
Trifecta!

Ian Cooper and Keir Vaughan-Taylor
Coolleman, Thursday 24th March to Monday 28th March 2016

Keir Vaughan Taylor, Phil Maynard, Rod Obrien, Rick Grundy, Brian Hedden Alan Pryke, Megan Pryke, Jason Cockayne , Ian Cooper, David Rueda Roca, Soo Parkinson,, Matt Saunders, Katie Keophilaphet

Thursday 24/3/2016

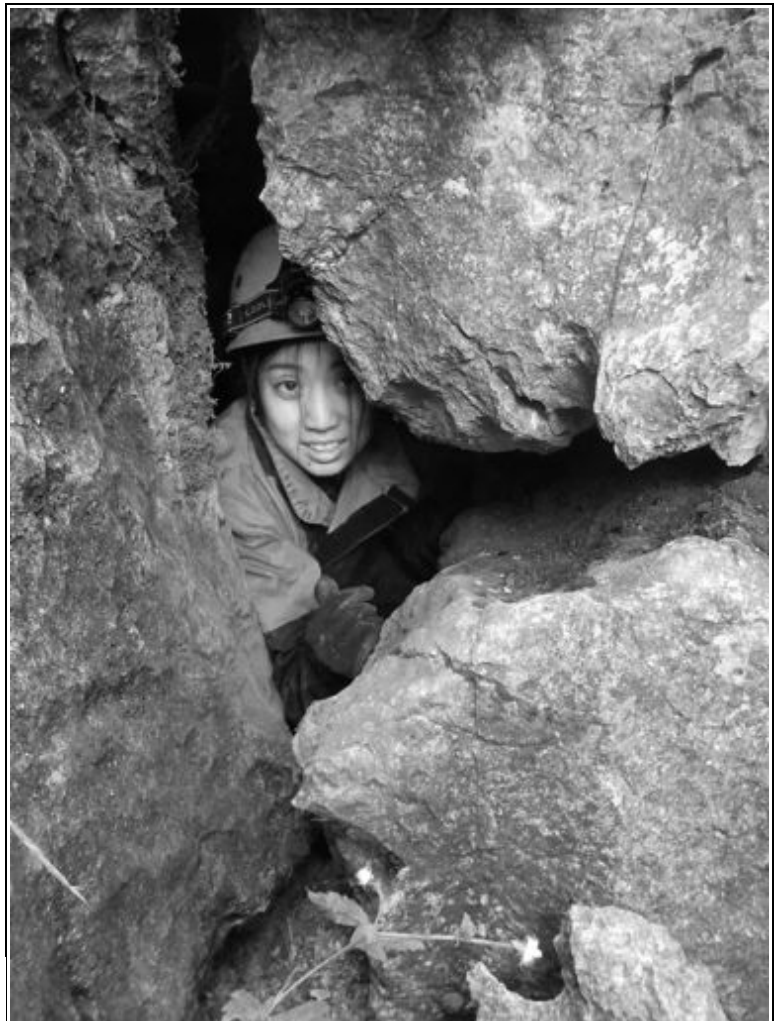
Ian arrived Thursday afternoon to an empty campsite. Numerous horses were present around camp and on Long Plain. Thursday evening arrivals encountered a cold night. Seated in fold-out chairs warming by the blaze, our troop obsessed with the usual cavers' dialogues and opinions on everything, we were joined by an unselfconscious brumby finding a position between the chairs in front of the fire and espousing opinion straight from the horse's mouth; "To your political argument I say neigh!" "Cows eat grass because they are lawn mooers." The feral horse numbers continue to grow and they are no longer afraid to invade campsites.

Friday 25/4/2016

Friday morning was all action, prior to becoming afternoon. A traditional SUSS start. Rod, Brian, David, Phil and Keir retraced crawls and stumbles from previous years into River Cave, (CP6), and Altamira Alley. Without doubt the water is cold and the nature of this trip begets problems. Somewhere between the entrance and the second breath hold Keir's diving mask fell out. Altamira Alley progressively sinks into the water table leaving divers chest deep, sliding our tanks sideways through the narrow alleyways. The CP6 map shows the many changes in directions, each length ending in a shallow duck-under and resurfacing into the next section of channel. Each length of channel descends just a little bit deeper as one moves upstream. At the start we gear up on a gravel bank where discovering the mask missing Keir adopted Phil's spare mask.

