

Niggly Cave and Growling Swallet Connected

(and Australian cave depth record extended... a bit)

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THE LURE of the Junee-Florentine 'master cave' and the dream of filling in the gaps and thus joining the known pieces has been driving Tasmanian cavers for decades.

Significant progress has been made in the last twelve months over a number of multi-day trips and the result is a slightly deeper deepest cave in Australia and a much longer and connected Growling Swallet-Niggly Cave system.

Neither Growling Swallet nor Niggly Cave had grown much in the decades since their main periods of expansion (1980s and 1990s respectively).

Growling twitched a bit when the familiar Eberhard name added almost 500 m in the Living Fossils extension to Growling in 2013-14. It twitched a bit more when Andreas Klocker managed to cobble together enough souls foolhardy enough to drag dive gear for a few pokes in the Dreamtime Sump in 2013-14, resulting in another ~500 m of (mostly) underwater passage (refer to Fordyce (2018) for background on this phase and the project in general). This twitch was enough to redirect efforts to the Niggly side.

It took until mid-2016 before things really started happening in Niggly. On a trip in July of that year a way down to the main stream, and ultimately an upstream sump, was discovered off the western end of the Mt Niggly basal chamber; the main stream continuation from the 1990s, Mother of God, is downstream to the east.

This was a significant development and predictions of a quick and easy underwater connection were prematurely banded about. The subsequently collected survey data hinted otherwise but it was the best lead available so a dive was planned.

Getting diving gear to the bottom of Niggly is no easy feat. Just the walk up the hill from the road to the entrance is a major pain in the butt.



Base camp in Mt Niggly Chamber

The hundreds of metres of snaggy tight meanders of Tigertooth Passage in the upper levels are probably the most brutal obstacle but the finale is over 250 m of vertical shafts. It was clear that camping would be required and pretty much all subsequent

push trips (diving and non-diving) have involved at least one night underground and up to three.

The new sump, DIY (Dig It Yourself) Sump was passed after two attempts by Sandy Varin and Stephen Fordyce. Leads in

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the dry chamber (Business Class Lounge) beyond the sump looked desperate and it was practically written off.

The survey indicated it was almost certainly heading for Porcupine Pot (and maybe the Living Fossils/Coelacanth area in Growling) and not the target Dreamtime Sump. Efforts were redirected to finding the elusive Dreamtime Sump resurgence.

Anecdotal evidence from the original Growling-Niggly dye trace from the 1990s and a more recent Bunyips Lair-Niggly dye trace suggested the junction we sought was located somewhere between the Mt Niggly area and the start of Mother of God.

Some targeted dye tracing confirmed this and a team of particularly foolhardy cavers tasked themselves with pushing rock fall 'passage' at stream level in that area (Ninja Streamway). By all accounts every metre won in this section was hard work with even a few 'Was the water level this high when we came in?' moments.

In December 2018 a determined multi-day push in this area was rewarded with a breakthrough beyond the flood-prone rock fall into solid stream passage terminating in a delightful-looking sump (Pool of Promise) heading in precisely the right direction for a Dreamtime connection and a bonus of wide open upper fossil passages to explore.

The bonus silver lining was the realisation of a simple bypass to the horrid Ninja Streamway once the survey data was entered back at camp which required only a modicum of digging.

The bypass transformed what would have been a truly horrendous dive trip commute into a walk in the park (for the non-divers, at least). That the bypass also involved a highly entertaining tyrolean beside a waterfall was just icing on the already silver-lined cake.

So the stage was set and expectations were high but the mega-bushfires and associated road closures over summer and autumn prevented a prompt return. The big day finally came on the evening of 23 May 2019.

Diver Stephen Fordyce was poked into the Pool of Promise and he returned over an hour and a half later with a grin; a ~200 m dive (with a short bit of dry passage) had been negotiated to locate the end of the line from his 2014 Dreamtime dive.

By connecting the two systems a bit of housekeeping was required on the 'longest and deepest caves' list. By taking the Niggly entrance as the highest point in the system and combining it with the deepest point in the Growling system (the bottom of the Dreamtime Sump), a few metres were added to the previous recorded depth for Niggly.



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Mt Niggly from Base Camp

It was all a bit academic and wanky; the main win was the physical connection (albeit via an underwater conduit, which is not much use to 'normal' cavers).

As with all cave survey data sets, there are multiple ways you can interpret them depending on your desired outcome (lies, damn lies and statistics). The final number decided upon by those that delight in crunching the numbers is a total system depth of 397.7 m.

Yep, despite our best efforts we couldn't bring ourselves to fudge the data to breach the 400 m mark. It's all plus or minus significant error etc., and a bit of a pissing competition, but that's life.

A pre-prepared and distributed media release outlining the connection attempt

and hopeful depth record had been distributed before the trip, instigated by the combined needs of Fraser Johnston's voracious desire to get material and free advertising for his *Tartarus* Tasmania caving documentary and Stephen Fordyce's insatiable ego.

The result was spectacular, with enthusiastic coverage at local and national levels (TV and print). It was nice to see a cave diving story that didn't involve drownings or rescues for once, although I'm sure the events in Thailand played a major part in why this story was seized upon so eagerly.

As usual, it confirmed to all those who knew the facts behind the story just how hopeless the media are at interpreting even a short and carefully-worded media release.

My personal favourite was a local news-



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Stephen Fordyce commencing the connection dive in the Pool of Promise

reader proudly reading from the autocue how the trip had received financial support from *National Geographic* while the picture behind her face showed Steve wearing his *Australian Geographic* t-shirt. Thanks, by the way, to *Australian Geographic* for their support.

While the connection and the depth record were cool, it hasn't all just been about the divers (despite what they'll tell you). In the process of looking for sumps we've managed to make some spectacular dry breakthroughs.

A dry connection between Growling and Niggly isn't entirely off the cards. During the connection dive trip, and on two subsequent trips, a few kilometres of new dry passage have been explored to the south and west of 'old' Niggly.

Also, since the gear was in the cave anyway for the connection attempt, another look at the DIY Sump/Business Class Lounge area has provided a breakthrough in the Porcupine Pot direction too. The show isn't over yet.

Prior to 2013 Growling and Niggly were considered about 13 and 3 km long respectively. As of the end of July 2019 the combined system is in excess of 23.5 km. This rivals Exit Cave for title of Tasmania's longest cave.



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Personal hygiene can be a casualty of cave exploration — Gabriel Kinzler after a successful day of pushing

The Junee-Florentine karst area still has a lot of secrets to give; the down side is what it takes from those who wish to receive — mostly cartilage, blood, sweat and tears and even some friendships.

It has been a massive team effort over multiple years and there are too many names to list individually (I'd only cock it up and miss someone off). If you've been on one or many of the trips since ~2014

then well done, cheers and thanks, but don't pat yourself on the back and retire just yet as there are still more leads to survey and tanks to cart.

REFERENCE

Fordyce, S. 2018 JF36 Growling Swallet: The Niggly Connection Project Phase 1. *Caves Australia* 203: 17-20.

