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## January Yarrangobilly and Cooleman Plains

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January 24-28 2019

Keir Vaughan-Taylor and Jill Rowling

Present: Ed Castro, Carol Castro, Phil Maynard, Keir Vaughan-Taylor, Cathi Humphrey-Hood, Rod Obrien, Mike Lake, Jill Rowling, Jason Cockayne, Ian Cooper

### Yarrangobilly

Having been given a key to Yan fire-trail gate, our group took our vehicles down the firetrail on the Thursday to the Y7 Coppermine cave entrance. Water flow out of the cave was not its usual feisty rush, but then it has been many years since I was last here. The climate may have changed. Ed, Carol, Phil, Cathy, and Rod spirited dive gear along the 200 m of stream passage and stationed it all in a big pile under a low roof just before the sump. I geared up and dipped under the surface to see a down-trending passage.

The walls were little tight but opened up after 5 – 6 metres into a space with many alcoves and a down trending hole. In general the space appears to be following a joint, angled at about four o'clock. I chose the left passage, if you can call it that, where it disappointingly terminated after short distance. Backing up to the last open space, the silt cloud enveloped me. I spent 10 minutes trying to find a protrusion on which to tie off but was frustrated by limestone pendants that were smooth and ill-defined. After some time floating in



*Phil and Rod in the Y7 Coppermine stream*

*Photo Cathi Humphrey-Hood*

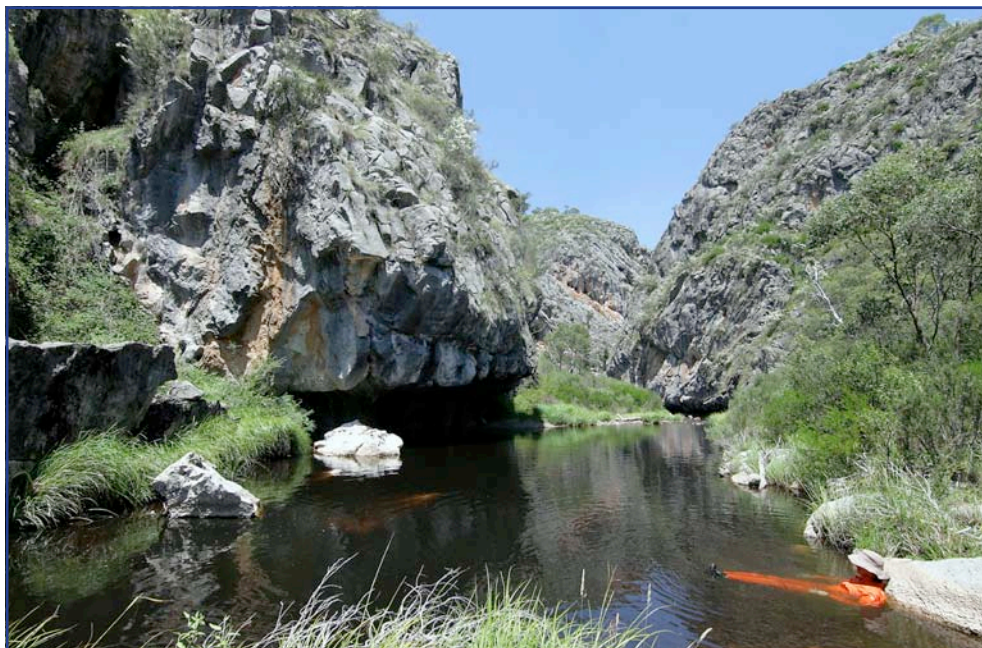
a custard-like void I abandoned finding a tie off, instead reeling in the line to return up the entrance tube where on the surface Ed, Carol, Phil, Cathi, and Rod were in wait. “What has been found”. “Not much” I reported, but also felt there was more in there to inspect. We would return the next day.



*Rod searching under the overhang at Tricketts arch*

*Photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor*





*Carol reclining in the Yarrangobilly River*

*Photo Cathi Humphey-Hood*

With the sun beating down, temperature back at the vehicles was now over 30 °C, in contrast to the inside of the cave. Each of us applied liberal coatings of sunblock then ventured down the Yarrangobilly River. My past experience with the Yagby River is it is perishingly cold, but on this day it lured each one of us in to swim in its warm waters. Rod despite the heat wore his wetsuit and set-to, inspecting many of the holes and nooks in the overhangs on the way downstream. Only micro-caves revealed themselves in the elegant limestone bluffs guiding the river on its way. The overhang under Tricketts cave was spectacular in its own way, but again no hidden resurgence of any significance was discovered.

The main group did a quick visit in Tricketts cave but our group had largely spent our time in the river. Besides, we would be back the next day.

We checked in with the Guides at Yarrangobilly. There was some concern about our welfare with worries that we could be caught out if there was an outbreak of fire. There were many fires burning in and around the park, however they were distant. In the worst possible scenario we could always retreat into one of the caves. Even so it's nice that someone cares.

