would crawl into the chamber above and sort out the rigging and I would climb back down and ascend from the bottom of the rope to unhook the lamp. We then realised, we had forgotten John's purpose built pole! Happily though, Jason brought his camera tripod, just in case, so it was repurposed as a pole.

Cameras were set up, positions in place, and so I started climbing up, being careful of loose debris above me. The fear we had was that the moment we touched the lamp, it could just disintegrate into pieces, so with much apprehension I unhooked it and discovered it was very solid. I placed it in the bag and John lowered it to the ground. Cue the celebrations!

Phil then climbed down for his inspection of the lamp whilst Jason went up to de-rig the ropes. The concern was that perhaps there could be unreacted carbide and water still producing acetylene gas that would place an explosion risk with the removal. Sadly, the handle hinges were more corroded than we'd hoped and we couldn't open the lamp to inspect the inside, but with a happy little spit on the nozzle test to see if bubbles were forming, it was decided it would be safe to remove.

John made a fantastic cartridge out of pvc pipe and foam to fit the lamp and Phil brought some added material to pad around the lamp. What we did not expect was this material to be pieces of old underwear. Phil did reassure us they were clean after much giggling from the rest of us. We also took some measurements of the humidity and temperature of the cave to report back to NPWS to aid in the preservation of the lamp. Turns out that area of East Deep Creek Cave is incredibly cold at 5 degrees Celsius!



The retrieval crew (left to right) John Brush, Brittany Meers, Phil Fleming and Jason Moule after successfully lowering the lamp out of its hanging place - Photo by Jason Moule

The trip back out went without event until we got to the entrance and yelled ahead so everyone could get their shots for the news story. It was rather interesting doing multiple entries and exits out of the cave for the sake of videos. I surfaced to a group of people with Ros and her son Bobby standing on the bank of the creek. I had not met Ros in person yet but regardless of being next to strangers I was wrapped in a huge hug as she expressed how grateful she was that a huge piece of her family's history was rediscovered and the closure it has brought to her. She also expressed how Brian would have been so very happy and proud that the lamp has come out and will be displayed to the public as part of his legacy.

Phil offered to pull the lamp out for Ros and Bobby to see whilst John broke the emotional tension by highlighting the beautiful packing material of old Bonds undies. Ros laughed and expressed how much Brian would have loved the humour in such a thing.

After a few interviews, more footage and some excellent sandwiches and brownies, we offered to take Bobby down to the formation chamber that his Grandfather found 73 years ago. With much enthusiasm he jumped in with us all and, he and I as the less experienced cavers, went on the informative tour led by the three caving legends. I still learn so much every time I cave with any other caver but between John, Jason and Phil, the knowledge there is pretty unfathomable. I can only hope I gain the experience and skill of any of them within my lifetime.



Matt White, (Manager, Riverina Highlands Area Southern Ranges Branch - NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service) holding the lamp as ABC reporter Adriane captures footage - Photo by Brittany Meers

Bobby's reaction was a nice reminder of why it's awesome to go caving with new cavers. He was blown away by the formation but also the notion that his grandfather found it at the young age of 19 and all by himself. We had an extensive walk around looking at formation and taking photos before it was decided that beer was calling us from caves house. I recall that night a conversation with Bobby in which he said that going in the cave "was the most amazing thing he's ever done". Safe to say we may have converted a new caver and I will be inviting Bobby on numerous trips in the hope he has time in his busy schedule to come join us in some caves. In the meantime, hopefully WASG sees a new member.

Ros shared many stories about Brian over dinner that night and I only wish I could have met him before he passed. There was more talk the next day as Matt took us through Jillabenan to give Ros a taste of caving and as John and Phil did more work on the lamp to attempt to open it. Alas, it was too corroded and the unanimous decision was to leave it for the expertise of the conservator. The lamp has now been placed in a safe environment for its preservation until the display is completed in the Caves precinct in a couple of years time.

My Personal Thanks

It's an honour to have played a part in Brian's amazing story. And whilst I've been told that my finding the lamp was a somewhat cool achievement, I can't take full credit. If not for Lachlan, Alex, David and Penny and the potentially fated circumstances of that 2021 trip, we would not have the outcome we have achieved now, so appreciation to that team is well in order. I also must thank Matt White, Paul (Bernie) Sims and the rest of NPWS for the catered weekend and really doing the logistical organisation for the whole project. Thanks is also owed to the members of the KSRG for their constant support and consultation in the best actions. Obviously, a big amount of appreciation to John, Jason and Phil. You willingly followed someone who has maybe a tenth of the experience you all individually have and you were nothing but supportive. You were all the ones that made the project happen in the end and I could not have asked for a better or more skilled crew.

He was missed sorely on the retrieval mission but Lachlan Bailey was the other instrumental person in this find. If not for him, we would never have known the significance of that odd metal thing hanging from the ceiling. Thanks Lachie for being us young'uns history buff! We have willingly let you join the amazing crew in Chillagoe but make no mistake, NUCC still claims you!



