

BY DEBORAH JOHNSTON (with additions by Alison Chau)

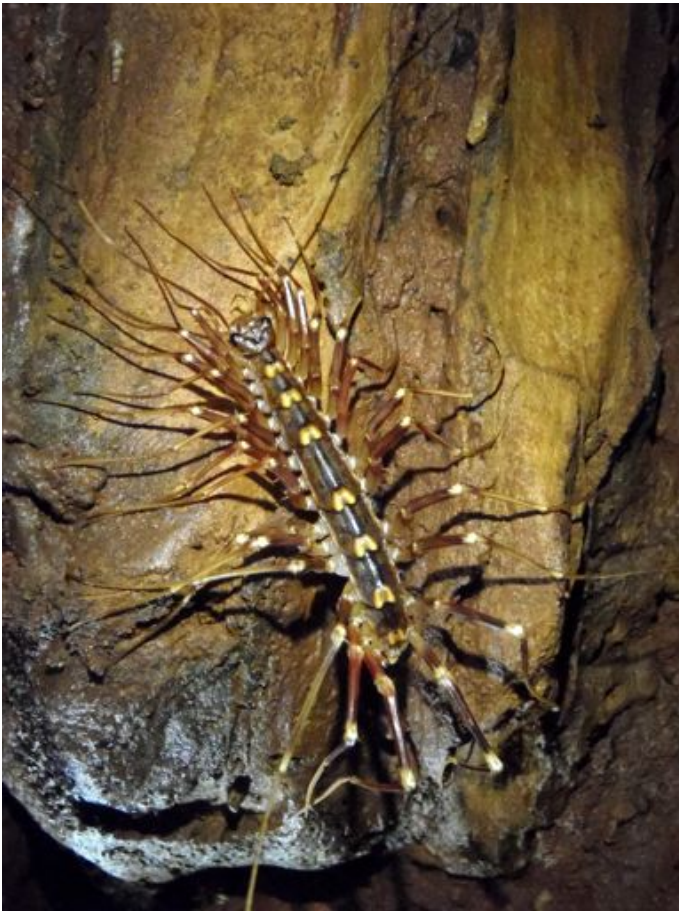
Participants: (in order of appearance) Deborah Johnston, Rod OBrien, Steven Kennedy, Paul Hosie (CEGWA?), Denis Stojanovic, Jack Wachsmann, Alison Chau, Natalie Brennan.

MIDNIGHT SWIMS IN LIGHTNING RIDGE

After a nice leisurely start from Rod's place in Toronto (Lake Macquarie) on Friday morning, Steve, Rod and I hit the road for a clean 9hr run, reaching Lightning Ridge just in time for dinner. After grabbing some pizza in town, we headed to the Artesian Bore Baths which have been concreted into a public pool with steps, an amenities block, and 24hrs lighting. At the source the water bubbles out at 46 degrees in sulfurous belches, while the rest of the pool is around 40-42 degrees with hot mist giving it a spooky atmosphere. What a great place to soak with a cold beer! After soaking for as long as we could handle, we camped for the night ready for an early start.

CENTRAL WEST QLD, WHERE ONLY TOURISTS DRIVE AT NIGHT

The next day we made it all the way to Longreach, zooming through a little town called Winton without stopping. We had made it about 80km out of town before we got the suicidal kangaroo that had hid in the bushes waiting for the perfect timing to launch out. Rod spotted him immediately and was hard on the brakes, but we were still going about 80km/hr when we hit the big bastard. We drove a bit further before checking the damage and seeing that the fan and radiator were toast. Before we could move entirely off the road a 53m long road train came barrelling over the crest and we all moved as far away as possible in case he hit the trailer. To our surprise, the road train pulled over a short distance down the road (well not that short... takes them a long while to stop!) and came over to offer us a hand! He and Rod popped the bonnet and spoke fluent mechanic for a while before we moved the car further off the road, grabbed beer and jackets, then hitched a ride in the road train to the Blue Heeler pub (established in 1889) in Kynuna to call the RACQ.



*Critter, Niggle Cave, Camooweal.
Photo by Paul Hosie*

Dave, the truckie, was a friendly and handsome 30yr old country bloke who had been driving trucks since he was 17, and driven his first road train at 18. He made a striking impression hitting about 6'3 with black skinny jeans and a well-worn leather jacket. The roof of the truck had at least 30 of those cardboard air-fresheners dangling together in a hypnotic rhythm. The boys jumped in his sleeper cab and I rode up front to learn more about Dave and his many travels, his 3 young daughters that love the trucks and help him out whenever they get the chance, about the town Winton we'd just passed through and its many attractions including where to get a good feed. I'm sure there was much more interesting things said, but over the roar of the truck I was surprised to have heard that much.

Dave dropped us at the Blue Heeler pub in Kynuna about 11pm and Rod grabbed him a few cans of Bundy as he rushed off to hit the road again to drive until 5am. There was no Telstra reception in Kynuna but the staff were used to handing over their landline to the many tourists suffering similar fates driving through the region at night, something none of the locals will do unless absolutely necessary.

Kynuna pub was going off! They had the music blaring, and the punters and staff partying hard! The walls were covered in historic memorabilia, including evidence that the local Combo watering hole was where Banjo Patterson penned *Waltzing Matilda*, with his first public performance being in that very pub. As the story goes, Banjo Patterson, a Sydney lawyer, brokered a truce between the striking shearers and the opposition they'd been battling for several years nearby, thus ending the last armed

conflict between Australians as they gathered to drink together and sing instead of shoot.

Out the back they had many single units, but unfortunately the main reason the pub was jumping was because a large group of road workers had booked the place out to take advantage of their Sunday day off. Shit. We organised a tow for the next morning, donned our jackets, and enjoyed some beers out the front waiting for traffic to pass by to hitch a lift, but we were too late! There was to be no more traffic until the next morning. With the temperature dropping, and last drinks called, everyone (staff and punters) moved out the back to party on with their takeaways. We joined them for another beer and got offered the bare empty room they have out the back which is where the staff lay their swags if they need to crash the night. As luck would have it, one of the staff was mates with the station owners outside Camooweal and lent me her swag for the night, and even rounded up the road-gang to go through their rooms and bring out all the spare blankets and pillows they could rustle up. One of the truck drivers bunking there for the night had spent years working roo shooting contacts around Camooweal and could not believe it was full of caves! Luck struck again as one of the guys had drunkenly backed his truck into the door of a unit which was now broken open, so he'd moved into a double with his friend, leaving an extra mattress for us in a room. After the second naked old trucker streaked through the yard we decided it was time to crash and settled in for about 5hrs sleep which is about 5hr.

WINTON, YOU BLOODY BEAUTIES!

The next morning we spied what HAD to be our lift, a big truck with 'Rodney's Transportation Service' down the side. We sent Rod over to claim his transportation service as advertised but the guy was going north, the opposite direction of our destination. After a few more attempts we ended up riding with a heavy haulage couple who were taking a 4m wide bulldozer down to Emerald, with me up front in the heavy vehicle warning truck with the lady who seemed to love having a woman to talk to, and the boys riding in the truck behind giggling about secret mens' business over the radio ever now and then.

