

Another hour had been spent on this exercise and I decided I didn't want to get back into clothes to walk to the sinks further up the valley, and change again to do them. My fingers were numb from the cold, and Ric arrived as I was changing out of my wetsuit, so that seemed a good enough reason to call it quits for the day.

Ric had taken 3 hours to arrive at camp. He had done a lot of careful observation of the track on his way in.

We had soup, tried to not be eaten alive by mosquitoes, and then headed back to the car, using the new bridge across the river as we left Camp Gumboot.

*[A summary of cave numbers and names for this section of the D'Entrecasteaux River was published in SS347:14 – Ed.]*

---

## **IB-14 Exit Cave – D'Entrecasteaux River Sump: Dive 2**

**Janine McKinnon**

**3 March 2013**

**Party:** Chris Coxson, Janine McKinnon (diver), Ric Tunney

The water was an impenetrable black as I swam down ... 2 m, 3 m, 4 m deep and still black all around. This was a good sign. At 4.7 m deep I found the ground, but all was still black ahead of me. Even better. A body length ahead, and rock loomed out of the dark at me half a metre away, but there was space underneath to fit through quite easily.

I swam under the gap, laying line as I went, and found myself in booming passage ... well, by booming I mean that it was all black around me, so I had more than enough room to swim along, laying line, and tying it off, periodically.

I was in the main D'Entrecasteaux River passage. FINALLY.

Thus my second trip into Exit Cave to try to make the connection from the inside sump of the D'Entrecasteaux River to the outside sink was finally making progress.

The way on was in the middle of the sump pond, in the floor. Not surprising it had taken a while to find with no current to see, and water you couldn't see through, and walls all black. Sneaky damn cave.

The first attempt had been a little over a week earlier, and had failed dismally. After two hours scouring the walls and side passages I had failed to find any significant passage. We (Ric and I) had surmised that there must be a reasonably large (human-sized) passage taking the water, as the flow was often very high. We were fairly confident that percolation and flow between cracks and rocks wouldn't allow the required volumes of water to get through in floods. I was starting to question this theory. Another attempt was still worthwhile though, so back we had come, with Chris helping carry the gear this time.

The water level was a couple of centimetres higher at the cave entrance and a marginally higher flow was visible at the sump. It was still very, very slight but at least faint movement of "things" on the water could be seen. This surely must help.

I was in the water a bit faster today, at 11:40 am. We had a sketch map that Ric had found in the archive from the 1994 SSS trip, where Bruce Stewart had reputedly dived here. This is the only previous attempt. Bruce is reported as going 5 m along a passage and being stopped by a restriction and a tree. The passage he started into is marked as being at the end of the middle finger passage. I had scoured that area last trip, I thought, but as visibility is so bad and the rock so black, I thought maybe I had missed something. So I started again today in that area. There was absolutely, definitely, nothing there. The pond was quite shallow (<2 m) here, so it was quite easy to see all the walls. There was absolutely no water movement either. I was a bit perplexed. Oh well, I would just go looking elsewhere. Again. Strike 1.

Last trip I had only had a cursory look at the left hand passage (all directions facing upstream – the way I was trying to swim), and Ric thought he could see slight movement on the surface there, so I tied my line into the sitting rock and started down to the floor of this finger passage. It was 4 m deep and I went 7.5 m before running into a terminal wall. There was a narrow ledge at shallower depth and I did a jump from my main line along that. I only managed to crawl two body lengths, in very tight, wide passage (with my head turned sideways to fit my helmet) when this became too small to fit further. There was no discernable current anywhere in this passage (ledge, really). I backed out and returned to the start, checking both walls for any prospects as I went. Strike 2.

Ric & I discussed. I had now been searching for almost an hour. This was not looking good but we still had some walls to investigate. Ric still thought he could see movement in front of the rock he was sitting on (my primary anchor point in the middle of the pond and at the start of the deeper bits).

I headed straight down to the bottom in front of the rock and found a gap between rocks. It was just big enough to fit through, and was a vertical slot. I dropped in, and managed to squirm almost a body length into a very small passage heading off horizontally. Silt, friable rock and muck rained down, yet again. I was seriously hoping this was not the way. I really didn't want to go further here. Luckily it wasn't, so back up I went. Strike 3.

Ric pointed a few metres in front of me. Such an optimistic boy, I thought. Oh well, try and try again.

I started down ... and you have reached the start of this story.

I continued forward. The passage stayed a good size, with only once narrowing to brush my shoulders. This was looking good. I guessed I had swum at least 50 m when the passage started to rise quite rapidly. I was just starting to think I would reach a rockfall when I surfaced, into air-filled passage. Big passage. Woohoo. I have called the submerged passage Sanguine Expectation, as it certainly fits Ric's optimistic attitude to today's endeavours (I'm not too sure about mine).

I tied my line off to a large boulder in the passage floor and cut it. I was looking down a chamber at least 20 m long (probably more), the same width as the passage I had left Ric and Chris in, and about as high. I could see formations in the roof at the end of the passage.

I was excited and keen to explore. However it had been some time since I left the others (maybe 15 minutes) and I would have to take my tanks off to walk around, and then put them back on again to dive back. This would certainly add another half hour. With no idea what was happening, the others would undoubtedly get very anxious, so I decided to return straight away, and explore on the next trip. This chamber I've called Never Say Die, for two reasons ... perseverance and tradition.

