
COOLEMAN PLAINS

26TH JANUARY 2007, AUSTRALIA DAY WEEKEND

BY KEIR VAUGHAN-TAYLOR

Participants: Keir Vaughan-Taylor (TL), Jason Cockayne, Sharon Pearson, Ian Houghton, Caroline Houghton, Andrew Houghton, Michael Houghton, Paul Lewis, James Little, Shannon Crack

Diving in Whitefish Cave

Blue Waterholes is the place where Cave Creek bubbles up through sand, out of cracks, fissures and broken rocky embankments coalescing to form a sizable river ten meters wide. The Blue Water Holes camp site has been fenced moving the camp site back from the river. This is a good thing because nitrates from a strong human presence has caused considerable algae growth in the river water and it's particularly bad in the drought.

The river's deep enough for a person to get seriously laughed at if you fail to meet the challenge of stepping stones along the way downstream. The river follows an undulating path below the rolling hills of limestone and gracefully arcs to the right into a subtly beautiful limestone canyon. The canyon walls rise perhaps maybe



Entrance of Whitefish
photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor



Jason at the sump in Whitefish
photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor

60 m hosting a few small but delightful caves. For me, the cave that is particularly interesting is Whitefish.

Four kilometers down river from the resurgence there is a cliff where water drops in a series of falls and cascades 30 meters to a lower level where limestone bluffs define edges of the river and lure the average red blooded caver with promises of an undiscovered cavernous realms. This place will certainly have a rewarding future for SUSS discovering its deep secrets. The vista of limestone opportunity lies out in landscape so far only gently explored by us to date. Our interest is captured at the top of the waterfall where half of the volume of Cave Creek unexpectedly diverts into a small cave called Whitefish. Once underground, river water falls into chutes to pools churning over sharp edges and boulders finding a quiet peace at waters' end

in a dark and mysterious sump. A dive line in the sump means someone has been through before and with the small community of divers I mull over in my mind who it might have been? Maybe someone from Canberra.

A squeeze just before the sump, on the left, marks a section of cave that can entertain a caving group several hours, particularly entertaining forcing through the squeeze. Some of us prefer to pass the squeeze and take a short swim along a rift, a bit more than head room and perishingly cold. The rift widens to a place you could almost call a room. There is an alcove on the left that is the entrance to passage that by-passes the earlier squeeze. Many SUSS groups have explored up the climbs and crawls, however I have to this day not seen this part of the cave. Next time, next time, it's always next time.

The squeeze is not really really difficult but annoyingly uncomfortable, so take your pick. You can take a quick swim in 6 degree water or give your elbows and cave suit a bit more of a thrashing. An orange dive line marks the way on in the water. On previous trips we tried a perfunctory free dive into the sump but it went deep right away. On a later trip we took thermals and a 3 liter cylinder to do what we thought would be a short duck under.

A wet suit would be overkill and I elected to just wear my decaying set of chlorofiber thermals. Those first moments after emersion creates sensory overload, a dimensional change, a change of perspective, with goals and motivations governed by temperature rather than intellect. A small pure white fish busily wriggled to keep just ahead of my view, ushering me the full 15 meters to a constriction at the far end. This white fish must be why Whitefish is called Whitefish. The passage steeply descends but then slowly rises ending at a kinking squeeze partly blocked with logs and debris. The surface seemed to be just on the other side of the logs. I spent a little time pulling at logs and pushing bits of lumber to one side, losing body heat but after a short time managing to squeeze into the next partition and discovering a surface.

The sump surface might be a meter square with a small beach at one end large enough to store some dive gear. The sump's surface is the bottom of a pit from out of which you can climb straight up into the middle of a big chamber. I estimated this chamber to be 30 meters long. No-one believes the original guesstimates, especially mine. I am told that I have a reputation for exaggeration, a criticism that I strongly denounce and in my defense I can say that later measurements showed this room is at least 34 meters not counting little terminal passages at each end. [*But the reputation stands, because it's funnier. ed.*]

Balancing on wobbly boulders, there is only a little time available to explore. There are rock collapses and holes in the floor to explore but not without a bit of protective caving gear. My thermals' fashion style and thermal properties had faded after many past glorious cave trips, glorious in my mind at least and would be seriously destroyed engaging in rock-pile fossicking.

