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## KOONALDA KAPERS

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KOONALDA CAVE, NULLARBOR

23RD SEPTEMBER – 9TH OCTOBER 2005

BY KEVIN MOORE AND PHIL MAYNARD

**Participants:** Keir Vaughan-Taylor, Kevin Moore, Phil Maynard, Paul Hosie (WASG)



*Koonalda doline*

*photo Kevin Moore*

**Kevin:** Having previously visited the area as part of the ‘Escape the Hype’ trip of 2000, Phil and Kevin were easily persuaded that another trip to Koonalda was a good idea. Previously strongly held convictions as to the sanity of cave divers were soon challenged, as Keir told Phil that he was being invited “to investigate a climbing lead for Paul and, oh yes, it’s at the wrong side of a cave dive, and I’ve arranged for you to do a cave diving course with Merv....”

After a few months of having Merv jocularly removing his mask and closing his main tank valve while he negotiated ever more complex rats’ nests of dive line in the dark, Phil was declared competent to cave dive, although it was suggested that he should be allowed only one fin, so that he would swim straight.

The morning of the first day, we collected at Keir’s place and contemplated the pile of gear that needed to be taken, and the car and trailer in which we intended to take it. Alternatives were considered and rejected on the grounds that:

1. Taking Kevin’s car as well would mean someone would be driving by themselves for a very long way.
2. Taking Keir’s (admittedly larger) gas-powered ex-taxi Ford provided no great confidence in the prospect of actually arriving at Koonalda.

These alternatives being rejected, the gear was duly loaded into Phil's Forester, leaving it with a good half a centimetre of travel in the suspension. The trailer was also riding a little low and we looked askance at the state of the left hand tire. After lunch at Wellington Caves, and dinner at Cobar, we made it to Broken Hill five minutes before the backpackers was due to close. By the time we found it, it was ten minutes after the Backpackers was due to close, but Keir's negotiating skills and Phil's credit card obtained us a room for the night.

The second day dawned, and the dodgy tire seemed no worse for its adventures, so we continued on, lunching at Peterborough and stopping at a hotel in Wudina, a small town on the Eyre peninsula that consists of a wheat silo, agricultural equipment supplies and a pub. It's also the setting off point for the Gawler Ranges, and Phil expressed his enthusiasm for a side trip on the way back. The Wudina Hotel is a bit of a find; it's cheaper than the backpackers and it serves beer and enormous quantities of food.

The third day started, traveling through yet more wheat until we reached the last outpost of civilised petrol prices at Ceduna. We filled up on the principle that anything more than a top up at the Nullarbor Roadhouse was unnecessary extravagance. It was also the point at which we needed to stock up on food, which presented a problem: there was enough room in the car for the gear and the passengers, but not actually enough room for food as well. After toying with the idea of tying Keir to the roof racks, we attached a few of the boxes instead. With a couple of weeks' worth of food filling the interstices, we continued to the Nullarbor Roadhouse, where we were informed by a concerned driver that our trailer was bottoming out on the bumps. Keir airily informed him that we'd driven all the way from Sydney like that.



*Koonalda station house*

*photo Kevin Moore*

Having stocked up on beer and topped up the tank, we drove the final hundred km to Koonalda Station. The station was built by the Gurney family out of scavenged sleepers and corrugated iron, and was a major stopping point on the old Eyre Highway, a fact evidenced by the collection of derelict vehicles that decorate the immediate area. The owners would promise to organise their vehicles, the insurance companies would say "like hell". This would be of little significance to us, if it weren't for two things:

1. the Gurneys went broke after the Eyre highway was moved, and the station house is now available for people to stay; and

2. one of these cars was a Valiant.

We settled in and unpacked the gear and cleaned some of the accumulated dust out of the house. We noticed a few mouse holes in the kitchen, so we rigged up some rope to string up the food, and settled in to wait for Paul. Tiring of the wait, Keir said "Let's go out to the cave!" Phil and Kevin, having similarly short attention spans, readily agreed, so we got into Phil's car (now considerably taller) and drove off to the cave. It had rained recently, and there was standing water on the road, so Keir spent many happy minutes filming Phil splashing through mud.