The next day back at Coppermine Cave we repeated the entrance procedure. I entered the pool this time intent on finding a tie-off. Immediately it silted out. I found a stubby stalagmite to tie off on and secured it with an upward support tie wrapped around a knob of rock. I made attempts to wriggle down a shaft but only suc-

ceeded in creating clouds of silt. I made my way back along the line and my colleagues waiting in the air chamber.

Rod wanted a go. He attached his tanks, sank his head down into the sump and followed my dive line in the first small space. Finding the tie-off, it pulled off right away and floated free. Straightening out the tangle of line Rod began a search up and down into the spaces running along what appeared to be an eroded joint in the limestone. In multiple directions there were blind alcoves and no apparent main passage from where the water came. After about twenty minutes Rod returned pronouncing there was no way on. This is probably

right but writing this I can't help but think another look might find something. Maybe one day when we have nothing to do. Returning the gear to the cars we headed back to highway and made our way to Cooleman Plain.

## **Cooleman**

*Jill*

Mike and Jill drove from Sydney on Friday 25th through a heatwave, reaching 41 °C around Yass. At Cooleman Plains (1300 m a.s.l.) it was only 31 °C. My first impressions of Cooleman Plains after about 15 years is there were rather a lot of horses about. Most were fairly fat but unkempt. People like to call them "brumbies", but that's an emotive term; they are just horses. We passed through wonderful vegetation: tussock on the plain, Black Sally, snowgrass and alpine ash groves in places.

Our designated campsite, "Currawong", was sheltered but full of horse manure. We were advised that the horses snuffled around the campsite most nights. We set up camp with two tents: a stuffy old snow tent for Jill and a breezy gazebo for Mike. That night, a noisy foal kept us awake with its vocalising and tripping over the camp.

Up early to beat the heat, the divers prepared their gear and we all walked over to CP6 River Cave. The alpine vegetation was simply delightful. I felt I could have been in NZ or Switzerland. Putting a trog suit on in the heat near River Cave was best done in the cool shade of the cave entrance. We set up a chain of people to pass the

dive gear down fairly easily. We had a look downstream. Some people did the duck-under but Mike and I chose not to. We had a quick look at where the divers were setting up in the upstream area, then exited. Well, tried to, with Jill needing some assistance on one climb. Outside we changed again as it was still like a furnace.

Coops took a group of us across country to look at a dry valley, then we wandered over to Murray Cave. This is a wonderful cave. Some exited via the lower exit. I had a look at the upper extension which is a bit crawly, but well decorated with oolites that look oddly like horse manure (or spiky eggs!). We returned to the heat outside, waiting for the others to come out the upper or lower entrance in the Lower Branch of the cave. This took a while. We all met up as we returned to camp with the divers.



*Mike carrying dive gear in CP6 River cave*

*Photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor*

A spectacular sunset completed the day. That night a powerful thunderstorm with ferocious winds blew over Mike's gazebo and forced him into the stuffy snow tent.

*Keir*

NUCC arrived and were keen to help. How pleasant. Our two groups carried dive gear in back packs across the plains and down into CP6 River Cave. It was record time to get there and in defiance of heatwave conditions. NUCC delivered the packages to the water's edge and then as mysteriously as they appeared, they disappeared, wafting up onto the plain above to explore their own cave dreams. We would need to pull the gear out ourselves after the dive. Rod and I sat around at the start of the river passage getting gear organised. Meanwhile Phil led Jason, Ed and Carol made their way downstream through the duckunder sumps. They were intent on surveying a passage opposite the inflow of the Altimera streamway.



