

BY KEIR VAUGHAN-TAYLOR

Participants: Leonard Klein, Phil Maynard, David-Stephen Myles, Greg Ryan, Keir Vaughan-Taylor, John Wooden

Drought Breaker is the source of the underground stream water in Fig Tree Cave. There are no trip reports of it having been previously dived.

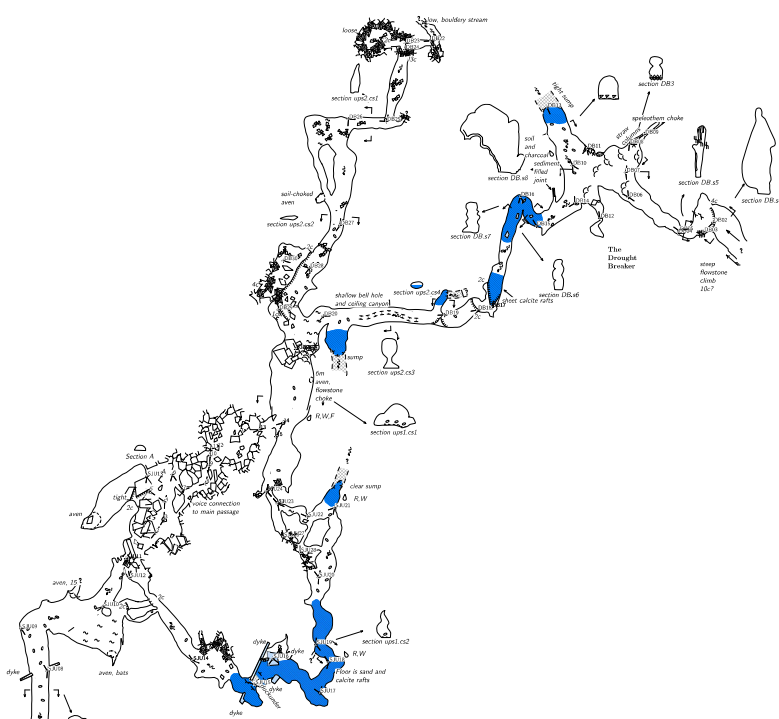
Downstream dives done by SSS in the 1960s were reported as brief reports in their journal. There must have been more trips by SSS to prepare routes to access water in Olympia and then make the diving connection from Junction to Fig Tree. In all likelihood Drought Breaker has not been examined with dive equipment.

Approaching the Fig Tree Arch a perentie at least 1.5m long ambled slowly and unconcerned towards a tree, sliding up the tree unaware of gravity and unconcerned about our presence. Further into the entrance a second smaller perentie eyed us from a marble overhang. Not so large but (to my appreciation) adorned with the most beautiful decorated lines running along its body. Many wrens could be observed foraging among the marble boulder beside the tourist track.

Transport of gear to the upstream pump is straight forward; through the main passages, descending an easy couple of climb downs dropping into a section of stream passage smelling somewhat of bat guano. The easy walk along steam passage ends at a slow flow of water emanating from of a shallow pool. The upstream watercourse is known to surface further North after a fairly short distance thereafter flowing some distance to Drought Breaker.

This slow flow sump is not that interesting in that it only pops up again into known cave further down our track. It was an option to dive through and walk the remaining distance to our main diving goal but it would consume time kitting up passing the sump then de-kitting to walk the stream way further onto the desired dive site. If the sump was tight or even impassible it would consume too much time.

There is a bypass through a rock pile that comes around to the other end of the water trap. Afterward there is more walk along passage ending at the Drought Breaker, the name of a pure sparkling orange flowstone



Drought Breaker north most sump

pouring in on the right. Straight ahead, the main aim of the game the Drought Breaker Sump.

Because we are not fans of tight squeezes especially with dive gear we made an exploratory foray into the tight sections. We decided it was an easy enough trip to transport our gear around the first short sump. The group chained the padded tank pack though the broken rock environment to then stand at the other end of the underwater section.

The marble corridor prior to Drought Breaker is worth the trip in itself being pure white sculpted with erosion scallops and a number of wading pools to wake up the sleepy heads. Just prior to our goal entering on the right is an unspoiled orange flowstone.

Dive entry is across a floor of coarse rounded river gravels into a passage, seriously smooth, pocked with high and low frequency scallops and descending to a nice friendly 3 meters depth. On the left is a silted bank rising to a surface and an air chamber 4 – 5 meters high. The way on is to the right and blocked by a bank of river stones but with a fairly large chamber on the other side – at least big enough to turn around. The rest of the dive was spent making the squeeze safe by scooping the gravel out of the way. As might be expected visibility diminished rapidly but it is my impression there may have been a slope hinting the presence of a surface – just beyond being able to see.



***Passing in bypass (Greg Ryan to Leonard Klein.)
Photo by Alan Pryke.)***

I returned to the air chamber to make sure there were absolutely no leads in the air space. Becoming suspicious that the air trapped in the air bell was not to be trusted I only breathed from air from my regulator making strange noises on the video sound track. The squeeze was more spacious but the way forward needs to be non hazardous. We would return tomorrow. Although only twelve meters distant from the start of the planned twenty minute dive, it was soon over and it was time to return to the waiting team. We left the dive gear except for one tank ready for a dive on the second day.

On Sunday John, Greg and I returned with gear for Greg and myself. The others roamed down Mares Creek and were to join us at Drought Breaker about 2:00pm to help get the two sets of dive gear out.

The dive plan was that I should try to video with a waterproof point and shoot, scoop more gravel in the squeeze and Greg could work the problem for a

second go.

Making the video proved unsatisfactory. Unlike a Go Pro the camera needs to be held and manually panned and panned slowly. Holding the camera manually can be an advantage because the shots are not just a “dumb” recording from a shoulder mount. The results were not great but there is a rough indication. Although a little revealing the motion jerks and the focus pulls in and out. I later found the battery was nearly flat.

I spent some time in the squeeze at first getting a few frames of video before the mud curtain descended. Remaining in the squeeze and clearing debris I was able to ease through to the other side. The walls are smooth and nothing is apparent to tie off on to. I was unable to tell which was the way on.

I returned to the start of the dive. We thought that by the time Greg suited up, the custard like qualities of the view should improve. Unfortunately this was not the case because the water flow is too small. Greg was able to see the 5m chamber on the other side but couldn't find the squeeze. His dive was short but a good effort.

Reviewing the video back at the dive start, the camera operating buttons were performing random functions.

Conclusion

On this trip we learned a good route through the rock pile that bypasses a possibly difficult sump. In future, if there is good reason for further exploration we will have shot at the short sump. Even so the trip though the bypass is fairly quick.

The entire river system in Fig Tree finally drains into the downstream sump and ultimately makes its way through Junction Cave. All water emanates from the Drought Breaker Sump and at times there are seriously big floods pumping between each water body. Many of the large tunnels and canyons are formed by this water source and forms good reason to conjecture there is more upstream.

Looking towards Fig Tree Arch (the campsite behind), there is no known cave in the limestone on the left ridge. Flood waters captured by the long tunnel in Conduit A (near the tourist bridge) are sinking into the chambers and passages connecting into the area just downstream from Drought Breaker.

Progressing the dive in Drought Breaker through the now excavated squeeze, new cave should be found that follows stream passages into the left ridge.



***Greg Ryan returning from dive.
Photo by John Wooden.***