Brian protects his regulators in a plastic container but despite this, Brian's port plug on his first stage somehow ejected. Phil having done this trip before, relinquished his opportunity to Brian, giving his regulator to Brian. Phil returned to the main passage to wait and wait. An almighty bang jolted my attention away from the cold. Brian's Poseidon regulator had blown off the end of his low pressure hose. The Poseidon is a fine regulator and with a little patience we located the parts blown onto a nearby rock shelf and rebuilt the second stage. Adding to the delay, our dive line had loosened since last year. A great deal of time was spent reliably re-fixing line so it wouldn't pull into undesirable positions. Finding stout fixing points is a job of mountaineering difficulty since despite the appearance of gnarled rock surfaces these are often mud sculpture impersonating a rock. There seems to be no place to tie knots and finding a fixing point in the darkness is definitely a black art.

Last year the team surfaced in a 15m long room. An underwater section prior to this room presents a constriction. Keir found this squeeze to be a wriggle. Scraping along the bottom he flipped the catch on his weight belt and it was gone. Not noticing the missing belt he was irritated with buoyancy being way too positive. His upside-



*Katie in small cave above Altamira
Photo Alan Pryke*

down roof pushing techniques endured extra practice. Upstream of the squeeze is a more complicated group of chambers with pendants dipping from a now flooded roof suggesting past periods of dry. Keir surfaced at a tie off in an air bell, using the breathing space to make sure all air was evacuated from his BC, then he discovered the lead weights were gone. With a sigh he resolved to return to the squeeze but fortuitously Rod appeared with the missing weight belt in hand, saving extra time in the cold.



*Rod in Altamira Alley
Photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor*

Reaching the air chamber, Brian again set off laying new line with Rod escorting behind. Keir remained in the air chamber ensuring, in his mind, there were no unexplored leads in this tumble of rocks. It was also a chance to warm up a little. Brian's wiry body managed to snake across a gravel bed that would not permit a bigger person to pass. Wanting to ensure a safe highway, Rod stayed at the gravel bank creating a larger passage for future surveying. Brian meanwhile surfaced in another air chamber, this time bigger than the previous room. He was able to leave the water to search for a way on but nothing easily presented itself. This is not necessarily the end because the water flow path was lost. It was likely to be somewhere back along the dive line in that now turbid stew.

Brian returned to our company in the big air space, very cold and feeling the imperative to exit. Rod and Keir delayed in the return passages tying line and making a few video clips along the way back. Rod and Brian didn't seem to get tired but for Keir, climbing out of the River Cave entrance into that glorious sunshine he was ready to sit round the camp fire and stare vacantly into space. "Feeling okay" they asked as if it was a workplace "are you okay day" to which Keir stoically replied "I think you're all mad..... I'm okay though".

Meanwhile on the surface, Alan, Megan, Ian, Katie, and Matt went to explore the western margins of the plain for stream sinks to match Altamira Alley. They had a look at the former North Branch Sink but any way on remains small and gravel choked. A few years ago a new sink opened up in the gravel stream bed about 300m further upstream. Since the last SUSS visit the sink has collapsed a little more and is not quite as overhung as previously. Ian tentatively climbed in for a look and could see the water turning east at the base of the slope. No bedrock was visible. The sink continues to consume a lot of gravel into some undiscovered cavern.