The entire lamp mission party celebrating a successful retrieval from the cave - Photo by Glen Ellis

The video footage taken by Jason of the excitement deep underground was subsequently featured on ABC news and as part of a media release by NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service.

Lastly to Ros, Bobby and the O'Brien family, it makes me so very fulfilled to see the happiness and closure this has brought your family and I know that the part I will remember most is your joy upon seeing that lamp.

There are also many other invested people in this project and I have to thank everyone who provided support, consultation or was just plainly interested enough to follow along with what was happening.

Some Words from Robert (Bobby) Cafagna, Brian's grandson

What a weekend. A successful retrieval of my grandpa's lost lamp followed by an exploration of the East Deep Creek cave with experienced cavers, for my first ever caving trip. Whilst I was sitting at the mouth of the cave I wrote the note below:

My grandpa was an extraordinary man.

He was an explorer, an academic, an achiever with an endlessly curious mind. I grew up listening to countless stories from his life, stories told with such vivid detail (and usually repeated 100 times) that my young imagination would recreate them scene by scene.

The ones that captured me most were the 'exciting' ones. His involvement with NASA and his experiments on the moon. As a kid, it was easy to be swept away by stories of space and science.

The cave story never quite felt real to me. But standing here today at the mouth of this cave, the reality has struck. My grandad stood here 72 years ago, ten years younger than I am right now. When I first saw the entrance, my immediate thought was, "who in their right mind would choose to go in there?" A brave, determined, relentlessly curious young man and his caving buddy did. Not only did he discover a new section of the cave, he survived three days inside it with no light, no food, and no warmth. It is easy for me to think of him as the older, brilliant astrophysicist. But standing here, I am reminded that before all of that, he was a tough young man. Braver than I think I would have been.

It is an honour to be here today. It means more than I can put into words to see so many people make the trek here to retrieve something he once left behind. Thank you to Brittany and Lachlan who found the lamp, to the incredible cavers who retrieved it, to the national park for getting us here, and to ABC for documenting this journey.

A special thank you to Brittany, John, Jason, Phil and Matt. You have made a friend for life. Your expertise, excitement and determination made this weekend truly special. The lamp was never just a lamp. It was proof of who he was. Curious enough to go in. Brave enough to endure. Determined enough to survive.



Bobby Cafagna admiring the stunning formation chamber found by his Grandfather 73 years ago. By Brittany Meers



John Brush and Jason Moule navigating their way down the doline to the entrance of East Deep Creek cave - Photo by Brittany Meers

Conservation and Money

Clare Buswell

On a recent trip to the SA side of the Nullarbor, I took the opportunity to visit Koonalda and check out the security that has after three years, been placed around the doline to monitor visitors. There has also been hardening of site to direct visitors to one parking area and a walkway to the doline with cameras that monitor visitor behaviour. All of this is welcome, even if it still has problems.



New Signage at Koonalda Cave Doline 2026. Photo by Clare Buswell

The parking area was moved in an effort to control soil erosion problems and prevent the wash from running directly into the cave. The walkway from the new carpark also aims to keep foot traffic on a wooden stairway, again to control unwanted soil disturbance. The trade off with this stairway is that you have to be able to independently walk to deal with the stairs.



New walkway, Koonalda Cave. Photo by Clare Buswell

Underlying a lot of these infrastructure changes at Koonalda, Koonalda Homestead, and Erosion Doline, which has been fenced off, was a long process of consultation between SA Department of Environment and Water (DEW) SA National Parks, the Registered Native Title Body Corporate, in this case the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation, (FWCAC) and Mirning elders.

The consultation took considerable time, lots of dosh with good things resulting, particularly the monitoring of the doline and work on the gate to prevent those with stone mason urges from moving rocks around to gain access.

However, the consultation process and subsequent infrastructure placement has again seen legal action brought by disaffected Mirning elders against DEW, FWCAC. This legal process will again hold up much needed remediation work at Koonalda. It also holds up any research work within the cave itself.

In the meantime, Telstra is digging a trench to place more optic cable across the Nullarbor and are now in serious trouble for the damage done by this trenching in the Wilderness Protection Area.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-02-18/telstra-investigated-environmental-breach-south-australia-site/106349226>

Some of this trenching occurred just south of the Koonalda Homestead, and in this section at least, the impact is confined and narrow. Weed spread however is a different issue. Only time will tell.

There is a move by conservation organisations to push for 1% of the Federal budget to be dedicated to on ground environmental biodiversity programmes by 2030. This would mean around \$6-7b. Currently the spend is 0.06% 2025-6 about \$470m. (Biodiversity Council Australia). At the same time, academics at ANU found that Gov't subsidies to agriculture, fisheries, fossil fuel activities, (including transport) that harm biodiversity came to \$26.3 billion or 4% of the Federal Budget. I mention the 1% for Nature Campaign as what is missing in this campaign is any mention of the underground and its biodiverse world! As members of the ASF it's up to us to put karst on this political map, if we are move away from being unseen and unheard.



Telstra Trench, Old Eyre Hwy, south of Koonalda Homestead. Photo by Clare Buswell.



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