With breath forming clouds of fog in the Whitefish Room I experienced that strange conflict of wanting to go back because I was cold and not wanting to go back because the return journey through the water was also cold. That piece by a 70s band called Cream, "The White Room" ran through my head. "I'll wait in this place where the sun never shines. Wait in this place where the shadows run from themselves."

That was the year before. On this trip with the company of a good few persons the main goal for this Australia Day weekend was to find out where all the leads in this 30 m chamber were going. As it turned out we were to discover more than just one little secret in Whitefish.

Australia Day

The countryside on the way in was bare, not a skerrick of grass for some poor sheep to browse upon. We parked and camped at the nearest campsite to Blue Holes but thinking about it now, the campsite further up the hill called Magpie Flat might be more comfortable. While further from the water supply the area has more grass and larger flat areas to pitch a tent. In future I'll stake our patch there. It's easy enough to drive down the hill to fill water containers.

My diving buddy Jason and I were prepared to not do too much diving. It can overly try the pa-



*Clark Gorge
photo Paul Lewis*

tience of any companion standing around waiting for divers to come back from some adventure that the rest of the group can't completely share. Nevertheless I wanted to at least dive through into Whitefish Chamber to try following the path of the river. The rest of the group could visit Whitefish and then Easter at the bottom of the waterfall where the water ultimately rejoins Cave Creek.

Without the usual flow in Cave Creek crossing the stepping stones was easy even with dive sets for me and Jason. This time the freezing waters would be less debilitating because I had a spring suit as well as my "glorious" thermals undersuit.

Jason and I geared up in the alcove on the left just before the sump. Water visibility at Cooleman has not been good on any of our previous visits and this time in the sump it was hard to see anything. A few shapes and colours are discernable up to about 25 cm. We followed the guideline to the end of the sump parking our gear on the small beach in the bottom of the pit.

I had cached a small camera and some survey gear to measure the general trend of the cave passage in a watertight PVC tube. Sometimes the water pressure locks the PVC screw lid into place and only by wedging the lid in a suitably sized rock fissure is it possible to put a decent twist on it to get it open. While only going to a depth of about 5 m the PVC tube had leaked some and the survey paper was sodden. I think the O ring had grit on it from the last dive – I should have wiped it cleaner to start with. The pencil could not write on it, instead poking holes in the survey paper. Instead of the paper I sketched and recorded the few survey legs measuring up the 30 m chamber with a pencil on the side of the PVC tube.



*Ian surfaces from the duck-under in Easter
photo Paul Lewis*

Jason wriggled off into a rockpile, finding a crumbling gravel tube. He wormed his way into a small 2 m x 2 m room atop a six meter pitch. It is a slightly tricky climb down into a room. Not too bad but this is a very undesirable place to break an arm or leg. The room at the bottom is larger and more comfortable. You can stand and walk around, just a bit. At times this room floods and water channels into another sump at the very bottom of the chamber. In one corner of the sump was the ever present white fish. The sump appeared to head in a direction that surely connects back somewhere into the sump we originally dived through. There may be a way into this room by coming from somewhere in the first sump we dived in through. I didn't see any connection, but then I didn't see very much of anything.

Jason seemed to spend a long time in the rockpile and I would say there is little chance of finding an easy way on through that jumble of rock. I believe the best opportunity is to find something in the first sump. We returned to join the others

in the main cave but were not surprised to find they had become bored waiting and went off to find their own cave at the bottom of the waterfall. Lifting and carrying our gear to the surface we met them having returned from having a great time in Easter.

In the words of the Karst Index, Easter Cave has "a river type entrance". A short swim into the river type and then a duck under into the passages on the other side. Naturally Michael and Andrew led the way putting the appropriate peer pressure on the whole crew all taking the proverbial deep breath. As the cold water took their breath away they all went through. Always a little daunting to do this but ever such a rewarding feeling. They reported finding the little white fish. I found in the Cooleman literature that the little white fish is not some exotic subterranean species but is just a trout. Apparently trout "bleach" white in the darkness of a cave but are nevertheless friendly company on a journey through sumps.