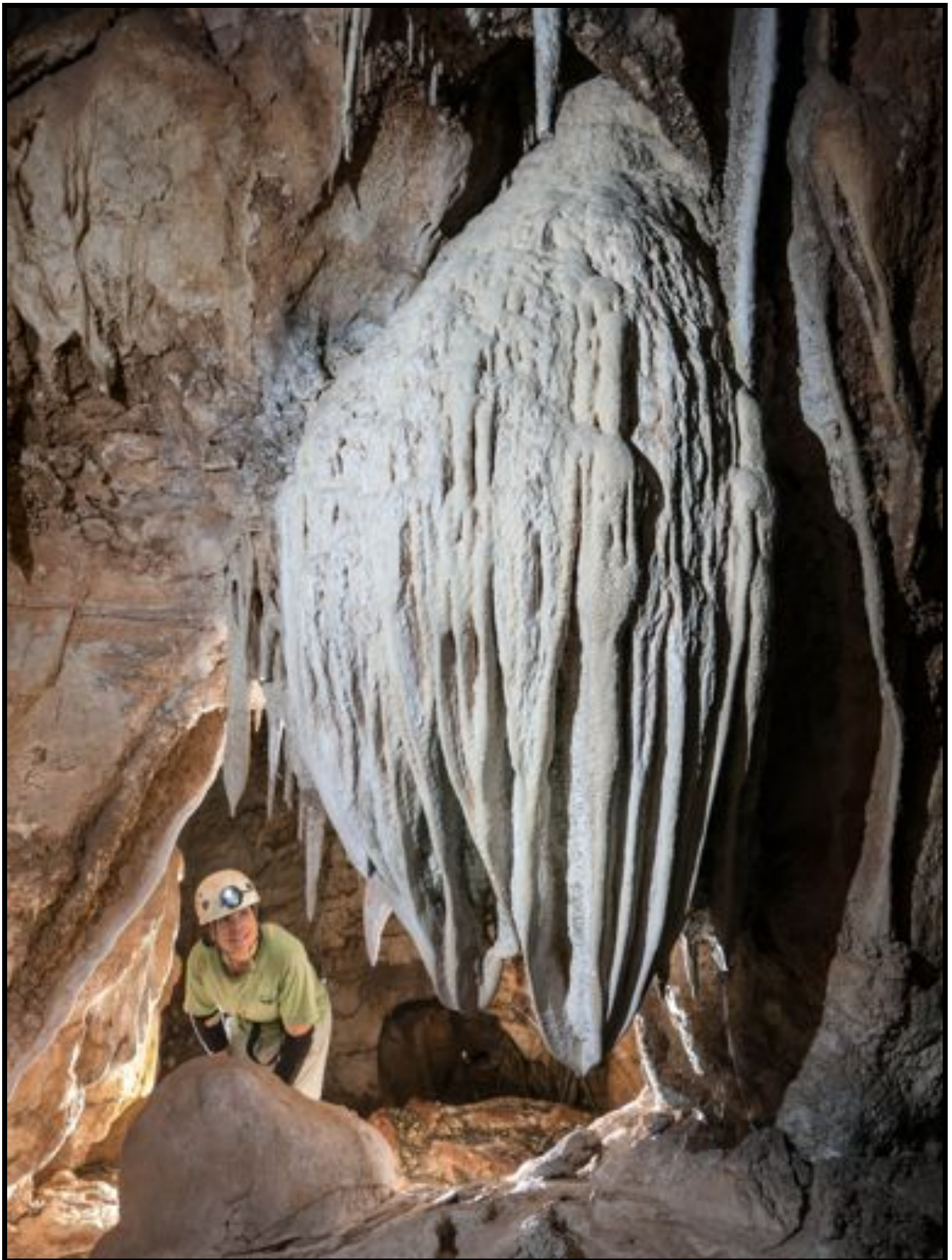
The group then wandered up to Harris Waterhole for lunch and lessons in the arcane art of rock skipping. After lunch they headed to nearby Cliff Cave (CP4) for a look. The Katie was deployed into some of the small lower passages but nothing new was observed. We then went west to the edge of the limestone which is in the trees above the main plain. We worked south until a significant stream and swampy sink was found about 800m WSW of Altamira Alley. Here a stream of maybe 10l/s was sinking in a 300m long by 50m wide swamp.