When we reached Rod's ute, the tow truck driver was already there getting things ready and the lady was disappointed that he promised to squeeze us all in with him (as she was looking forward to a bit more girl talk by giving me a lift all the way into town). We squeezed into the tow truck with the friendly driver who also ran the local mechanics. On the way back he pointed out some secret camping and fishing spots, and let us know how Winton was becoming a surprisingly popular destination for film-makers, not so surprising when admiring the landscape. Being a Sunday, we could only decide what parts to order in when business resumed on Monday, then wait until Tuesday for the parts to arrive and get put in. After a bit more quality bush yarning, the mechanic loaned us his red Hilux dual-cab with "Winton Devils 2010 – you bloody beauties!" on the back window, and after checking into the comfortable Outback Motel, we headed off to start seeing the sites.



***Rod in the Octopus Tree, Bladensburg.
Photo by Deborah Johnston***

We saw the best dinosaur bone preparation centre in the southern hemisphere and learned how some of the most complete skeletons had been found in surrounding farmland, alongside many preserved dinosaur footprints including the world's only recorded stampede print collection. We tried all the coffee shops, and perused the collections of opals, fossils and minerals they'd pulled from the surrounding area. We visiting the 'musical fence' (my favourite!) and historic truck and machinery museum (Rods favourite!) and spent hours exploring the nearby Bladensburg National park which was full of history, including the shearers strike camp of 1891-93 which led to the Australian Labor party formation, and a couple of refreshing (or was that freezing!) rock holes for a swim.

We met Arno in the opal shop he ran, then later went past his place in town which is impossible to miss due to Arno's fence which is built of concrete with a bit of everything else you can think of added, war helmets, gnomes, typewriters, wheels. . . you name it! By day two we'd discovered that our towie/ mechanic was also the very well-respected town mayor, and son of the previous mayor! That explained why everyone was so friendly it seems, as we had been cruising around in the mayor's ute calling WINTON DEVILS! YOU BLOODY BEAUUUUUTIES from time to time.

Steve and Rod even got to enjoy a kilo of big king prawns in the sun over a coffee from the bakery cafe after spying the big seafood truck from Townsville that was passing through town.

Everyone shook their heads when they heard we'd been driving there at night, and we heard about some less fortunate travelers including the motorcyclist who was attacked by an emu, totalling his bike and breaking an arm and ankle – and the American tourists in a teeny hire car that hit a full size Brahman bull and survived. There was also a group of four French backpackers that had not been warned about wicked camper vans before their unfortunate hire choice in Darwin. They were settling in for at least a week in Winton, living in the mechanics car park. Unfortunately with the four of them we couldn't take them on our excursions around the region and being flat broke they didn't join us on our several rowdy pub nights at the Tatts (a great place for a drink and a feed – they even serve Tooheys Old for Rod and Coopers green and red for me and Steve! Bliss!), where we met even more of the super friendly locals. We even ran into Dave the truckie again and, sorry to all the ladies, but he is taken, having fallen in love with the pub's barmaid and moving to Winton to drive local trucks. In fact, the only negative thing to be said about Winton was that all the good tourist t-shirts were only made in kids sizes, and I promised to admit that on one particularly delicate morning (after a few too many beers in the pub the night before) the aroma of the artesian water in the hot shower overcame my steely resolve.

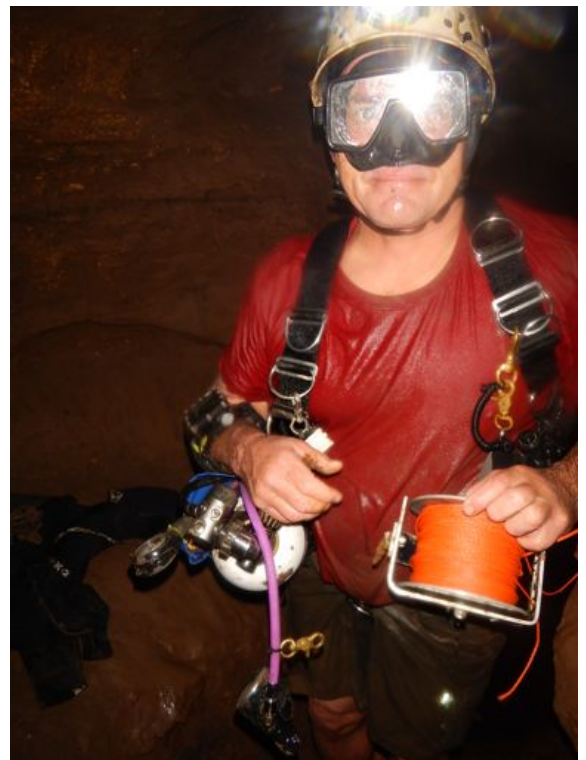
As we planned out a busy day four in Winton, fossicking for opals and visiting two town museums we hadn't made it to yet, we were almost sad to find out that the car was all fixed and it was time to go.

WINTON TO CAMOOWEAL VIA MT ISA

Hitting the road from Winton that afternoon, we made it back to the Blue Heeler pub in Kynuna just after sunset to enjoy a tasty pub dinner and hit the sack, cringing at the uninitiated caravans driving past at night. We set off again at dawn, looking at the fresh road kill and big termite mounds that had been converted into crazy scarecrows along the highway, before brekkie in Cloncurry and then doing a big shop in Mt Isa. Steve had already unpacked his pre-prepared dehydrated camp food, and his eyes boggled when he saw the full cart Rod and I wheeled out! I could see that he was thinking there was NO WAY we could finish it all, but I knew better – after all, the divers need plenty of fuel to lug their steel tanks through these caves!

I spied a bloke in a big hat dancing and raving through the car park on his own. . . but didn't have time to confirm it was Bob Katter himself before packing up the ute with food to head out of town. We made a quick stop at the Thirsty Camel attached to a club to stock up on booze but then as we waited at another register, Rod and I saw Steve get refused service as he wasn't a member of a club which was their requirement for selling booze. Rod and I quickly pulled out a few cards, including my trusty SUSS membership card which changed the topic to cave exploration.

The lady behind the till was captivated with our heroic stories and then said to Rod and me with a wink "good thing you're Paul's sister and brother-in-law eh. . ." and then to Steve "oh, and that you're his errr nephew. . ." before ringing up our orders, but only after we promised to try and check back in on the way home to update her on our discoveries!



**Rod, gearing up, Camooweal.
Photo by Deborah Johnston**

CAMOOWEAL CAVE EXPLORATION

Day 1 - Ticking off Flatteners (and Finding New Caves)

We arrived in Camooweal just after lunch (a full 6 days after setting out) and then headed down to the Billabong camp ground in the Camooweal Caves National Park, complete with one black swan, two tourists, and about 40 cows. Steve quickly set up his little Macpac tent then kicked rocks around for the next 3hrs as Rod stomped around setting up the rest of his supercamp complete with giant tent, fridge, esky, gas cooker, table, benches, chairs, chainsaw, eight dive tanks, two huge oxygen cylinders, a generator, and charging station. Once supercamp was complete, we jumped in the car and set off for our first target, an area identified through aerial images as being a 100m wide 2m deep doline. We trundled through the bush and were thoroughly unimpressed to find the dry bed of what is a small lake in wet season. Undeterred we explored the dry streamways nearby and found one section with warm air escaping through cracked mossy rock which we labelled as 'a dig for the truly desperate'. We then found a 6m deep doline which takes water from two creeks, and poked down into a 4x3x3 chamber with some tough but diggable leads blowing more of the distinctive hot air. Meanwhile, back up in the doline, Steve wiggled his way about 2m down a tight flattener and was rewarded with a surprising view as he looked over the edge down a wide 7m pitch! I squished down the flattener to take a look myself, sceptical that it was a joke to cram us in the tight passage, but saw that it was indeed a nice looking pitch that we could come back to explore.

