

BY DEBORAH JOHNSTON

Participants: Deborah Johnston, Rod O'Brien, Al Warild, Alex Boulton, Michael Collins, Keir Vaughan-Taylor, Phil Maynard, Alan Pryke, Megan Pryke, Rowena Larkins, Thomas Cunningham, Bill Lamb, Michael Larkin (NUCC), Ryan Filler, Max Midden, Kyle, Tina Willmore, Stephen Kennedy, William Slee.

It was a busy weekend at the Jenolan caver's cottage with two Canberra NUCC visitors (that I may have promised not to call NUCCwits?!), two American exchange students, six divers, and seven regular SUSSlings!

Saturday Diving

On Saturday, the divers for the day (Rod, Alex Boulton, and me) confused everyone by being ready to go at 7:30am and at their dive site in the Mud Tunnels of the Southern tourist caves by 9am. This was achieved with Rod's whip-cracking to get us out of the hut, and with the much appreciated help of Rod, Rowena, Keir, Will, Alan and Ryan who helped carry our gear. As we were entering the cave through the locked door I stopped to tie my pesky laces. In just a couple of moments they had raced along the Binomea cut and down the stairs towards the Temple of Baal. . . unfortunately with my headlight in tow! Without a light I could only pull the door shut and sit on the bench to have a sulk until the dry cavers returned. It wasn't long afterwards that I realised the tank pack I had also contained my spare lights, but this lightbulb moment was too late as I had now locked myself out by closing the door.

I waited and waited, and sulked and sulked, wondering why on earth they weren't back yet. A tour group slowly arrived and stared as I sat there in my bright red wetsuit, with one couple checking that they didn't need a wetsuit too! Eventually the guide appeared and let me in and I couldn't help noticing that his last name was Dive! As I got to the top of the stairs I met poor Rod and Alex at the top step after they had come back to find out what was taking me so long. They explained that the others had decided to exit via Lucas that day! Luckily we still managed to stay ahead of the first group of the day, and all geared up and entered the dive. Rod swam ahead to film the entire dive on his gopro with the best visibility, with Alex and I following to wait at the first air chamber and assist with the climbs once he had finished.



*Alex climbing to new dry cave after diving Lethe, Blue Lake, Jenolan.
Photo by Deborah Johnston*

Alex and I reached the first restriction where you typically turn around facing out of the cave, and go down the vertical slot feet first, taking one or both tanks off to get down the tight bit. I watched in surprise as Alex squeezed his whole body into the small alcove above the restriction, then watched in confusion as he did some fancy yoga moves contorting around in the small space, then I watched in horror as he completed a barrel roll and started going down the hole head first! This did not look right at all so I got in place to help him back up again, only to watch his fins, light and bubbles disappear down the passage as he swam off unphased.

I followed (feet first!) and soon we were at the first air chamber where I did a very horribly tight muddy climb to convince myself that the one small bit I hadn't looked at last time, wasn't in fact a lead that would come back to

embarrass me in the future. It wasn't, and the lead was written off. After Rod had finished his video, he and Alex swam to the end of the dive where there was a climb in the third and final air chamber. Rod had bravely attempted this climb on an earlier dive using me as a human step ladder to reach the first foothold. He made his way up several metres by chimneying, but was forced to retreat when his manly chest (wrapped in two coats of 7mm neoprene!) refused to fit through the smallest part. It wasn't possible to see what lay beyond the top of the climb, but I could see that it curved off slightly and it just 'had the look' of going into horizontal passage. I'd had a very good feeling about this for some time, but didn't have the guts or skill to attempt the climb myself. Luckily, today we had Alex who

had the right size and eagerness required to get the job done for us. Rod easily boosted Alex up to the first foothold and he wriggled and grunted his way up the slippery climb with deceptively inadequate foot and handholds. The tight section was still tight on his small frame but he reached the top and reported back the good news that we'd be hoping for – human sized, clean washed horizontal passage waiting for us to explore! This exploration would have to wait until next time however, as Alex was wearing a drysuit which would not be suitable for anymore rough dry caving so we exited with Rod and I bringing out just our tanks and leaving the rest of the gear for the following day.

After some lazy lunching and tank filling we took Alex back down to the showcaves, this time to Blue Lake where he dived to Cerberus Junction using Rod's gopro to film these sections of passage for us. Unfortunately for Alex he also used Rod's Scurion dive, the light you use once and have to have despite the painful price tag! After his dive he packed up and hit the road to prepare for a family event the next day while Rod and I relaxed giving the cave plenty of time for the silt to clear so we could finish our surveying.

Saturday Dry Caving

After the hordes departed unfashionably early, Max took the two Americans to the far reaches of Wiburds where they were well and truly tested. We were slightly horrified to find out later that they were both new to caving! Luckily we didn't have to worry too much about their ongoing trauma from this experience as they both absolutely loved it.

Al Warild and Keir had originally planned to dive, but Rowena had convinced them to instead help her with her exploration of the Southern Limestone. Phil also replaced his dive gear with a survey kit and headed to sand passage in Mammoth cave with Thomas Cunningham in tow, while Bill took the rest of the group for an entertaining wander to Slug Lake.

Sunday Diving

On Sunday, Rod and I returned to Lethe with Phil, Al and Keir. We had no dry cavers to help, but because Rod and I were only carrying our refilled tanks, we were able to help the guys. There had been plans for the others to survey Blue Tongue while it remains open, but unfortunately Keir had slammed his finger in a door which meant the dry caving to reach the water would be too painful. Instead we all entered the water in the mud tunnels, with Rod and I going back upstream, and the others did a downstream through trip emerging in Blue Lake.



**Alex entering Styx resurgence heading to Cerberus, Blue Lake, Jenolan.
Photo by Deborah Johnston**

ward bag of everything else on the front. Rod made the steep stairs at the very end look easy, while I huffed and puffed up at half speed.

We got back to the hut fairly early and were delighted to find that Will had done a great job cleaning everything as he procrastinated on his self-inflicted study day. We waited for the groups to emerge from Mammoth, the Southern Limestone survey, and exploration around Hennings before rushing home, staying just ahead of the traffic from the Bathurst races.

Rod and I groaned into our cold soggy wetsuits, and felt our way along the passages which were still completely murky from the day before. Luckily, the section beyond our last survey point was the only passage that had cleared so we got to work. These legs were far more difficult than the rest of the cave as here the water enters a rift with a series of blockages where the dive line does a series of steep corkscrews up and down with a big dog-leg in the middle. We persevered and only had a few legs left to finish when Rod swam down and started checking my hands. Thinking he was looking for another survey peg I showed him that I was only holding the end of the tape, when I realised that I was ONLY holding end of the tape as it had snapped in half! Calling it a day we headed out of the dive and packed up for the weekend. We slogged out wearing our wetsuits and weights with a heavy bag of two tanks on our backs, and a lighter but awkward bag of everything else on the front.