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# COOLEMAN - EASTER 2015

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BY KEIR VAUGHAN - TAYLOR

**Participants:** Rick Grundy, Soo Parkinson, Phil Maynard, Rod O'Brien, Keir Vaughan-Taylor

This weekend was particularly successful with the new passages presenting a diving style that created unusual dive plan logistics. The cave continues in a number of places. The furthest exploration point is becoming more distant with substantial exploration well beyond the map rendered from all our surveying efforts to date. (Included in this report). River Cave shows no sign of ending, and I feel is the most sporty and exciting cave exploration in New South Wales.

Predicted torrential rain hung in the distant horizon indecisive in its intent. Since January, there are heralds of Winter, a tree independently coloured Autumn next to its still green neighbor, much cooler nights, long sighs from ravens as if stiffening resolve for the oncoming cold and those ragged clouds promising to go obliviously on to Sydney.

Traveling Long Plain, the power lines seething within the watery rain cloud, we moved off the gravel road to make way for retreating campers in 4WDs. My Ford suffered a punctured, well actually serrated tyre, revealing itself after annihilation along with its supporting rim. Misfortune, they say, clusters in groups of three. Completing the trifecta the spare tyre was also flat. This was not a manifestation of bad luck but rather a failure of my pre trip motor vehicle maintenance checks. Fortunately, an electric air compressor is always in the back of my station wagon. It was appreciated that Ranger Steve stopped to make sure we were okay.

Friday's drive was done as we pulled onto Magpie Flat. We set out across Cooleman Plain carrying gear to the River Cave entrance. Birds at the campsite squabbled over territory providing usual round campfire entertainment.

The long passage we were to survey and push is now called Altamira Alley, named after the Spanish Caves of Altamira, famous for spectacular paleolithic paintings but more famously the name of a Steeley Dan number played repeatedly on my car's CD during our Southward trip.

Last forays to Altamira were during the Australia Day long weekend. Rod ducked and dipped through a series of short sumps ultimately recognizing the need for a full dive kit. Rod's dive lights penetrated through the water of submerged passage as far as photons could reach out and return.

Phil and I secured 100 meters of surveyed passage but there was clearly more to be gained, and this Easter we would do it.

Logistics are hard to determine because of the unknowns. We needed to minimise the carry weight across Cooleman Plain so we decided that at least for the first day we would use the smaller 3 litre cylinders. We would want at least five of them. We use one as safety on the second duck under and one in reserve. Rod would need two for any penetration and Phil and I following along with survey tackle would use a single cylinder each as confidence boosters passing the short sumps of Altamira. I would need to reduce my weight belt, but with water measuring a chilly ten degrees a second neoprene surf suit under my usual wet suit helps cope with cold but becomes hard to coerce downwards into the water for the sump ducks. It seemed that three weights, about three kilograms, could be a manageable balance.



*Tree Creeper at campsite*  
**PHOTO CREDIT: Kier Vaughan-Taylor**

Soo Parkinson, a hardened British caver, joined our group to experience Australian project based cave exploration. She was not to be disappointed confronting the River cave entrance the initial drops from the entrance and muddy crawls to enter the basalt strewn river bed. Thence two breath holds through sump 1, the longer second sump and then the rest of the new sections of cave. River cave, after the second sump, presents a series of environments usually involving swimming, crawling, climbing and sometimes standing before entering a river course again.

Altamira Alley Tributary enters 40 meters short of the back of the cave where a rock pile filters the river into a void inside the jammed river stones. Beyond the piled stones is Murray Cave. Rick thinks that a way can be found into a just visible void through the packed stones in the rock pile but there is much to do.



*Rick Grundy & Soo Parkinson - River Cave Beach Room*  
**PHOTO CREDIT: Kier Vaughan-Taylor**

I made several efforts to get some photographs along the way but this my third waterproof camera (in such a short a time), it showed a back screen seriously fogged around its perimeter and displayed difficulty getting a focus on any selected objects.

The best way to deal with a fading camera is to just take lots of pictures and hope some turn out. Experiment discerned that licking the objective lens could often help banish murky blobs on the captured image. My shortsightedness added to the challenge of reading the cameras settings. The camera kept auto selecting various predefined camera settings. Macro somehow gets selected and blurs every photograph. I'm on to that trick now. The selection Pet doesn't wreck a cave photo, but the device refuses to auto focus on Phil's dogged facial expressions.