Day 2 - Ticking off Wallows (and how not to rig)

The next day we set off to tick off the southern-most leads identified from aerial images, two 'dolines' which were actually shallow mud wallows (completely dry this time of year) and another which someone thought was a stream flowing into a pile of rocks, which was a small natural billabong (also dry, and completely devoid of limestone). We trudged for another half an hour through the countryside with our heavy packs (optimistically filled with rigging gear, overalls, tools and a SRT kit) to get back to the car, and head off for a far more promising lead nearby which had been labelled as having 'openable leads'. We reached the GPS position for this location fairly quickly but the only thing close to it was a pile of rocks with zero airflow, and zero openable leads.

We exchanged raised eyebrows then spread out to investigate the wider area where we found a much better looking doline nearby which looked like it should be a winner but again with no airflow and nothing that would be openable without an explosion! Steve had better luck nearby where he found a stream sink with hot air pumping from two sections of rockpile and mud. We contemplated this dig, and realising that it would be days of work we labelled it as such and moved on. This lead is near one of the larger caves in the area, but far enough away that it is definitely heading into something new.

We then returned to the pitch found the day before and shoved intrepid Steve down it. It was a solid effort for him to get down the flattener and over the edge with his gear on, and even more of a challenge to get back out again, which makes it even more of a shame that there was nothing at the bottom! Rod negotiated the flattener but was unable to look over the edge due to the tightest bit being just a bit smaller than his chest... so maybe a good thing it wasn't a goer after all? With a few hours left before sunset we drove over to a spot near the campground where tourists gawk down the impressive entrances of Great Nowranie and Little Nowranie. These dolines are about 50m apart and the surveyed passage pass reasonably close to each other, but despite extensive efforts for decades, the two had not been connected. Our plan for the afternoon was to rig Little Nowranie so it was set up to put one diver in the sump at the bottom the next day to look for possible leads. As we approached the doline the three of us entered the fabled SUSS realm of 'maximum pfaff factor' and somehow spent two hours rigging just the 25m entrance pitch before retreating to camp in the fading light to enjoy some beers and stargazing on another warm evening, interrupted only by the many feral cats.

Day 3 - Little Nowranie Breakthrough

On day four we packed Rod's diving gear and then headed back to Little Nowranie, making our way down to the water in good time with much more efficient rigging (leaving the pfaff factor at the entrance). By the time we reached the large clear sump at the bottom we were all completely soaked in sweat from the 29 degree heat and 100% humidity, and puffing even at rest with the slightly elevated CO₂. We got the dive line and tanks ready while



**Steven Kennedy in a new cave, Camooweal.
Photo by Rod Obrien**

poor Rod struggled into his 5mm wetsuit creating huge clouds of steam, and noted the huge mud slope just before the water. We hoped it would be shallow and not disturb the water clarity too much, but Rod sunk in well past his knees having to lurch forward in a giant bellyflop before swimming ahead furiously trying to stay ahead of the silt. He swam down the right hand wall following the mud slope down to 27m depth before the avalanche of mud enveloped him in a total blackout. Rod is a commercial diver at home in the most horrible of conditions, so he just knelt on the bottom and slowly felt his way along the wall with his hands in the complete darkness, eventually finding a lip with a small opening underneath.

He wiggled through the opening into a passage then was surprised to pop his head up through the mud layer into water with about 6m visibility in a reasonably large passage. He checked his air, found a good tie off for the dive line, then followed the passage about 40m through to a T-junction in a reasonable size passage. As he sat there contemplating whether to go left or right, he looked around for a good tie off then noticed some of his old dive line down on the gravel bed, coated in an algae growth. Success! This was Great Nowranie and he had made the connection people had been attempting for decades! Returning for a triumphant round of high 5s, we all floated in the refreshing pool of water for as long as possible, noting hundreds of tiny white cave prawns sharing the sump, before making our way back up the cave with just Rod's tanks to refill, leaving the rigging and the rest of the dive gear in place.

Day 4 - Common Cave

The triumphant trio; me, Steve and Rod, set out to Common Cave (aka Canellan, next to Danes Four Cave) for an exploratory dive in the sump below. I had heard that locals make their way down to the water for swims using rope ladders so was looking forward to a cruisy day.

It was a great little cave with nice pitches, each with some scary looking rotten Bunnings rope strewn in places. Rod had visited many years earlier and remembered seeing the very rudimentary rope ladders that the locals had been using, something that Steve and I struggled to visualise as we spent ages rigging re-directions to avoid some very nasty rub-points on the razor sharp rock edges. Everything was going smoothly until we reached the lowest section of the cave where we endured a 40m crawl through some outrageously sloppy, horrible elbow deep mud.

Reaching the sump, we were horrified to see that it was about the size of a bathtub, and completely choked with bacteria and putrid scunge, with a stench to match its looks. We spent a very, very long time attempting to achieve a seal on one of the regulators that had become too muddy and then, thinking happy thoughts, Rod geared up and plunged into the pool racing to stay ahead of the silt while Steve and I struggled to suppress our gagging as we retched from the stench of the disturbed water. Rod returned a short while later and confirmed that it was a goer with a small low passage tending downwards, with the feeling that it would pop into something larger. . . booty for future intrepid divers to scoop!

We lugged the gear back through the muddy hell then passed the gear back up to the base of the last pitch. Each pack had at least 2kg of thick, gluggy mud hitching a ride, and at one stage we counted packs realising that one had been left a short way back in the cave, completely camouflaged in the mud. Steve ascended the pitch with no troubles, with Rod next only to find that the coating of mud was causing his croll and basic to slip, needing about six goes to catch for each move. After hauling the gear up, the rope was completely coated in thick mud and I spent a solid 30 minutes ascending just 15metres arriving at the top almost totally exhausting and wishing (for the first and hopefully last time) that I had prussik loops instead of mechanical ascenders!

After exiting the cave near sunset we made our way into town for a well-earned shower and some beers and dinner in the pub where we also enjoyed some outrageous local stories about the caves.

Day 5 - Windy, Spirally, Whirly Leads (before Reinforcements Arrive)

Steve, Rod and I headed out to clock up some more kilometres of bushwalking as we checked some promising leads in



**Rod O'Brien rigging in Common Cave.
Photo by Deborah Johnston**

the bush (Wind Trap, Spiral Sink and Whirlpool) but despite our best efforts, we were not rewarded with any leads, let alone new caves. Later that day the rest of the gang arrived with Paul Hosie reaching camp at midday after his monster drive from Perth, and Alison Chau, Jack Waschmann, Denis Stojanovic and Natalie Brennan arriving in their two car convoy from Sydney late in the evening, setting up camp and crashing for some much needed sleep.

Jack had been adamant at the start of the drive up that they would be able to drive through the night, taking Google's 29 hour estimation in one hit by rotating drivers. Thankfully, he soon agreed that this would be a less than ideal way to arrive, and we made our way up in a more leisurely, yet still gruelling, fashion, camping on the first night near Dubbo, and the next near Longreach. Their trip was not as action-packed as Deb, Rod and Steve's, but there was still time for Alison to figuratively genuflect at Glenn McGrath's statue in Narromine and Jack and Denis to have a romantic midnight riverside stroll. Highlights included: overtaking an oversize police-escorted bull-dozer scoop and vehicle which took up both lanes; Nat discovering the little luxuries of driving Alison's Forester long-distance, such as cruise control, and the well-positioned arm and foot rests; and the boys entertaining both vehicles over their two-way radios with such edifying comments as "emu!" (Denis), "kangaroo!" (Jack), "the road's not straight!" (Jack) and "We should get Jack a colouring book. . ." (Denis).