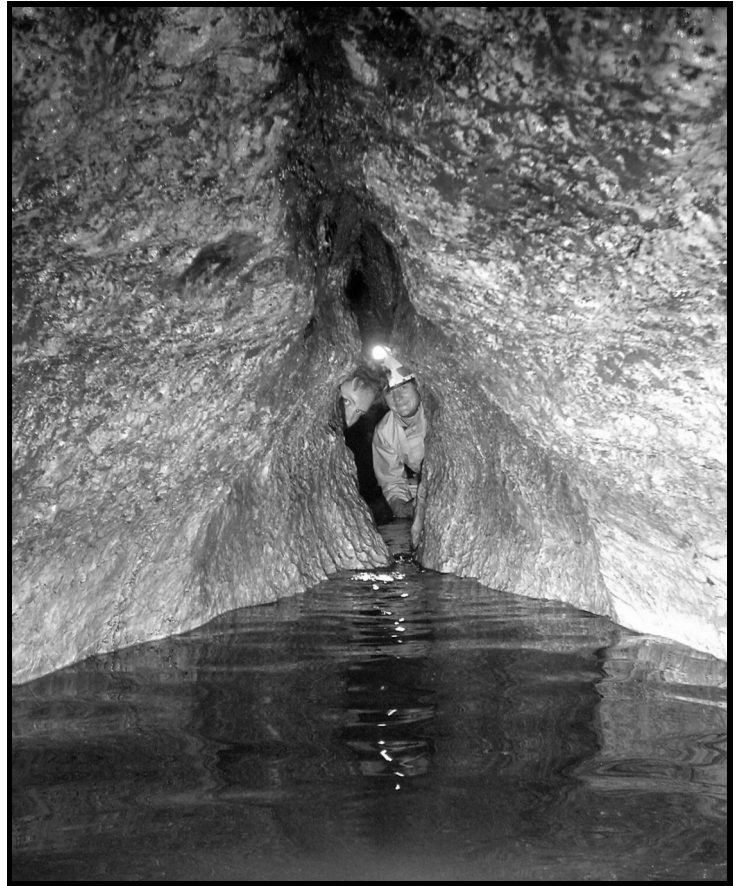
I judged that people had had a pretty good time and could probably sustain another day of Jason and I diving somewhere. A sip of port that evening after dinner and we decided that the next day we would investigate Jason's hot lead found in the cool upstream River Cave.

River Cave

From the Blue Waterholes upstream the bed of Cave Creek runs dry. The rounded boulders in the bed are chock-filled with shells, fossil corals and some of the best crinoid or “sea lilly” fossils. Usually crinoids are seen as one centimeter circles outlined in the rock surface. This is the cross-section of the stem but with a little searching in the creek-bed good examples of the flowering tops can be found.

The limestone cliffs promise lots of caves and on the way to Murray Cave there is one cave at track level – Cooleman Main. The entrance goes into the cliff and another comes out further upstream and is probably the path of the river a long time ago. However there are no other caves apparent even from climbing up and down those high bluffs chasing alluring dark patches in the limestone that are only shadows. Somewhere inside those cliffs is a river, the river that comes out at Blue Holes. We have a few clues about how to find the river, which begin at River Cave.

It’s easier to drive up the road from the Blue Holes campsite, park on the grass and walk across the plain, dropping to cross the creek a few hundred meters upstream from Murray Cave. We then climb the hill on the other side of the valley to join the Joe Jennings track. Jason and I carried our tank pairs and any help we can get with the other gear is always appreciated. Jason had dived in River with Al Warild on a previous visit. They were sharing gear to minimize how much had to be carried across the grassy plains. Jason had popped into River Cave for a quick see what was on offer on the up stream and run out fifty meters of line with every indication of the cave continuing. He wasn’t using his own reel and didn’t fix any line. This time we would begin establishing an exploration highway fixing line along which we could extend further on what we hope will be many future visits.



*Shannon and Caroline in River
photo Paul Lewis*



Paul Lewis at the fossils, sump 1 Murray

The group helped get dive gear into the cave and down to the underground river. The water level is very low at present with the river depth only a few centimeters trickling over the rounded basalt river stones. There is a bent-over walk upstream across the cobbles and the water soon gets deeper.