*King Solomans Temple, Colong
Photo Alan Pryke*



*Tina Willmore in Fanackapan cave, Windjana Gorge, Western Australia
Photo Alan Pryke*



*Megan Pryke in Fanackapan cave, Windjana Gorge, Western Australia
Photo Alan Pryke*



*Route to Woofs Cavern, Colong
Photo Alan Pryke*



*Approach to
St Michaels cave
Photo Guy McKanna*



Katie explores for a way in to Altamira Alley
Photo Alan Pryke

There was no way found into the ground but further down the valley a couple of untagged small holes were examined that extended up to 10m each. The next valley to the south also has 2 streams sinking but time prevented them being explored. This suggests that there is likely to be further branch streams in River Cave and / or Altamira Alley. It was then the trudge back across the plain to camp. Ian took Katie and Matt for a look into Murray Cave where we met the NUCC and CASM cavers. Then there was the walk back down Nicol Gorge to the resurgence, a wash and camp.

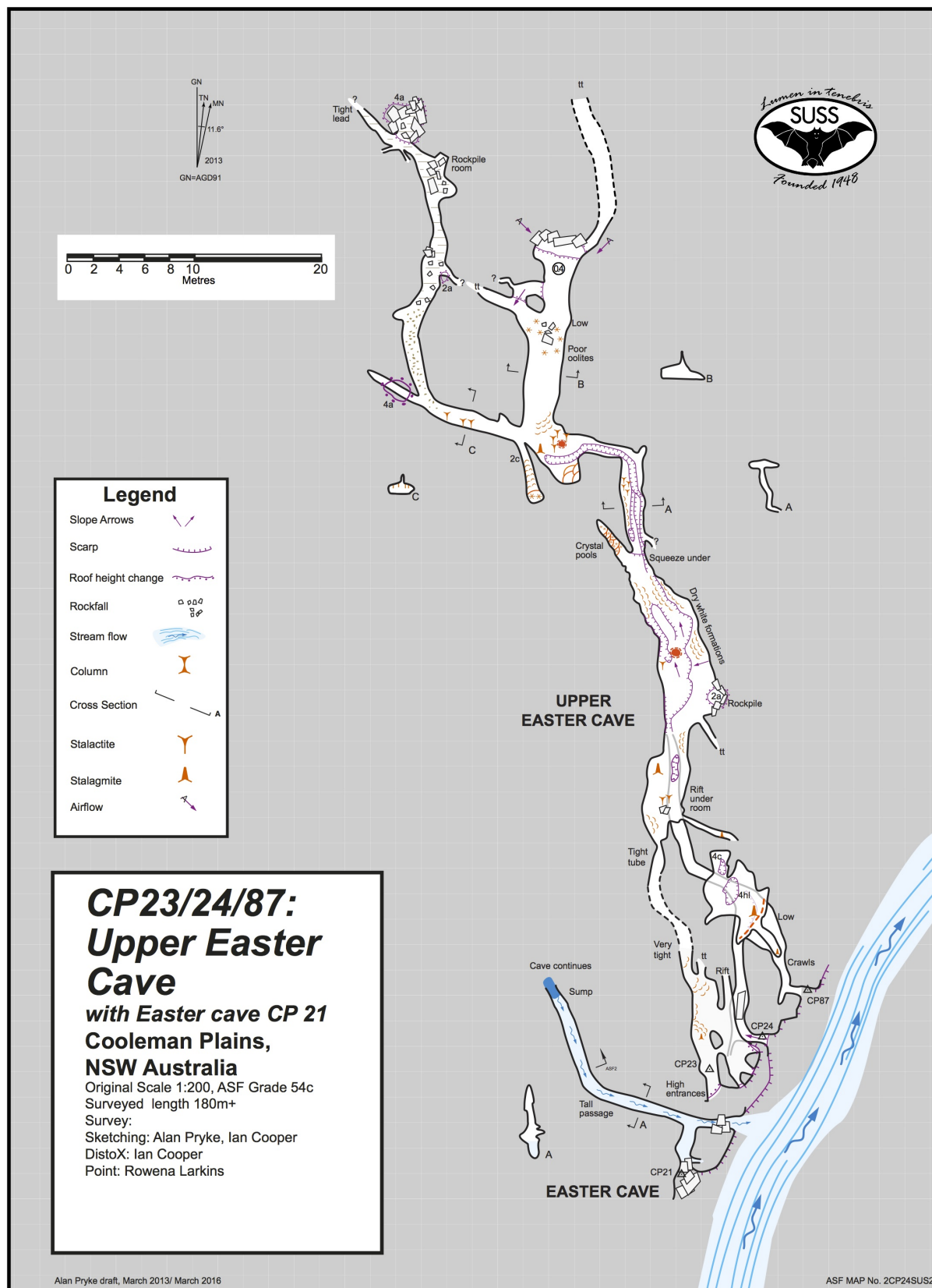
Saturday 26/3/2016

The next day was pretty much a diving rest day. Keir took the opportunity to find his missing mask. Jason and Keir returned to River Cave guessing that the missing mask was somewhere between the first encounter with the river and the second duck-under. Trying not to stir the water they carefully searched section by section making their way downstream. Jason wore shorts, tee shirt and protective arm pads. Without a complete dive set the cave seems much easier. Despite what should be a hopeless search they methodically examined the river bed making their way down to the first sump. They splashed though the sump into the next