Day 6 – Pants Optional

In the morning; Jack, Denis, Rod and Steve all raced down Little Nowranie to recover Rod's dive gear and de-rig the first pitch to discourage overly-adventurous tourists. When they returned the group congregated for a pow-wow outlining our plan for the next few days, with Rod commanding attention in his outfit of speedos, knee pads, hiking boots, and a singlet just long enough to make nudity ambiguous (having ditched his wet shorts for the drive back to camp after a swim in the sump).

We then split into two groups, with Alison, Jack and Steve heading to Marcus Mice with Hosie to help him with gear to extend the known dive; and me, Rod, Denis and Natalie heading to nearby Five O'Clock cave to do the first ever dive of its sump. We first went into an obvious high entrance in the doline which drops down a roughly 6m climb terminating in a dig with no airflow. We then found the correct entrance of cave in the right-hand side of main doline (as viewed after walking from road).

As we entered Five O'Clock Rod suggested we first do a trip through the cave to check the route, rigging and CO₂. I disagreed, saying that we should just do the trip once and with all the gear. Somehow I won, and we pushed and pulled the gear (luckily only the one small set in three bags) through the passage past the small entrance which is low and small with one tight squeeze before reaching a small chamber you can sit up in, followed by a climb about 2m (with a room off to side where you can look down tight sections of rift to rooms below and fresh air). At the base of the climb there is a belly crawl section leading into a maze with multiple ways on. Denis and I entered this section to find the way on and noticed the effects of CO₂ almost immediately. Stupidly, we pushed on regardless and found the way on which continues straight ahead into a small chamber with a flat roof and a very large rock cairn. You then go down a non-obvious hole to the right into another small flat-roof section. You then continue straight then down another non-obvious hole near the far wall to a lower section, following this passage straight-ahead to the end. This passage has some sections where you look up rifts, and the pitch at the end. The route is confusing but we marked the junctions well with rock cairns to assist on our future trips. By the time we reached the pitch we were sick from the CO₂ and made our way back out, resisting the urge to rush and instead moving slowly to minimise exertion.

After exiting, we made our way over to Marcus Mice to check out the progress of the other group, with Denis and Nat making their way down into the cave, and me and Rod deciding to explore leads on the surface instead (knowing that Rod doesn't fit through the first tight squeeze above a climb and that I was too chicken to push through without a rope or handline to assist!) then enjoying a beer in the fading light.

Rod's wet shorts had been chafing his thighs badly for a few days causing red-raw skin which had become very painful. After hours on the surface, he and I decided to swap pants so he could protect the red-raw skin a bit better in my running tights. Naturally, the second we dropped our pants Nat and then Alison popped out of the cave entrance to see us standing in our undies, with helmets, a crowbar and beer. Truly SUSS.



**Back to nature, Camooweal.
Photo by Deborah Johnston**

Day 7 - Great Nowranie, Marcus Mice, Checking Features

On day 8, Steve and Denis did a quick run through Great Nowranie, rigging the pitches for a future dive trip before returning to regroup with Jack and Hosie to return to Marcus Mice for another dive, some exploration of dry leads, and a good survey.

The women of the trip; me, Nat and Alison, teamed up for ladies day (with Rod an honorary lady for the day as driver, not because he looked so great in those tights the day before) and set off into the bush to locate some dolines described as having draughts and unexplored leads. We arrived at our first destination, Hornet Hole, and found a flat field of rocks. We spent a good half hour covering a 150m area around the GPS mark but found nothing except for one hole the size of a rabbit, with no airflow or lead prospects. This was a mystery as the description indicated a pothole entrance into 3m of damp passage with openable leads!

We moved on and walked across the plains and dry creeks to reach Kessirlbech Cave (aka Koolairlabah) which Rod had been very keen to explore. We all approached the large dual dolines with excitement, noting the two large creeks that flow straight into the larger, main doline. Rod spotted a very small hole at first, joking that it'd be the entrance, before we hunted, and hunted, and hunted. . . then realised that oh god, it was the entrance. Too small for me or Rod, Alison and Nat poured themselves in and explored what they reported to be thoroughly tight, horrible, spiky passage. . . all the way to the current end of the cave which had a little bit of shitty formation, and a couple of uninspiring and very difficult leads. Despite carrying knee pads all the way to the cave, neither of them had put them on before entering so they returned very tenderised after about an hour of this tough exploring. . . convinced that we had somehow made the entrance squeeze smaller as they struggled out.

Still early in the day, we decided to visit another good prospect promising draughts and leads. . . and found two small dolines devoid of draughts or leads (but containing some very large snakeskins). Exploring the surrounding area we noted a small creek running into a rock-sink which we opened up into a human sized hole. Nat, Alison and I went in and were excited to find white crystal passage with a 2m climb and a cool fresh breeze running into the cave. Nat explored a tight flattener to a choke then we went down a 2m sloping passage to a 3m climb, entering a stand-up chamber with a domed roof and no obvious way on. Contemplating where the water would go, we tried a dig to the right which fizzed out, then straight down which was also playing hard to get. All that remained was a tight section off to the left which we initially classed as too small, until I stubbornly scraped and squeezed in taking my helmet off to see that the cave kept going around the corner.

Deploying Alison, the hardy micro-bod, she somehow squeezed her small frame around this horrible corner and found that it opened up into some more chambers with evidence of high water flow, but no obvious leads apart from a couple of hard digs. We contemplated a suitable name for the cave and decided on The Naughty Corner in honour of that bastard corner and Alison the conqueror being a school teacher when she's not exploring caves.

That evening, everyone enjoyed showers (one group in town via a beer at the pub, and the other group thanks to Paul's shower tent and pump), then Paul treated the tired group to a giant box of king prawns he'd picked up in Darwin.

Day 8 - Little Nowranie, Marcus Mice, feature checking

One week into the trip and no rest in site as we hauled four 12l and one 7l tank, plus a gear bag back into Little Nowranie. Thankfully we had the full group helping out so we got all the gear to the water in around two hours without too much exertion in the heat. Rod and I had 40% nitrox mixes and set off through the new connection into Great Nowranie.

From the sump you follow the line almost straight down to 27m before going through a low hole in the wall into a slightly larger chamber with large mud banks. Going down the first section of line you are followed by an avalanche of fine red mud which makes visibility low through this next section which is around 40m of head bumping before popping out into the main Great Nowranie passage which is around 2m wide and 1.5m high on average, with some smaller sections and multiple larger parts. The old line is coated in algae growth and the entire passage is filled with various types of bacterial growth. In sections, the old line is buried under mud or rocks up to 1m deep. The water



***Alison, Nat and Deborah, Ladies Day, Camooweal.
Photo by Rod Obrien***

temperature was 29 degrees for the duration of the dive, meaning wetsuits were only required for extra buoyancy with our heavy tanks (which we gaffa-taped foam too for extra floatation). We followed the Great Nowranie line to its southern most extent where Rod was to explore, and extend the line placing a pinger at the very end, with me following a short distance behind to survey this new passage.