In the past the water lipped the roof closer and closer but today the level was low, revealing much more of the upstream journey to ordinary travellers. The passage appears to stop. On the left a rocky bank of basalt rocks have been thrown out of hole through a volcanic dyke. Through the hole a tunnel with a sump presents as the way on. The dive looks like it begins here. I fixed one end of my guide line round a stout bollard in the wall and set off into a shallow passage. Visibility was poor. Come to think of it, the visibility while diving at Coleman has always been limited, having a milky appearance before even entering the water. I am wondering if visibility might be better at other times of the year but I am reluctant to try it in winter. Besides, they close the road.

It was difficult to see where the main way on was going. Zigging through shallow rooms, I took time to fix line on basalt pillars that joined floor to roof. Any number of possible directions could be taken. Only a survey would show and who is going to be able to survey in this environment? After all the mucking about, not much crow-flying distance was made but I did surface in an 8 m long air chamber. I crossed the chamber, fixing the line to the roof and then down onto a rock on the far side where the line on the reel run out. Much of the line length was consumed in wraps to secure tie offs in the zigzag passage. More was used just crossing the room with the air bell. I thought we would just leave it in place. Assuming global warming doesn't continue the harsh drought conditions, the air bell is due to spend its future life as a flooded realm.

After probing around in the the room looking for holes, we found a steeply descending hole at the opposite end of the chamber from where we had entered. My line was used up so Jason took over placing line from his reel, laying our highway into a deeper section of water reaching about 12 m depth. Making his way upstream he ran out of line with the passage still continuing. I followed along behind him in soup out conditions. There is plenty of room but the environment didn't present the visual experience you might expect with Imax cave dives.

Jason found nothing to fix line onto at his furthest exploration point. It's hard – the basalt protuberances break off easily when you try to wrap dive line round them and then you are left trying to find something else. Jason had to return a considerable distance back along the line where he could fix the line representing our furthest exploration point. In a mirky nothingness I caught up with him in some kind of door-way. He was trying to tie the line off but I had no idea what he was doing. After some confusion about which direction we were headed we turned back to the 8 m room.

Jason had been using that thin line which allows greater lengths on the reel but I much prefer the stouter orange 3 mm line. Clearly we should both have to get bigger reels. Our trip was successful in that we placed fixed line, pushed out our exploration point and it is good there is more passage and exploration for future trips. Unfortunately my line laying resulted in much zig zagging and that limited how far we pushed.