section. Keir tended to move quicker than Jason, trying to keep ahead of murk displaced with their footfalls. In a deep pool he spotted an underwater something that turned out to be the sought-after mask. Yay! Keir started upstream and found the indomitable Jason standing in a pool up to his thighs searching the river bottom with his hands for a mask in some distant recess. Cold? What's that?

Sunday would be a chance to connect Murray and River caves with teams pushing from both ends. Jason and Keir packed up the remaining gear at the River Cave entrance and moved it to the entrance of Murray ready for the next day. Murray's entrance chamber hosts many swiftlets perhaps enjoying a certain refuge status. While standing outside in the bright sun a Brown Hawk dove into the cave then out clutching a bird in its talons.

Dozens of other swiftlets performed desperate attacks on the hawk, in the hope of spooking the hawk to drop its prey. The hawk seemed to enjoy the aerial combat for a while but eventually made off with its dinner.

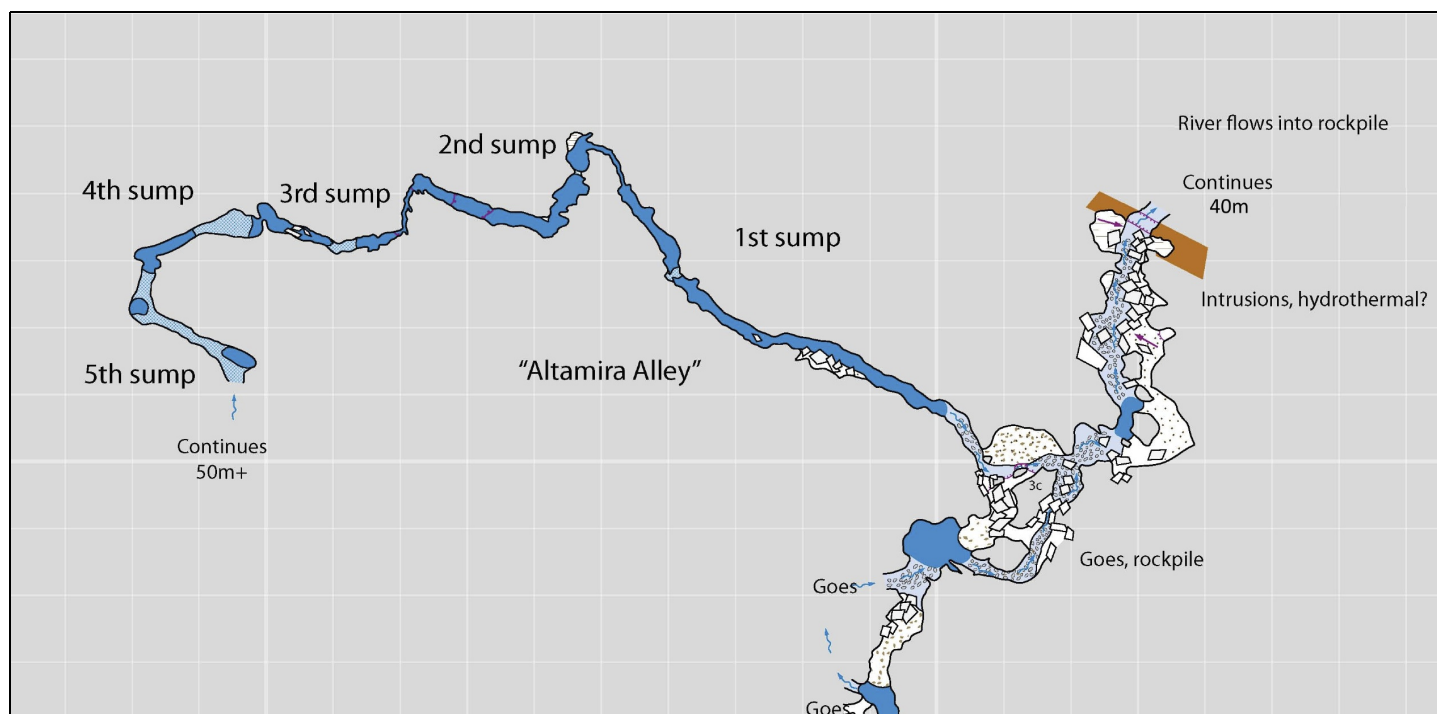
Most of the group, (Ian, Alan, Megan, David, Rod, Phil, Brian, Katie, Matt) spent the day heading down Cave Creek. First they went to Easter Cave and Upper Easter Cave, (CP23/24/87). Alan, Ian and Rowena had previously surveyed this cave and left a squeeze to explore. We were able to deploy the petite Katie into a drafting flattener at the back of the cave. After some effort and encouragement Katie was able to fit through to some additional stand up rooms which remain unsurveyed. On the way out Katie was able to fit through a tight tube and exit through the CP23 entrance.