When we reached the end of the old line and Rod tied on, I noted that it was a bit deeper than the previous passage and that it had taken about 40 minutes to swim there which was longer than expected. We both had plenty of air before turning around on thirds, but I was distracted by trying to pre-empt how much decompression we might end up with, especially with the return trip likely to be much slower due to the reduced visibility. I was still throwing these thoughts around in my head when Rod turned around to tell me that the new passage was too small and silty to push and survey, so I should head back out again. Normally I'd be bummed about missing out, but with the nagging heebie-jeebies threatening my comfort level, I happily said goodbye and cruised back out of the cave, pleasantly surprised to find reasonably good vis the whole way back to the junction. I began surveying the dive connection between Little and Great Nowranie, but it was not possible to read the compass. Noting that I had stacks of air left, and that I was 2 minutes from deco, I had just decided to head out when Rod suddenly appeared at my side, scaring the shit out of me! He had extended the line a further 50 – 70m and placed a pinger at the end to be located on the surface for an accurate location and depth. We both made our way out through the tunnel, and into the sump where we followed the dive line steeply upwards. I had my bright dive computer pressed flat on my dive mask trying to read the depth and deco stops, but I couldn't make out any numbers in the silted out water. I turned my light off and tried again when I was a bit higher and still couldn't read the numbers themselves but I could see by the colour that I didn't have to make a stop. We reached 6m where Rod had fixed a deco cylinder of 80% oxygen, but we made a safety stop here without switching tanks before clambering out of the sump back into the hot and steamy cave.



**Heading to the dive, Little Nowranie Cave, Camooweal.
Photo by Deborah Johnston**

and disappeared down the first abseil. I had cultivated a healthy amount of trash-talking from the group who called down things like “does it normally look that awkward” as each caver descended, then I went last with my pre-arranged eruption of claps and cheers, only to find that the group had already moved further on in the cave except for a bewildered looking Denis... damn! We caught up and joined the smooth operation of chaining and lowering which meant we all reached the water with minimal time and effort. I jumped in first using the tanks I'd left the day before and finished off the survey of the new connection. It was so hot I couldn't bear to struggle into my wetsuit again so I jumped in with my shorts and tshirt instead, aided by the tanks being less full and so less heavy in the water. Visibility had cleared enough to survey bearings and lengths but not general passage size measurements. On the way out I noticed a strange flatworm swimming through the water, which then moved up the dive line like a leech. I hoped to god it wasn't a leech as I floated there without the protection of a wetsuit! Once I was out of the way, Rod grabbed his gear to jump in but quickly found that the travel cylinder he had borrowed from Paul had been leaking from the valve and was now only half full! It was still hissing out air at a reasonable pace so we swapped it for one of my larger tanks which was still just under half full. To compensate for the lack of buoyancy in fresh water using thin wetsuits, Rod gaffa taped some extra high density foam around each of the large tanks which made them float much more readily in the water, keeping him up out of the silt. With his three 12l tanks on, Rod sunk through the mud to his knees, and took three big paces before zigzagging through the dry cavers cooling off in the sump, then disappearing down the line.

With our deco tank full and my tanks still very full, we left them in place to be re-used the next day, only taking out Rod's tanks to top up with Nitrox for his longer dive the next day. Meanwhile on the surface, Hosie located the pingers placed at various locations using Ken Smith's receiver so he was able to pinpoint the exact location on the surface above each transmitter, and calculated the depth by taking a reading at 45 degrees. After that, Steve, Nat and Paul returned to Marcus Mice to finish surveying, while the others checked possible features finding some impressive dolines but without any openable leads or airflow.

Day 9 - Little Nowranie, Spinifex

After a leisurely (or was that stalling?) breakfast, the group made their way back to Little Nowranie with some freshly filled tanks, and were greeted by a large group of vintage car enthusiasts on a road trip. They asked lots of questions and took photos of the group while we got ready, lowered the gear

Jack picked the right place in the sump to get an impromptu spa bath as Rod's bubbles floated up just underneath him (or at least that's the source he claimed!). Rod sped down to the end of the line and then pushed it around an extra 100m before his computer started flashing at him. The passage he was in is slowly getting deeper and he had reached 31m which was the limit he could descend with the mixture of oxygen he was breathing. Placing a pinger for surface location, he then made his way back out of the cave as quickly as possible to minimise decompression. With the poor visibility and fast speed, he estimates whacking his head hard at least 30 times. He returned in time to only have 15 minutes of decompression to complete, and was delighted to find that the rest of the group had taken all of the excess gear out of the cave.

After they had pulled out the gear, the dry cavers went off to do Spinifex Cave.

Correction: the dry cavers mutinied! Between lugging dive gear for three divers attempting different dive projects every day, us dry cavers had had little opportunity to enjoy ourselves in a non-labour intensive capacity. So at close to 1800, we spontaneously decided to check out one of the better-sounding caves with significant dry passage which we were not already tired of seeing whilst pulling dive gear through.

Spinifex was a jolly cave, beginning with a tightish vertical section, which involved bridging down through a tall rift. There were several giant borehole passages with chambers over 15m high and wide, and some fascinatingly shaped passage, including the guillotine, a keyhole passage with deadly-looking sharp edges around neck height, and another section which looked like the inverse of dinosaur vertebrae.

At the end of the two main passages there are sumps but only one has ever been dived. This cave is known for high CO₂ but the group were able to make it most of the way to the water before having to turn back, exiting the cave about 10pm that night.

Day 10 - Marcus Mice, Spinifex

Hosie rushed off early (ok, it was 9am, so early for SUSS) to fit in one last dive in Marcus Mice and about an hour later Steve, Nat, Alison, Jack and Denis made their way over to help bring out his gear, finish the last legs of survey, and de-rig the cave. Rod and I waited on the surface (the nice side of the very tight squeeze above a drop), but after a couple of hours in the heat, we left a note explaining that we were off for a rumble through Spinifex. This ended up being a very short trip as Rod's barrel chest did not fit through the one squeeze of the cave, which happens to be in the daylight zone of the entrance doline. This frustrated him wildly as he had done it several times in the past. Curse those shrinking caves!

We returned to camp and found that Hosie had gone to the post office in town (to collect birthday presents!), and the others had run away to do a fun trip through Great Nowranie (and to leave a diabolical surprise for me as punishment for not helping in Marcus Mice!).

When Paul returned after lunch, we loaded ourselves with seven of his gear bags, including his homebuilt side mount rebreather affectionately coined Big Bertha (but referred to in his absence as the bitch) which was to be christened on this very trip! After a record two hours of gear fiddling, Paul jumped in the inviting sump and disappeared, heading down the other section of line to extend the cave. After he left, Rod and I started extracting six of the remaining bags from our previous trip. The two of us got the heavy gear bags and tanks all the way to the bottom of the main entrance pitch at midnight where I called it a night as I was completely stuffed! Paul returned letting us know that his rebreather was mostly well-behaved, and that he'd added at least 20m to the end of the line, a fantastic effort! As we exited the cave we found the others sitting in their car next to the cave entrance having just come looking for us given the late hour. We contemplated bringing the bags up the last pitch for about 1 second before reason prevailed and we left them there to worry about the next day.



**Preparing for the dive, Little Nowranie Cave, Camooweal.
Photo by Deborah Johnston**

Day 11 - Great Nowranie, Little Nowranie, Kalkadoon

The dry cavers headed off to Kalkadoon Cave, the largest known cave in the region which was accidentally named after a fighting tribe of the traditional owners of the area, oops!