We followed the river through decorated passage, dry sections and then another head sniff swim through white marble and formation. This White Marble Swim has a few unlikely crawling leads on either side but not inviting. The water level was down 10 cm lower than our last visit which meant some of the ducks would be shallow but most of the passage is still chest deep in water and is much colder than the main stream.

Altamira Alley has about 50 meters of narrow vadose canyon, shin deep in water before diving into the first submergence. Water flow was small and the level lower than our last visit. The first dive, this time, was a very shallow duck under and on the other side more similar passage. Although there are places to get out of the water to record survey stations we were largely obliged to float.



*Phil Maynard passing a duck under*  
**PHOTO CREDIT: Kier Vaughan-Taylor**

Phil protected his Disto X by encasing his precious device in a water proof Pelican case. We could obtain reasonable measurement through Ducks only just under the surface sighting along a fiberglass tape then recording a bearing from both ends of the sump and averaging any differences.

We remained together most of the trip finding that each new sump surfaced again shortly a few meters through a submergence, soon surfacing again. This is cave diving at its strangest. Its never quite engulfed below the surface into that other world. It would be possible to do this trip using dolphin techniques, as long as you were to not get misdirected in the custard coloured water. Each leg would kink in a new direction leaving us unsure about where we were going without some head scratching. Perhaps we were trending to the West. Narrow passage sometimes widened but for the most part we were chest deep in cold water. It was several hours measuring and scrawling onto a survey sheet willing the survey paper to resist the water and the scratching of a pencil with leads that would break on every second compass bearing.



## SUNDAY 5th APRIL

We had one more day. We elected not to survey and instead push. With enough cylinders for two, Rod and Rick were nominated to lay line as far as they could linking the continuing chain of short sumps and going as far as possible. Phil and I would act as support and look at some other leads off the main drain on of those holes coming off the main stream. Soo elected to help port, but after the effort of the previous day chose to wait prior to the first sump and help on the hike back across Cooleman Plain.

After we stocked a mud bank prior to the first duck with cylinders and paraphernalia for Rod and Rick to kit up and go. Phil and I made for one of the side leads coming off the main stream where we would survey.

We moved through an opening where on the right a hole dropped to what looked like a South Western trending passage and on the left yet another room but this one much bigger. The lower passage would wait for another day. Entering the large room we faced a steep slope of tumbled rocks stacked on a slope high into the roof.

Phil said I needed to climb to the top and make sure there was no way on. I faced the scree with some trepidation but dutifully placing one careful foot at a time to reach the apex of the rockpile at the back of the big room. There was no way on and footprints in some of the mud sections suggested that Felix had climbed here on a previous trip. We could, have just asked Felix if there was lead.

Phil took aim at me with the laser in his Disto X recording the dimensions of this large room. Satisfied with the view and with a little trepidation I turned to go back down. It is always harder to go down than to climb up. I shouted to Phil that there was a wobbly rock than might fall and as predicted, it dislodged. The stone careered down the scree slope bouncing left and right to finally collide on the opposite wall with an almighty bang. Phil complained that I came close to hitting the all important Disto X.

It had been a few hours and with the surveying completed we made our way back to Altamira where Rod and Rick should be waiting for help carrying the gear out of the cave.

Rick and Rod had pushed further along the river course. They placed line through four or five more mini sumps finally surfacing in a large room with collapsing rock piles. Rick dumped his gear and scrambled into possible leads. No leads were found but you never know for sure. Our main stream ran over a gravel race and entered yet another sump. Rod mounted a Go Pro on his helmet and sank into the ongoing sump for a preliminary investigation. Unlike previously it ran a little deeper into the water table. The Go Pro video shows an eroded passage twisting left and right shaped with the same architecture as the preceding tunnels but here entirely under water and ongoing. Unlike the main river the water is clear.