*The second airspace heading upstream towards Parallel Universe*

*Photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor*



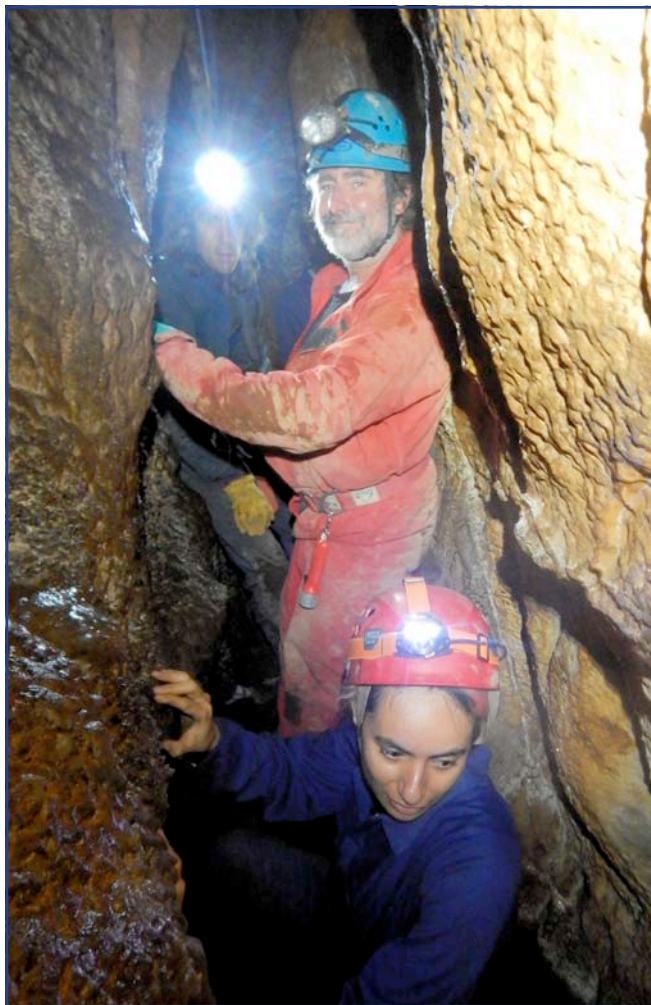
That passage had previously been reported by a younger member of our club to be hundreds of metres long. At that first exploration, it seemed as though a tunnel went on forever but sadly the survey results didn't bear out the optimistic estimate and it came out to be more around 30 metres. Phil then followed up on some of the shorter and unsurveyed passages where the river disappeared but emerged some distance further along and will add them to the developing map of the cave.

While the others struggled with sines and cosines [*mostly we went off on a tangent. ed.*], Rod and I waded up the River



*Parallel Universe, CP6 River cave*

*Photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor*



*Lachlan (NUCC), Jason, and Whitley (NUCC) in the entrance passage of CP6 River cave*

*Photo Keir Vaughan-Taylor*

Cave stream where it gradually deepens to a swim. Water dribbled out of the start of the dive across basaltic river gravels into the lake. It seemed greatly reduced from previous years. We entered the upstream sump navigating along the line through passages that we now regard as known ground. We passed through two air spaces clearly showing decomposition around black intrusions.

Because of slower water movement, visibility was better than usual accommodating us with vague impressions of wall passage. The dive drops to about 11 metres, surfacing in a big chamber we call Parallel Universe. In the past getting pictures was difficult because the rock in this chamber absorbed much of the light. The chamber is big enough to make it hard to illuminate. On this occasion I had bought some extra-powerful video lights purchased from China. They come with various issues, but big passage is less of a problem when addressed with 25,000 lumens of white light. The advantage is lessened by my less than desirable photographic skills. I blame the camera. It has trouble focussing and is prone to getting water droplets on the lens. I regret not taking more pictures.

The photograph is looking back towards the way out. In this place the water is about 8 metres deep. The way on upstream is behind me. The guideline runs just under the water along the RH wall. Next time we'll be examining the walls along the floor of this chamber to see if there is more to find.

Rod and I followed existing line upstream. The route upstream drops under an archway into a room that previously we had thought had a surface but only rose into blind avens. The line trended to the right ending in the mud tied to a hammer left on a previous dive. Rod retrieved his hammer, added line to the end and we proceeded further placing many more metres of guideline.

Going on upstream, passage is forced under another volcanic dyke/arch. Rod moved ahead into what I thought was a large void. Just before I arrived Rod encountered a blind passage. He backed out from of the blind alley deciding there might be a surface. Catching up we both rose along the sides of a wall into a shallow depth. Although promising a surface river it was not to be. A gnarly rift narrowed down and prevented us from reaching a surface.

Poking into the various deceptive ins and outs we flossicked our way back through Parallel Universe eventually returning to the gear up spot at our dive's start. We pushed and pulled our way out of our dive paraphernalia and started the transport of gear packs back to the surface. There were only two supporters to help us back out of the cave, the noble Cathi and Carol who worked like a pair of steam locomotives. Working like a pair of frozen penguins, Rod and I could at least warm up trying to keep up. Our brethren cavers were still downstream beyond the two sumps, somewhere, surveying and probably quite cold.

Back at the entrance as we warmed up we heard our comrades' voices echoing out of the cave. We trudged with the dive gear back to the campsite where I promptly fell asleep.

*Jill*

Sunday was mercifully cooler. Mike and Jill opted to walk over to the old copper mine and then the area near Disappointment Gorge. The mine area is interesting (again, more horses!). We ascended the west ridge parallel to Disappointment Gorge, finding the vertical pot CP52 breathing cold air. There were plenty of weeds in this area! Intermittent rain attended the rest of our ramble. We retraced our steps and took a short walk up the western valley, but it "lacked enthusiasm". The eastern valley looked more interesting.

*Keir*

The other days at Cooleman we spent walking but were intrigued by the Blue Waterholes resurgence. We started surveying each spring's location. Of course Joe Jennings has already done that but perhaps things have changed.

Phil our cartographer updated the relative position of Murray, River, Glop Pot and the water source caves further south.



*Crossing the plain with dive gear*

*Photo Cathi Humphrey-Hood*