With a copy of Hosie's map of Kalkadoon in hand, we were interested in some question marks along a narrow and very long section of straightforward-looking passage. We entered through the very impressive doline entrance, which

required a 5m abseil, and which we rigged off a large boulder and a thread. We followed the most obvious passage through walkthrough passage to a low crawl. The low passage continued through a T-junction, where we took the right hand passage. This soon became walkthrough stream passage for a few hundred metres, then the ceiling dropped again, with crawling passage joining up many small rooms.

Despite the many warnings we had been given, and our own generally good sense, we took less water in than we ought to have done. This was a decision we would soon regret, as we sweated bucketloads in the hottest and most humid cave we had yet encountered on the trip. Denis and Nat pressed on for as long as they could, Denis even finding lengthy walkthrough passage before he decided to turn back, with Nat thoughtfully leaving a cairn behind for future reference. Unfortunately, that future was to be quite close to hand, as they espied the cairn on the return trip and realized to their disappointment that Denis had discovered a connection to the very walkthrough passage through which we had entered!

Moving at a constant, yet energy-conserving, pace in order to minimize dehydration, it took more than half an hour to return to the T-junction. It was decided that the cave needs a resurvey; the existing map already has a number of tempting leads, and is only a skeleton sketch. The survey team would need to bring a lot of water and Powerade with them, and to park their car well before the road becomes overgrown, as Alison learnt to her peril, and the severe puncturing of one of her tyres!

Hosie was spending some quality time with Big Bertha, so Rod and I headed into Great Nowranie to de-rig the top two pitches.

As we approached the entrance we met two tourists, one of which was famous in the area having fallen down the cave entrance in 1981, luckily landing on a large chockstone where he lay injured. He reported that luckily there was water on the rocks he was able to lick otherwise he felt he would surely have died. Mines Rescue eventually pulled him up and he recuperated with no long-term damage. Despite this experience he said he had still always wanted to explore the caves but had never found the opportunity.

We reached the top of the pre-rigged abseil and were greeted by the rotting remains of a feral cat. The tourists insisted on staying to watch us do the main abseil, much to the dismay of my fairly full bladder! Rod and I had a look around the upper levels of the cave, admiring the warp zones where you walk into visible humidity clouds where the cave roof is belled. On the way out, we de-rigged the second pitch with the bastard rebelay, then the main pitch before moving one doline over to begin bringing the rest of the dive gear out of Little Nowranie.



A frog inspects Paul Hosies home-made rebreather, Camooweal.

Photo by Paul Hosie

Rod and I went to the bottom of the cave and silently stared at the many heavy gear packs for a moment before beginning the ordeal of hauling, dragging, lifting, shoving and cursing. Fatigue from the previous nine days had well and truly caught up with me so my mood was a thoroughly shitty one, and I attempted to coax Rod into giving up at various stages and leaving the bags in place. Rod stayed the course and when we reached the half-way point we were both delighted to hear the voices of the others who had come back from a long, hard day and Kalkadoon and were there to help us finish the last of this slog. It was about 9pm as we were exiting the final chambers and we surprised a pair of large ghost bats that were flying in.

Day 12 - Rocklands Station

The group assembled after breakfasts relatively early (9am!) and headed up the road to a large cattle station where we had gained permission to explore for the day. After checking in with the manager's wife, we all visited Jurutu cave which looked very prospective – taking the entire overflow from the large Georgina River when it floods. Unfortunately, the impressive doline choked out after a short distance in the cave with evidence of ghost bats feeding on local animals (including rat skulls found).

The group then split into two with Paul, Denis, Jack and Alison heading off to check out the impressive Barwidgee doline and Theatre in the Round Cave, while Rod, me, Steve and Nat set off for lightweight dive trip in Hassels Cave where Rod would find the end of the previously laid line (laid by whom I still don't know?) then extend it (his

speciality!).

After slowly negotiating the new roads across the station, we found the best section for the final 3.2km off-road drive to get to the cave. After a short distance we realised that the black soil was too soft to continue with Rod's car sinking deep in the dirt as we negotiated the large rocks. We briefly considered walking, then accepted that it was too late in the day to attempt such a long trip without driving, and that this would have to be deferred to another year when the soil was more firm. This decision was met with little resistance given the fatigue shared by everyone at this stage of the trip!

There was no rest to be had however, as we sparked up the GPS and formulated a plan for checking off features which had been identified as possible caves and dolines from aerial images but not yet explored. We packed our bags with optimism, crowbars and water, then headed off into the bush with a skip in our step. After trekking in the heat to six or so featureless plains, the skip was well and truly replaced with a drudge, only broken up by the amusement over my terrible driving, including a shameful bunny hop past one farm gate, and Nat suggesting at one stage that we could put the truck in neutral and all push it the short distance to a shady parking spot rather than endure my attempts at a hill start!

Nearing 5pm we knew we only had an hour or so to meet the rest of the gang so we trudged off to check one last feature and found nothing. Refusing to give in (after all, we know that all the big discoveries are made at the end!), we split up and explored the surrounding landscape before lucking upon an interesting area of limestone which takes a huge amount of water from Scrubby Creek. The surface limestone was impressive, looking like tessellated pavement that then further eroded into 2.5m+ cracks, with some sections toppled over.

We were exploring these cracks when we disturbed a large dingo which legged it off into the distance, earning the resulting cave the name Dingos Dash. After recovering from this encounter (and making sure there were no dingo pups) we put Nat down one of the deeper cracks. After a worrying amount of time she returned describing the small sections of passage that she'd found including some small streamway passage and some of the largest snakeskins she'd ever seen (pythons). Steve then popped in for a look and found some more passage and then what seemed to be the way on with difficult rock pile choke with breeze.

The other group, consisting of Hosie, Denis, Jack and Alison, had also been surface trogging. We had initially been intending to resurvey Barrowidgee, since the existing map cannot be located. Barrowidgee consists of two large doline entrances, with an underground connection, and which takes a great deal of water during the wet season. We rigged the entrance pitch, fuffed with Hosie's DistoX which was giving readings in radians, and Denis spent some considerable time sketching the entrance doline. In the meantime Jack had been exploring, finally determining that the karst index description was sufficiently accurate, and that the cave would not benefit from a full survey. So despite his many disappointed protests, we abandoned Denis's sketch and headed to look for surface features that Hosie had found from looking at old maps and cross referencing with Google images. None were actual karst, so we spent a pleasant hour wandering in a huge circuit of the countryside during the hottest time of the day.



**Paul and Steve removing tar drums, Niggle, Camooweal.
Photo by Rod O'Brien**

We then went to Theatre in the Round, with a large sloping entrance into a roughly 20m diameter semi daylight chamber. We were surprised to see an unidentified canine (possibly a dingo / dog cross) inhabiting the entrance chamber; but not so surprised as this canine was itself – it spent the next half hour dashing around trying to escape our unthreatening presence.

After checking the existing map, Alison located an unsurveyed entrance through a letterbox off an aven to a section of cave that corresponded with an unsurveyed section marked as Henry's lead. Jack, Denis and Alison explored a rock pile and meandering Vadose passage, with the latter two pushing a dig at the end, coming to a 2.5m squared room with a rubble floor; and with a potential diggable lead with very tight access. Even with some judicious excavation, Denis struggled in exiting this part of the cave. We returned to the entrance to meet up with Hosie, who had spent a relaxing couple of hours contemplating the ceiling of the entrance chamber, and drove back to meet the others.