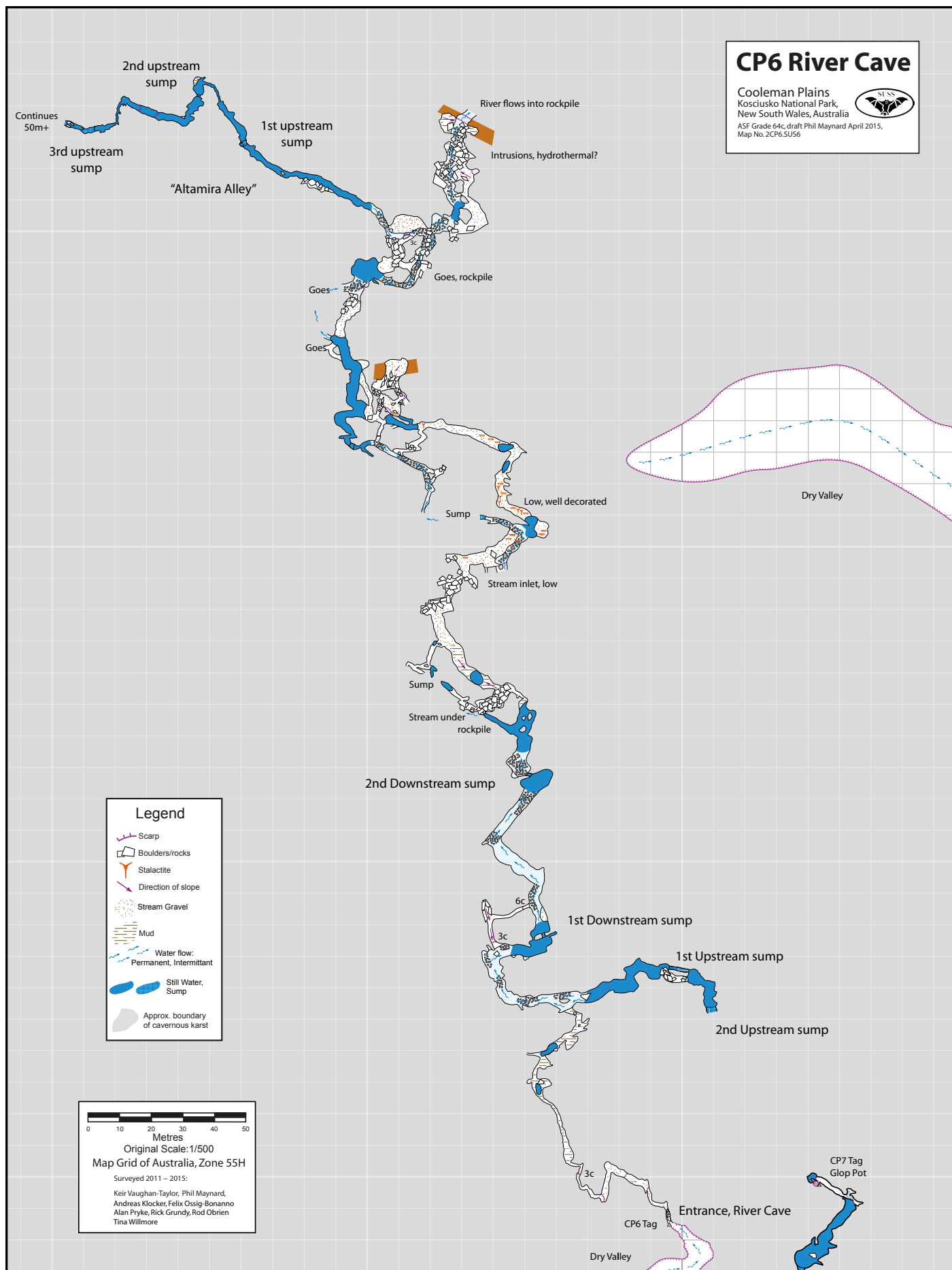
The passage was apparently continuing from this end room as a full on cave dive and so the ongoing unknown would have to wait for a future trip. The return journey is better than a water park. They returned to the main river and with not much of a wait for Phil and I to meet them.

They said they had heard a bloody big rock fall somewhere. I said it was just Phil banging his Disto against the wall trying to get it to work. "Phil banging his what?" they said.

The way back to Soo was quickly traversed. We perhaps dwelled a little longer than usual in the swim sections compensating for overheating in our wet suits. Soo was waiting on the rocky bank near the first sump. She had moved out all the support cylinders to the cave entrance so we were on the way to an efficiency award. From the river Cave blind valley entrance our team was able to carry everything back in one trip.



*Rod Obrien - Typical Altamira passage  
PHOTO CREDIT: Kier Vaughan-Taylor*



**River Cave Map, Coolman**  
**MAP CREDIT: PHIL MAYNARD**