Next we went to CP92/161 for a look. The extra pairs of eyes led to Katie and Ian finding an unstable upper rock pile room with dimensions about 35m x 7m. At the top of the room is a 4m diameter aven with an extremely precarious looking earth domed roof. Names such as “Death Zone” and “Danger Room” sprang to mind. Next Katie was pointed at a squeeze near the J161 entrance. She moved through to a series of well-decorated rooms and importantly a larger way in was found with Alan, Megan and Brian following. There are some high-quality crystal pools and flowstone. This area has been visited before with some carbide and hob-nailed boot marks.

Meanwhile Ian, Phil and David had a look at Schrödinger Cave, (CP181) and found only half a sump, with the water level down about 5m on the previously-seen level but still well above other levels seen. More than half of Cave Creek was sinking near the CP181 entrance. Then we went for a look at Whitefish Cave. The cave is still choked with flood debris timber but was only taking a trickle of water. All got to see a 15cm white fish in the sump pool.

Rick stood around the camp fire, arguing that the chance of connecting Murray and River was unlikely. He'd carefully investigated the River Cave rockpile last year. “It is hopeless”, he said. Despite the misgivings from our nay-sayer, the plan was that Rod and Brian would return to the frozen lands of Altamira Alley and survey hopefully as far as the first big air chamber. Rick and Jason would help get their gear to Altamira and then embark on one of Keir's hopeless causes.



*Detail from map of CP6 River Cave
Map draft Phil Maynard*

Sunday 27/3/2016

Phil and Keir set off to dive Murray Cave. The first sump is a frosty 20m long swim in sizeable passage, however later sumps are glorified breath holds. The second sump is usually just a wade in the water under an overhanging dyke into a room where the river flows into a small lake then into a hole poised between the black dyke and an orange limestone wall. On this occasion there had been a few changes. In the recess, there was deep water. Enthusiastically both Phil and Keir had a go at squeezing feet first into the hole and feeling out the space underneath. Chest deep they could feel large rounded river worn boulders wedged into the surrounds. Neither of us were game enough to commit to the complete underwater experience. We would wait partly transfixed for turbid swirls to clear and peer deep into the hole. It called to us, teasing us with the notion it was our only lead to the course of the river downstream from Murray.