Day 13 - Meeting with Traditional Owners, Rubbish Removal from Niggle, Diving in Four Mile and Niggle

Today Paul, Rod and I rushed out of camp early for a meeting in town with Colin, one of the traditional owners of the area. We arrived on city time, then promptly reset out clocks to bush time and hung around for at least a

couple of hours having multiple cups of tea and pouring over Google Maps exchanging knowledge of the land. After this leisurely start we met with a group of workers that had been assembled to help with the day's task (including Dan the local copper) which was to remove the debris from Niggle doline which had been almost half filled with tar drums after the war, with the gaps filled in by decades of beer cans.

We received a welcome to land from Colin's sister Hazel letting us know that the group had the warm support of all the traditional owners, then Paul gave an excellent introduction to the group explaining our exploration work and why it's important, including how the caves are connected and all full of life meaning that if one is polluted, the rest suffer. After decking everyone out in their PPE for the day we grabbed a flatbed truck and headed the short distance down the road to the doline and got to work.

Hearing about the delayed starting time, us young folks decided to flee to the border! It was the first time into the Northern Territory for some of us, so we entertained ourselves by mass-phoning at the border sign and gazing enviously upon the 130km speed limit signs. By the time we had had our fill of these things, it was time to turn back and meet the others.

It was a bit of a slog but we had all but the most difficult drums removed from the doline in around two hours, before retiring to the shade of a tree and gas-bagging for an extra hour.

Nat made a spectacular entrance to the seated lunch circle, thanks to her sturdy wellies. These had already been the cause for some comment in town, as the locals were openly amused by her choice in rain-appropriate footwear in the driest of outback dry seasons. Over lunch, Nat managed a highly impressive face plant into the lunch circle as her gumboots contacted the cunningly flattened and hidden barbed wire fence. Needless to say, she was fine.

After the work crew left for the day we split into two groups again with the dry cavers all descending on Niggle (taking Al Warild's precious DistoX in the hopes that it would lead them to the SUSS extension that eluded them in Kalkadoon), and the divers headed into Four Mile. Each group rigged the cave for a dive trip the next day.

The dry cavers rigged Niggle with a 50m rope, and off a couple of boulders that made up the entrance, involving the use of a couple of very long tapes. Eventually, the pitch had three redirections above a rebelay at a ledge about 10m above the bottom, with a rope protector needed at the rebelay. One could abseil all the way to the bottom, but we avoided additional rope rub by climbing up and down the 3m slope from the bottom.

Armed with Hosie's map, Alison's plan had been to check out the eastern unsurveyed leads. One of the leads that Denis, Nat and Steve tried to explore involved a hairy climb up a muddy wall. The use of tape was not effective, and it was resolved that they would return on the morrow with a ladder in order to explore it more safely. Alison was persuaded to enter into an awful hole which she decided not to push, as it involved removing both helmet and shoes.

We took what we thought was Paveys Passage, but we ended up in a long passage filled with water with no junctions for what seemed like several hundred metres, but which didn't correspond with any part of the map that we had with us, despite our best efforts in cartographic decipherment. We decided at around 1730 that it was time to turn around. A retrace of our steps didn't help us to figure out where we were, so the five of us together are either surprisingly inept at map-reading, or there is some significant additional passage that has not been properly surveyed.



**Python in Four Mile Cave, Camooweal.
Photo by Natalie Brennan**

My Scurion battery was getting low so I had it turned off at one stage when we were pulling bags through a flattener using a long tape. Unfortunately, the end of the tape flicked a fist-full of grit into my open eye which was a complete shit. My drink bottle was full of Gatorade but luckily Paul had his Camelbak full of water. He offered to come through the flattener to give it to me, but I misheard that as him telling me to hurry up and come through... after I was a bit of a bitch, snapping at the boys, Paul came through and gave me some water and I began slowly extracting all the grit from my eye bit by bit as I slowly made my way through the cave. The location of this sooky cry-fest was then referred to as wailing way for the duration of the trip! The trip into the cave was worth it as we reached an impressive rift passage with an excellent free hanging 25-30m abseil down to a clear pool with frogs and Childrens pythons. We then

went to the 'dragons teeth' formation where we rigged a drop with a thick mat for rope protection over the sharp edges down to the lower passages with leads to explore and the large but murky sump to dive. Up top we found large piles of guano and heard bats but none were sighted.

Returning to camp we chatted with the visiting 'bat man' Arthur White, and his zoologist companion, Blake, who had both come up from Sydney on a funded project to record ghost bat activity in the region, both delighted that we were able to confirm guano and bat sightings in particular areas lightening their search efforts considerably.

Despite the late hour, we also broke open Jack's birthday cake, which we had had the forethought to purchase in town that morning at the general store. We hope it made up for previous mediocre birthdays, when the one concession to the occasion had been the presentation of a birthday rock to the young J. T. P. Wachsmann.

Day 14 - Diving in Four Mile and Niggle

This morning Jack had a flight to catch from Mt Isa to return home early for work. Luckily, he had arranged to get a coach from in town to Mt Isa to save us the 4hr round trip, and even more luckily we organised for him to drive Denis' car into town at 4am and stow the keys so we could all stay in bed at that disgusting hour!

Rod and Paul prepared their dive gear all morning with the groups getting going after midday, then the two fully laden groups headed off; Rod, Steve, Alison and I heading to Four Mile (where we caught up with the bat men who were looking for the bats we had heard the previous day) while the others headed to Niggle. We got the dive gear to the bottom of Four Mile in just one hour and Steve and Alison headed back up the cave to explore multiple upper leads which connected through maze systems, or terminated. After Rod jumped into the dive, I rushed over to another section of stagnant water to see if any bubbles came up. While waiting by the stinky pool, I was able to probe it with a stick and steel krab on a tape to determine that it is just a little pool with no dive prospects. I then set off down the other lead on the map, which was a long belly crawl along a muddy passage with a couple of pools of water, labelled on the map as 'to the bowel' with a question mark. I continued along this passage a long way and it showed no sign of getting smaller, but I ran out of time and found a place to turn around to return to the sump to assist Rod with pulling his tanks up the steep wall so he could then tape-climb back out. After re-emerging from the side passage I realised it was labelled to the bowel because you look like you've been shat out of it!



Critter, Niggle, Camooweal.
Photo by Paul Hosie

to the dead-end then thought the line had broken. He got his reel and began to tie on before the vis cleared a bit and he realised the error and he zoomed back out of the cave as fast as possible to minimise the amount of deco required.

As we exited, we surprised a group of three locals who were very keen to try caving but unsure where to start given the lack of local clubs or cavers frequenting the area. One of the guys had abseiled down into the Great Nowranie doline earlier in the day using just a dog-clip on dynamic rope, then climbed back out up the chockstones as he had no ascending gear (or helmet, or light)! They let us know that they felt much more confident to explore the caves while we were around, and we did our best to explain the dangers of these difficult, advanced caves of their region, without putting off their desire to take up caving!