Having reached the cave, there was little we could do without the key, so we said "Yes, that's the cave", and headed back to the station, where we were greeted by the Hosie-mobile and then by Paul himself. There being nothing much left of the day, we sat on the balcony with some cheese and beer, and made plans for the week's activities.

The plan was simple: A day or two to get the gear in, Phil climbs the lead, a day or two exploring the great unknown, a day or two to get the gear out, a day off in Eucla, and then off to see a few of the cool caves in WA that Paul wanted to show us. We'd organised some power tools for bolting the climb, and dry tubes to get all the gear through the sump, and, of course, rubber boats for navigating the delightful lakes, imaginatively named one, two and three. Since Kevin was going to be the one to have to organise a callout if we needed one, he was given Paul's CDMA phone, the number of the Eucla nurse, and, encouragingly, the information that he'd need to drive 90 km before he could expect any coverage.....

The build-up went as well as we could expect. On the first day, we got the gear into the cave as far as lake 2 and left, well satisfied with progress. Back at the station, Keir explored the wrecks, and returned with a glint in his eye and the information that he'd found the Valiant and it did indeed have booty! It was a model from the early 70s, which had left-hand threaded wheel nuts, and they would match the missing nuts on his trailer. Spanner in hand, he left to reclaim this precious loot.

On the second day, the gear had to be carried across the rockpile to lake 3, and this achieved, the divers would continue across the lake, through the sump, set up and start the climb. Meanwhile Kevin would return, and do some photography in the rest of the cave. As the dive lights disappeared into the distance, loud banging and scraping sounds echoed around the chamber. The first difficulty had been encountered – getting the 'Caving Zeppelin Vaughan-Taylor', Keir's extremely buoyant rubber boat, through the roof sniff was proving to be less than practical.



*Keir and Phil at the landing, kitting up  
video still Paul Hosie*



*The CZ Vaughan-Taylor in the roof sniff  
video still Paul Hosie*

**Phil:** May the Farce be with you: Keir and I were trying to haul a raft through the roof sniff while the raft just wanted to jam against the roof. The water's deep here and there's no ledges, so all we could do was swim, haul, curse, and try to sink the boat. It shouldn't have been that hard to get it to ride low; there were three complete sets of dive gear and a ton of climbing equipment on board. Just goes to show what forty dollars can get you at KMart. Paul could have helped us but he was having too much fun capturing all this on video, so the two of us had to persevere.

Beyond the roof sniff, there's one final stretch of lake in a huge dome chamber, then a tiny landing

next to the sump. We tied the boat up here and made it our dive platform for the rest of the trip. Kitting up, we finally got to have a look underwater. Below the waterline, the lake opens up underneath the west wall of the dome into a huge annex. This is very wide and drops steeply down to about 25 metres. At this point there's a short squeeze and then a steep ascent to the surface of the final lake, and the end of the known cave.



*Phil gracefully dives through the squeeze  
video still Paul Hosie*

OK, this was fine and easy for the other two – Keir and Paul are two of the more experienced cave divers in the country. But for me it was new, exciting and a little bit daunting. Of course, the others were carrying all the climbing gear through in neutrally-buoyant PVC pipes while I had almost no gear to carry, but I was still pretty clumsy. Paul made sure to capture my first trip through the squeeze on video, with me twisting around, knocking into things and generally making a fool of myself.

The final lake isn't particularly large, with virtually no shoreline and no way on at water level. The roof rises a very long way into a classic Nul-larbor dome, disappearing out of sight over the top of a pitch opposite to the direction of the sump. The pitch was first attempted by Andrew Nelson, Paul H. and Paul Boler, back in January 2005. They managed to get to a ledge about 6 metres up, left a couple of bolts and carabiners in place and pulled their rope down after them. This time, Paul had bought a stack of aid gear, etriers and bolts and we were going to use siege tactics to climb the pitch double rope with slings and quick draws bolted to the wall.