After wasting too much time we made our way upstream to the last sump formed, as is Sump 2, along a dyke. It is best to use a tank since the way on kinks steeply back at a confusing angle. There is a taut rope through the sump that gets caught up in the knobbly bits of the dyke. Entering the water, Phil's regulator decided to stick

CP92/161

**Cooleman Plains,
NSW, Australia**

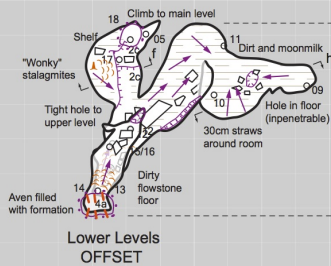
Survey : 27/3/2005,
26-27/3/2016

Original Scale 1:200

ASF Grade 5.4

Surveyed by SUSS:

Megan and Alan Pryke,
Katie Keophilaphet, Ian
Cooper



Lower Levels
OFFSET

Legend

Slope Arrows



Scarp



Roof height change



Rockfall



Flowstone



Column



Cross Section



Stalactite



Shawl



Tree roots



Stalagmite



Airflow



Vegetation



Crystals



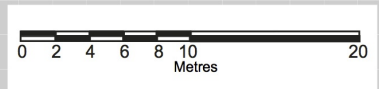
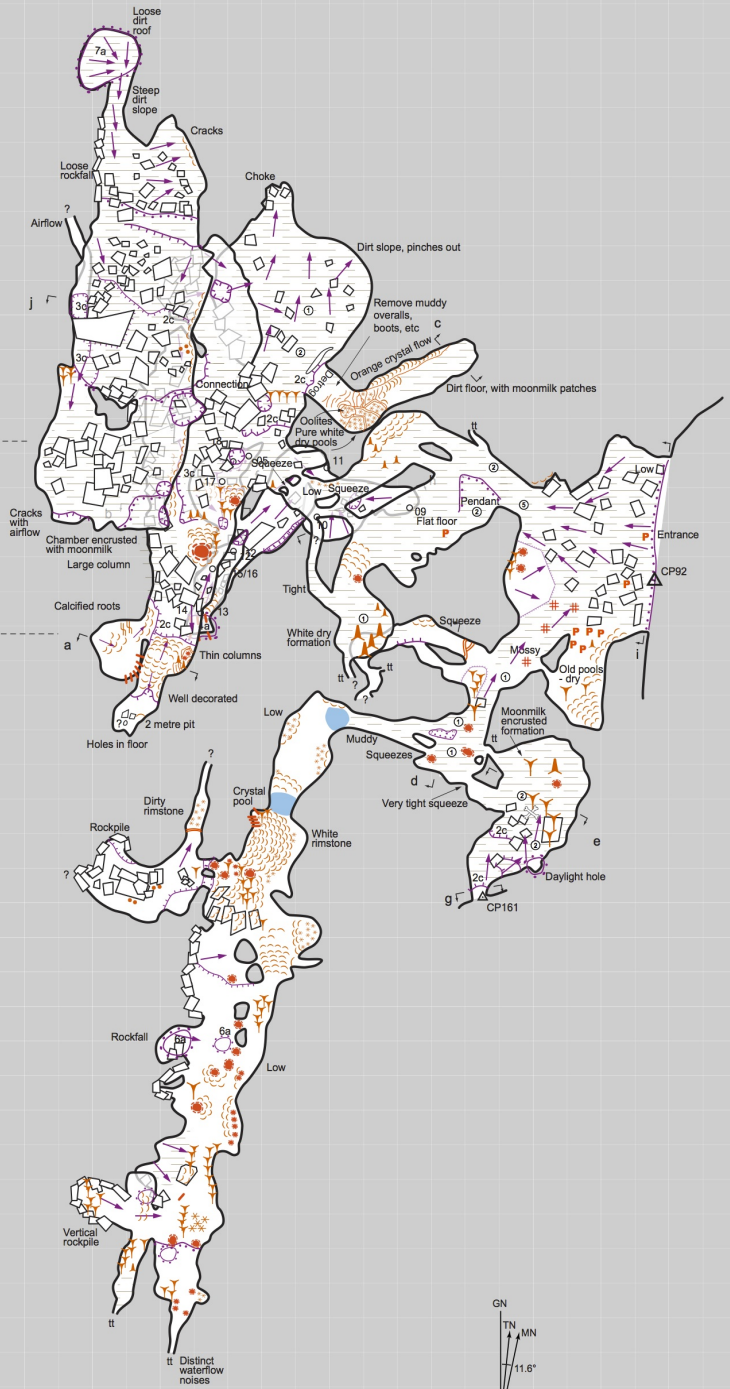
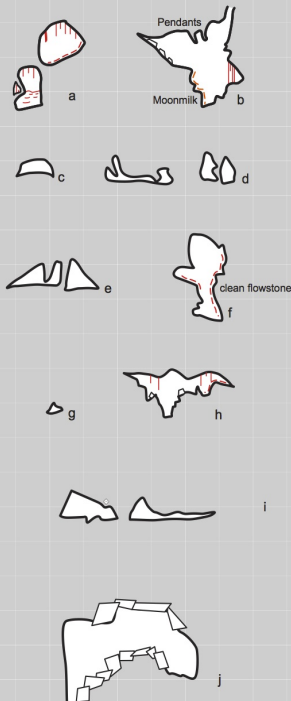
Pendant