Rod returned from his dive after around 40 minutes with his first words being "well... that was horrible!" He had descended the existing line to 40m where it goes through a bit of a flat-tener. The line then ends at a gravel slope where large rocks have been pushed up the slope by large amounts of water. Rod poked the large cobblestones getting ready to begin digging them out of the way, when the entire slope of rocks tumbled down, filling in the space underneath him and pinning him to the roof. He backed out at lightning speed, let his heart rate settle, then moved back in to jostle the rocks again. Another landslide was triggered, he gave the slope the finger, placed a pinger on the roof, then made his way out of the cave. Upon exiting, there is an almost vertical section of dive line which then branches off in two directions, one going out of the cave and the other leading to a dead-end. Rod accidentally followed the line

Day 15 - Four Mile, Niggle, meeting with Colin

With Four Mile already rigged and the packs at the water, Steve, Rod and I headed off at 8am to retrieve the pinger and de-rig the cave. We had rushed ahead early because we had some very important business to complete before entering the cave – a thick shake and egg rolls from the local roadhouse served up by non-other than the lady who had been in the keen group we'd met at the doline the afternoon before. Nat, Denis and Alison arrived at the cave expecting us to be well into the cave, but were disappointed to find us still stooging and only just getting our knee pads on.

With the cave pre-rigged and no gear to lug we got down to the sump in about 20 – 30 minutes at a leisurely pace. Steve valiantly tried to pull me away from the swimming pool at the bottom of the pitch, but I was destined for the splash. At the sump edge I stuffed around for a solid 45 minutes while Rod strained with all his might not to push me in!

To minimise the amount of gear lugging, I only took in my mask and computer, and used Rod's booties and fins (which was a pain as they were way too big), and jumped into his trademark blue 5mm Seatec one-piece wetsuit which is a surprisingly good fit (albeit a little baggy on my biceps!). I opted to add a power inflater to Rod's BCD but it had been so long since he'd had one attached as he manually inflates, so we checked it carefully to make sure it would actually work.

I jumped in the water with Rod lowering his two 12l tanks from the day before, both still more than half full. I opted not to worry about the 7l travel cylinder on offer but noted the 7L deco cylinder hanging at 6m. The murky water in the sump was a refreshing 26 degrees but felt much cooler than the 25 degree air.

We had some yoga mat foam gaffa taped to one tank which still hung heavily in the water, and had some high density foam strapped to the other which was bobbing up on the surface. Rod clips his regulator mouthpieces to each tank while I prefer to have mine clipped high on my BCD near my chin, so there was a bit of a mess sorting out where to tuck away the hoses. Eventually, I couldn't put it off any longer so dumped some air from the BCD and descended, trying not to think about cave prawns crawling into my ears!

I had Rod's BCD cinched tight around my waist but it didn't help the bagginess where I can't fill out the shoulder straps. This caused a strange profile as the one tank hanging down and the other one floating up caused the whole jacket to spin around! Luckily I was in 6cm of vis so none of the cave critters could laugh at me as I wrestled with the jacket trying to get a bit more streamlined. Giving up, I hooked my arm around the low-hanging tank and cradled it up against me as I headed down the line to 10m where the line then zigzags from either side of a horizontal passage giving the impression that a much greater distance has been travelled than in reality. The passage pops into a large chamber where the water suddenly clears from zero visibility to 6+ meters. The temperature also changes dramatically from 26 – 28 degrees (feeling more like 30+). On the way down to retrieve the pinger, I was impressed by a huge log which had washed in somehow, and more of the freaky bacteria that looks like moving animals when dislodged and floating free in the water. Before I knew it, I was at 40m and looking at the reflector of Kens pinger, but the water was still stirred up from the collapse the day before so I couldn't see the slope of doom. Clipping the pinger to my side, I then made my way out of the cave. I was in the short no-vis section, almost back into the main sump, when I felt the dive line go slack. After much groping around I realised it had come free from a wall protrusion it had been wrapped around which I fixed, but that process took a solid 10 minutes. Luckily this was only 10m depth so I was still able to finish the dive with no deco, and emerged after a safety stop to find Rod who had been starting to worry why I was taking so damn long.



Stygobiont amphipods living in the cave sumps

Photo by Deborah Johnston



Freshwater land crab in Niggle Cave, Camooweal.
Photo by Natalie Brennan

we were keen to be out of the caves by 4pm to allow a quick shower and change. It was 3pm by the time we reached the bottom of the pitch after each abseiling down through the very small entrance hole and crossing a friendly redirection and a very unfriendly rebelay. We found Paul at the base of the pitch having finished a successful dive, and he raced out to head off to the meeting with Rod, with me opting to stay behind and help the others with the gear.

It took the five of us just 30 minutes to get to the sump with no gear (at a cracking pace), then 2 hours to get the 7 packs of gear back to the base of the pitch (again, at a cracking pace with one short detour to admire the white freshwater crabs that live in the cave). Nat then went up ahead to see if Rod was up at the entrance to help with gear hauling, and we all sighed with relief when she happily called back that he was. Two hours later we had all 7 packs up the pitch and out of the cave. The group emerged at 9pm feeling shattered but relieved, but the relief turned to angry disbelief when we found a very happy Paul who'd been sinking beers in the doline for hours instead of helping lug his gear! We went into town for our last Camooweal showers at the van park. With all the stalls occupied, I ventured over to the less pristine truckies shower. This was probably a wise move as when I removed my t-shirt, the kilogram of dried mud flakes exploded like a bomb around me.



Deborah prepares for a dive in thick mud, Camooweal.
Rod O'Brien

Day 17 - Farewell Camooweal, for now

The piles of dusty and dirty gear were shoved back into our cars and trailers as best as possible and we hit the road for our long drive back to Sydney with our poor muscles delighted to be finally resting after this epic but amazingly fun trip.

A final note: ALWAYS put your foot down (not on the accelerator!) when Denis suggests pushing on, and on, and on, and on, otherwise you WILL end up driving 1500kms in one day, and pull in to Mount Victoria only 48 hours after leaving Camooweal. It's not worth the sleep in. . .

Day 16 - Four Mile, Niggle, Traditional Owner Meeting

The night before, Hosie had said over dinner that he would head off to Niggle Cave at about 6am to do his last dive. I rolled my eyes at this wild claim of an early start, but to my surprise he had already left camp at 6:30am! Motivated by this effort, Rod and I set off an hour later to Four Mile with four of us making it back to the surface with gear in just two hours, including de-rigging along the way. With Paul still in Niggle on his own, the rest of the group congregated for lunch and then made our way to a surface feature nearby which held great promise. This 'quick look' turned into hours with us eventually deciding to go and fetch Paul about 2pm.

Rod, Paul and I had another meeting with the traditional owners that afternoon to present our findings from the trip so

we were keen to be out of the caves by 4pm to allow a quick shower and change. It was 3pm by the time we reached the bottom of the pitch after each abseiling down through the very small entrance hole and crossing a friendly redirection and a very unfriendly rebelay. We found Paul at the base of the pitch having finished a successful dive, and he raced out to head off to the meeting with Rod, with me opting to stay behind and help the others with the gear.

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I tried to clean this up but only succeeded in smearing the mud around like a scene from a bad horror movie. Eventually I left the shower stall feeling ashamed for what had been left for the poor next person to come.

Any delusions of being a celebrity diver with minions on hand must have been quickly replaced with the fear of all future requests for help lugging gear being denied, as when we returned to camp from our showers, we found a very appreciative Hosie serving up a hot Indian dinner for everyone which was eagerly gulped down as he let us know how successful the meeting with the traditional owners had been, and how the information of the life in the caves and their underwater connections will be used to help stop planned fracking in the area.