I estimated the pitch to be about 30 metres, looking from the bottom. That shouldn't be such a huge undertaking, but in this cave there were a couple of things stacked against us. Firstly, the bedrock is very soft limestone, altered by salt water and other corrosive processes into, basically, wet chalk. It's impossible to get natural protection in this and ordinary 8mm bolt casings would be just as dangerous. Paul had brought massive ramset bolts and two powerful drills to produce anchor points which might stay put under the etriers and during abseiling. Secondly, where the pitch changed from vertical to a steep slope we could see many boulders the size of an overloaded Forester just waiting to roll down on us. Simply finding a route up to the top that avoided the boulders was a challenge.

After placing a couple of bolts for a belay I climbed up to the existing bolts and clipped in. From this point I was on belay, and the belayer (first up it was Keir, I believe) had to hang around for an age half in the water under a protective roof as the rocks came whistling down from above. Shuffling to the left along the ledge, I could see a sloping gulley route up to the right for twenty metres or so followed by a two metre overhang. All routes on either side led to the Boulders of Doom, but the thought of hanging from a roof made of wet chalk scared me badly.

Having seen enough for starters, I abseiled off new carabiners – the old carabiners were corroded shut after eight months in the cave. We left the climbing gear out of the water, although I doubted any alloy would survive long in the cave, and made our way back to the boat. Of course, we had to take our tanks out each night for re-filling, but we could leave the other dive gear on the shore or in the boat.



*Keir and Phil kitting up for the climb  
video still Paul Hosie*

**Kevin:** Meanwhile, Kevin had returned over the rockpile to lake 2, boarded the CC Hosie, and holed it while attempting to land at the other side. This would mean portaging the CC Moore, rather than having a raft for each lake, and also meant that Kevin would have to wait for the others at lake 2, rather than heading to the surface. Still, there was time for photography before the others returned, and the crime confessed. Paul, it seems, is a very forgiving chap, and Kevin was not keel-hauled, or forced to wade across lake 1.

Having made a small amount of progress on the climb, the lads were keen for the next day's activities. Kevin would help with the carry to lake 1, and continue photographing the cave, while the others went on and continued the climb.

There are a few things that had changed since our previous visits: one being that lake 1 is not as vile, or as deep, as it'd been on previous trips. So long as you are careful not to disturb the sediments, it can be negotiated in reasonable comfort, however its reduced depth makes it hard not to disturb the sediment. Another change in the cave is less pleasant to report. Despite extensive gating of the cave, there is graffiti in archaeologically significant parts of the cave that wasn't there in 2000. A section of the mesh near the entrance gate had been bent back, and rocks had been removed from the under the mesh nearby. We decided we'd do what we could to fix the gate before we left.

The lads on the climb were a little bit late this day, and the reason was apparent as soon as Phil removed his boot and poured out a mixture of water and blood: he had cut his foot inside the cave. Tomorrow was cancelled; we'd be visiting the Eucla nurse.

**Phil:** There's simply no way you can abseil or ascend on a single bolt in this rock. I knew that I'd have to leave enough time to put two bolts in wherever I decided to stop for the day. I started up, and found that the drilling was depressingly slow. The drill bit clogged in the chalk and the hole had to be cleared repeatedly. As soon as I started to place my first drill hole, I realized that it would take a significant amount of time to place any protection at all. The belayers got bored and scared at the same time as I seemed to make no progress for hours, and knock down piles of rocks doing it. Several metres and several hours later, we'd all had enough. I'd reached the point where the slope eased off a bit and went up to the right under the overhang. It was better to abseil from where I was because the next bit would take me back over the top of the belayers.



*Rockfall onto the belay  
video still Paul Hosie*

Back at water level, I got out of my caving gear and was getting changed into the wetsuit. I was knee-deep in the water and bare-foot, walking across to where my booties were, when I felt my foot slam into a rock. The edge of this rock was so sharp that at first I didn't even feel the cut. Then a burst of red stained the water and I lifted my foot to find that the pad behind my big toe was sliced almost to the bone. Urk. I sat on the rock for a while trying to slow the blood with direct pressure, but it wasn't working, and Paul eventually got tired of me feeling sorry for myself. "Come on mate, we've got to go." And of course we did, since Keir was already gone through the sump before my accident and must be getting very worried by now. I put the wetsuit booties on and could immediately feel my



*Keir on belay  
video still Paul Hosie*

foot sloshing around inside, but there really wasn't anything we could do except dive back through and walk out of the cave.