Roof height (m)



Climb/aven (m) 2c 2a



relentlessly on free flow and he called his dive. Keir pressed on to the back of Murray on his own where the terminating rockpile listened to his best cooee, shouted into the spaces between the rocks. Alas no reply. A very muddied water flow emerged and Keir could tell the River Cave party were not far away. Phil and Keir had dallied too long coming in and may have missed the other team. Keir squeezed into and along the water and estimated another 15m from the end of the survey. Following the water, Keir could see through into a small room where the flow continues. The squeeze is undesirable and without the motivation of knowing what the others had achieved he declined to scrape through into the next little bit.

Previously, (but not by much), Jason and Rick were at the River Cave side of the rockpile. Jason is always enthusiastic. Rockpiles, to Jason are terrific puzzles that need to be solved. Rick surveyed his behaviour with skepticism observing with his arms folded and muttering something like “If you insist on looking so hard then you should at least look somewhere more likely”. Rick couldn't help himself, his British caving gene kicked in and soon they were both up to their elbows in cold water on the right hand side of the rockpile. They first manoeuvred several 20kg rocks off to one side succeeding in creating a tight 1m vertical squeeze into what might be a small space. It seems to be stable. Great care was taken to squeeze into an upper space however this was not a small disappointing space; instead it emerged just above a stream passage.

The walk-along passage is best described as “more River Cave”, having the same dark rocks, similar passage dimensions and river. It continued for around 30m but with no apparent offshoots. It terminated at a very solid rockpile with considerably less surface area and no obvious dry leads through. There is a small pool of water on the left side of the rock pile. Laying down in this, it is possible to place one's legs through a 20cm to 30cm deep flooded channel beneath the wall. This feels as though it returns to air after 1m. It is possible that a skinny person may be able to wriggle through on a long surface supplied regulator. The surface map shows positions of River Cave and Murray Cave with a separation of about 40m. The extension of 30m in River Cave and an extra 15m in Murray Cave means the two caves are within survey error of connecting.

Rod and Brian pushed the survey further along Altamira Alley into the fifth sump going upstream. There is still more than 50m of passage to survey in Altamira Alley and some other side passages to be surveyed upstream of Altamira Alley. Potential remains for significant side passages.

Alan, Katie and Ian spent the entire day pushing and surveying the extensions found the previous day in CP92/161. Megan took Matt for a look at Barbers Cave and Black Range Cave.

Monday 28/3/2016

Most of the group spent the day recovering gear, packing up and going home. David and Matt went for a tour through Cooleman Main. Alan, Megan and Ian went back to CP92/161 to finish the survey. At the end of a

low tunnel we could clearly hear flowing water through a tight formation constriction. Analysis of the survey shows this is the other side of the large cave entrance half way down the waterfall. This remains to be tested by voice connection and survey. A map of the current surveyed extent of CP92/161 is included.

It was 2.30pm by the time that all were back at camp and then on their way home, leaving the camp-site to the horses.



*New room in CP92
Photo Alan Pryke*