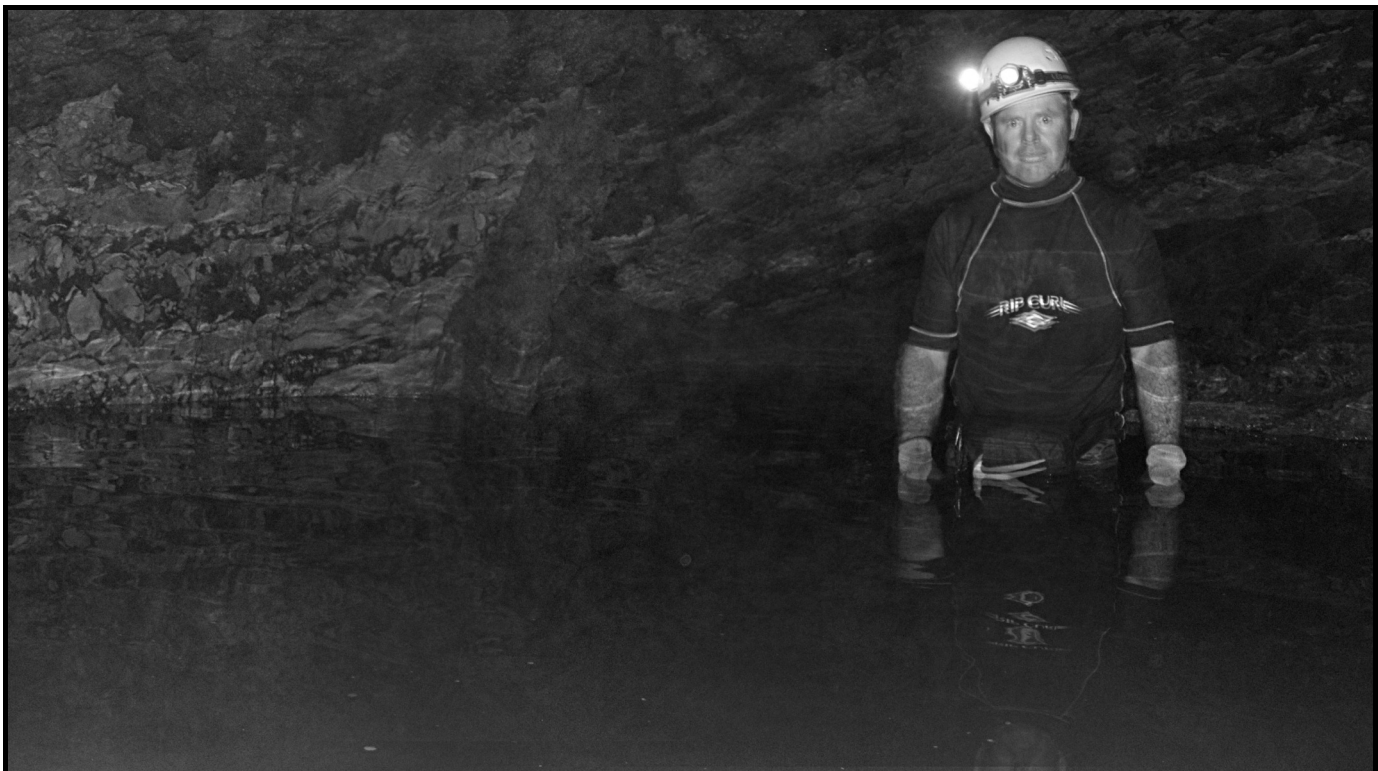


photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor

This was further illustrated when Paul and James climbed in and out through passages in the roof and found an 8 m long room with an orange dive line fixed to the roof. We could have started the dive from there. Uhhhh! It should be noted that we are also creating a path that we can return to again and again in time when the river level rises to the roof... should it ever rain again.

Jason later said that the route that we took didn't seem to be anything like what he had explored in the previous trip. That may mean we have even more exploring to do. I love it!

Sunday January 28th

The sump in Murray's Cave is low enough to pass without scuba gear. The whole group visited the back section of the cave where the main river was seen to be at its lowest level ever. The place where the river disappears into a cleft is usually hidden in the depths of the water. Previous dives indicated that the fissure in the wall was narrow. With the water level right down running only at a slow trickle it is clear the gap can not be passed in any future exploration. The group continued up the main passage of Murray finally stopping at the third sump which could be passed with a breath hold, but was anyone game? Ian got in the water and swam about in the sump but the way through is not altogether clear.

We returned to the main entrance where the warm sun shines and the world is a beautiful place. I went wondering about on the hillside looking for karst features. Time was however running out to the perfect long weekend. Ian, Caroline and family headed back for Sydney but Paul, James, Shannon and Jason decided to crawl down a tiny fissure in the side of Murray's main passage.

We know that there is a second entrance to Murray in the hill. It's only a very small fissure that leads to the inner world where the others were headed. I believe the map we will publish will document this entrance as Patrick's Retirement.

I once wrestled through one tight part of the fissure network and knew well that there is a little-known sump somewhere in there. Too hard and too small to dive, however in this drought the sump was likely to be dry. It's the sporty squeeze that doesn't agree with me. Checking out nooks and crannies on the hill seemed like an agreeable activity by comparison.

To my amazement the lads down under were suddenly over on the hill with me. The siphon was completely dry and there was much new passage, a way on. Gallantry like this has never been seen in the caving fraternity whereby they had returned so that fearful leader could join them in glory. I was touched! Damn! Have to make the effort now.

The small crawling passages were as I remembered. At first you can walk bent over but only for a while, then it's on your side sliding along and then on your stomach and then there is the squeeze. On your back and the usual Houdini techniques. The squeeze was not going to let me get by unless I had a lump hammer. Not on this trip anyway.

The others scrambled on without me with tales of 300 meters of passage. I reckon this translates to at least 150 m. We were running out of time, Ian had already gone and we also had to make that 7 hour drive back to Sydney.

So now, I sit here in the comfort of my computer chair, wondering why I didn't push just a little harder in that squeeze and hang out for longer in that wonderful place. The bypass has a very good chance of connecting back into the river and that connection would be downstream from sump 2 representing the main drain towards Blue Holes. This is a really, really good lead and we have to get back as soon as possible. This lead re-energizes exploration on the downstream side from Murray's and may reveal more of the mystery of the river's path.



*Walking across the plain with the dive gear
photo Paul Lewis*