**Kevin:** The Eucla nurse is a fine woman, with a practical outlook that is conspicuously lacking among insurance companies and litigation lawyers. She patched Phil up with Steri-strips and Duoderm, gave us some supplies to do it for ourselves, and told Phil to keep it dry for a week or so. On being informed that this probably wasn't how things were going to be, she gave Phil some rubber gloves to at least try to keep it dry and told him to have at least one day off.

Having come to town, we took advantage of the many facilities – a laundry, showers and a cafe selling a decent steak sandwich, souvenirs and beer. We went down to the old telegraph station before heading back to Koonalda. The next day, Keir and Paul would have to do the climb by themselves while Kevin and Phil spent the day exploring the rest of the cave.



*Injured Phil  
photo Kevin Moore*

another four bolts placed me about two metres below a couple of big boulders which seemed to be the top of the climb! I tried to stand up in the etriers to see what I could see and realized that I no longer had the strength to do even that. Time to go, even though we were so close. Someone with more fitness than me would have finished the climb on this day. The rock here was so soft that my first attempt to place an abseil bolt failed completely, with the ramset just turning inside the hole when I tightened the nut. By the time I got a belay together I was exhausted, scared and wanting to get out.

**Kevin:** Kevin spent the day on the surface, wandering around the area and paying a visit to Koonalda International airport, among other attractions. Koonalda International airport consists of a couple of rows of tires in a more or less flat area of scrub, riddled with rabbit warrens. He got a lift back to the station with a couple of locals. There were a couple of travelers who had also turned up, looking for somewhere to stay; the stockman's hut was free of

The whole day was available for playing with the digital SLR. After taking about as many photographs as they could think of, Kevin and Phil decided to see what they could do about the gate, and set about finding the biggest gibbers they could to fill the gap that the illegal cavers had made. It appeared that the pirates had stopped when they encountered the dessicated carcass of a sheep, as that formed the base of the squeeze under the gate.

After the meagre progress of the day, Keir and Paul realized that Phil's leading hadn't been as slow as it seemed, and having reached an overhang, Phil's services would be required, injury or no. Kevin, on the other hand, was taking the day off, having run out of Kevin-accessible cave.

**Phil:** The idea of keeping my foot dry with a piece of latex glove just wasn't going to fly, so Keir sorted out a dressing to cover the toe and off we went. The belay underneath the overhang represented a sharp change in direction for the rope and there was already plenty of drag for both ropes, so I had to put a long sling on each bolt and then start reaching for the roof. The first two bolts were across to the left and close to the wall, but after that I had to place two bolts horizontally out under the roof. This was really really tiring, since I was hanging from a bolt by the short cowstail with my feet pushed out one way in the etriers while my arm was out over my head in the other direction holding the drill. The things we do....

The bolts at this point needed to hold, since any failure would probably make all the bolts on the roof fail and give me a four metre pendulum underneath the long slings into the wall. I was a happy climber when I got a bolt into the wall just above the overhang and finally got my legs upright. From here,

caving crap, so they took over that for the night and left us with some carrots and onions that would be contraband at the border crossing.

The next day was the scheduled day off in Eucla and, Phil being knackered from his exertions on the overhang, we took it. It was a chance to get clean, a chance to buy the Eucla Golf Club T-shirt, and Paul knows the proprietor at the Eucla cafe, which has a restaurant at night. Paul was also having issues with the video light, and had melted the insulation. The insulation problem was sorted with the aid of some grout, and we spent the afternoon playing on the sand dunes before returning for dinner at the restaurant.

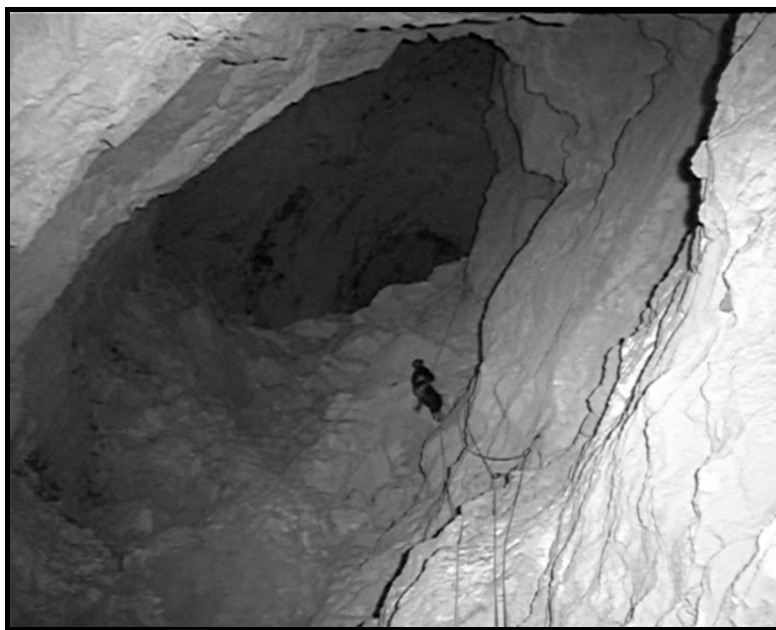
Our energies restored, the final push was on for Phil and Paul. Keir was feeling guilty about the fact that Kevin hadn't been for a swim in the cave and offered to take him to the open-water-safe parts of the cave. This offer was gratefully accepted, and so Kevin was able to spend a happy hour diving around lake 3, looking at various bits of cave, while Keir floated above like a little angel [*Little? ed.*] albeit an angel that had forgotten his snorkel and had to lift his head from time to time to take a breath.

While Keir and Kevin were splashing about in lake 3, Phil and Paul were attending to more serious matters.

**Phil:** Ascending to the previous high point, I realized that the very soft rock continued all the way over the top. I decided to give up on placing bolts and free climb the last bit. Two metres above the dodgy double-bolt belay, I stuck my head up between two big boulders and looked at the top of the chamber. What I saw was a dome-shaped chamber 30 m across, with crumbling white walls, similar in form to the rest of the cave. The rocks I was balancing against – which were moving ever so slightly when I tried to climb over them – were at the bottom of a rockpile which rose steeply away to the back of the chamber. The roof came down and met the top of the boulder slope at the back wall. There was no air movement and no break in the slope or the walls to indicate a hole anywhere. Curses, foiled again!



*Kevin waits on-shore for the divers  
video still Paul Hosie*



*Abseiling below the overhang  
video still Paul Hosie*

I took a good look around the chamber but I couldn't climb the slope without getting off rope and the entire slope looked unstable. One more attempt to get onto the slope and I almost rolled off the edge, along with the big boulder that balanced there. That was enough for me – I had no confidence at all that the bolts below me would survive a fall from 2m above. I called out the news to Paul and set about de-rigging the pitch.

**Kevin:** After the day's disappointments, enthusiasm for further caving was running low, as was time; we'd have at most a day for Paul's cool caves in WA, so we decided to give them a miss this time, and visit on another occasion. There was still the problem of getting all of the gear out of the cave.

Sigh.

A day of getting the dive gear out of the cave. The joy was only increased by the land-lubber, who managed to sink another cave canoe, leaving only the CZ Vaughan-Taylor. Being made of sterner stuff, the CZ Vaughan-Taylor proved up

to the task of floating all of the gear across the lakes, so all was well. By early afternoon, all the gear was out of the cave, and the cleaning started. Much of the gear used for the climb turned out to have corroded and was useful only for pack-hauling. The demised canoes were given a suitable funeral, and we scraped together some sort of dinner from what the mice had left us. The mice, by now, had figured out how to tight-rope walk across our ropes and were providing us with serious competition.

It had been a great trip and it was over; Keir had started to worry about how many brownie points he was losing with Sue, but Phil was still keen to do the side trip to the Gawler Ranges. All in all, it had been a great two weeks. We may not have found boundless passage into the great unknown, but we had a hell of a good time trying. Many thanks to Paul Hosie for organising the permits and for his excellent company throughout the exploration.



*Keir and Paul at Koonalda station*

*photo Kevin Moore*