The return swim was very easy, just following my line back, and took only 6 or 7 minutes. I counted the knots I had placed in the line at 2.5 m intervals. This is for distance measurement

when surveying (distos don't work too well underwater and playing with a tape measure alone does not bear thinking about). I counted 30 knots; so 75 m of underwater passage. I will do it again, more carefully, on the next trip.

An interesting observation on the return dive was what I think is an eel that I saw about half way back along the passage. It certainly looked like an eel to a non zoology bod like me. It was brown/green and about half a metre long. I have never seen one in Tasmania before, although they are found in some caves in Mt Gambier, but usually near or in daylight zones. Does it live there or has it come in temporarily? It is a long way from daylight where it is.

I had not taken the tanks out after last week's trip, and so I now only had half tanks of air. Whilst this was plenty for many trips through such an easy sump, I still decided to wait until I could get them filled to return to the chamber. Prudence never harmed a cave diver. I would have to come back with survey gear anyway.

We returned to the junction with Exit main passage and started sorting and packing gear; some to stay in the cave until next

week, the rest to go home for drying, cleaning and (tank) refilling.

Ric took Chris off for a short sight-seeing trip to the Ballroom whilst I changed and packed.

Kerryn and Darren arrived presently to see how we were going and offer to help carry gear back to the car. This was very thoughtful of them and we appreciated it.

They went looking for Ric and Chris, and they all returned shortly thereafter. Chris and Darren kindly carried the tanks out, and subsequently back to the cars.

We arrived back at the cars at 4:30 pm. What a civilised hour to finish.

We vowed to return next week to survey and explore.

And the passage I found had neither a particularly tight restriction nor a (necessarily) very thick tree to block the way as reported by Bruce Stewart.

To be continued ...

---

## **Mole Creek**

**Stephen Bunton**

**9-10 March 2013**

**Party:** Stephen and Kathy Bunton, Gordon and Jenny Fiander

This trip was a favour for friends of friends. The fact that Jenny and Gordon were poms and that they were friends of Geoff Batten seemed to ring alarm bells amongst some members but my attitude is that anyone who comes to Tasmania to go caving should be made welcome. Despite being in their late fifties, there was no doubt that they were competent even though they didn't want to do anything gung-ho, so Mole Creek seemed like a good option.

I arranged a permit for Marakoopa and Croesus Caves and said we'd meet them at Wet Cave campsite on Saturday afternoon about 5 pm. This arrangement worked. The weather was glorious. I can't remember ever sitting around at Mole Creek until after dark in just a t-shirt and shorts!

After dinner we grabbed our head torches and wellies (no fancy helmets, trogsuits or other paraphernalia), and wandered into Wet Cave. Despite the fact that Wet Cave is private property beyond 70 m into the cave, the sign to tell you to keep out and "entry by invitation only", is only 34 m from the entrance. We went a little beyond the fence to see if this was the norm. Judging by the plethora of footprints it seems everyone ignores the "keep out" sign.

Mole Creek itself was the lowest I have ever seen it, in fact all of Tasmania is the driest I have ever known. We headed over to Honeycomb Cave and could not even hear the stream gurgling in its lower levels. Again without trog-gear and just one torch each we managed a low impact traverse to the back entrances of the cave. Of interest was the fact that I found some of the number tags. In the past I have not bothered about these at Mole Creek but after our recent focus, almost obsession in the JF, I couldn't help but noticing them everywhere. I guess entering a cave in the dark when the reflectivity is certainly more obvious, is not something I do very often.

Next morning we headed over to Marakoopa, to the Rangers' complex and picked up the keys and permits. We headed into Marakoopa before the first tourist party at 10 am. We quickly

headed up and got into the stream on the left just before the stairs start climbing. Like most caves I have done in the past or at least a decade in the past, there was some aspect or two that I had forgotten. The first was the incredible number of glowworms that light the left wall (true right wall of the stream) as you ascend. The other was just how steep the streamway is and how much elevation you gain. This is a great trip and after a little interlude in the miniature lost world of a doline between Marakoopa 1 (MC-121 entrance) and Marakoopa 2 (MC-15), the cave continues albeit in a smaller version. Regularly spaced orange tapes seem to indicate that Marakoopa 2 has been surveyed recently.

On the way back, out and down Gordon took some photos, mostly of the pretties and we arrived just as the 1 pm tour was entering the cave; a few minutes too late really. The permit conditions say that we are supposed to make ourselves invisible to tourist parties but the tour guide didn't seem to mind. Standing just inside the gate we must have looked like fixtures; in fact one tourist asked how much they paid us to stand there!

From Marakoopa we relocated to the Mersey River and had lunch. On the way we noticed huge thunderheads over the length of the Great Western Tiers and sure enough a bit of rain prompted an early end to lunch. We headed into Croesus sort of overland – the track was well and truly overgrown and indistinct.

Inside the cave it was the usual race against time to see all the pretties before everyone gets cold feet and is too distracted to appreciate them. Nevertheless this is a fantastic cave! In fact both caves are fantastic and really I had forgotten that too.

When we returned to the entrance we found that it had rained heavily and the cold air had caused a dense cloud of fog to condense in the entrance. I had not seen this phenomenon here before and it was truly lovely. We then headed back to the Mole Creek Pub for a cultural experience in the Tassy Tiger public bar. Back at Wet Cave campsite it was raining again and we cooked in the half-completed information hut.

This was a very pleasant weekend and it reminded me of how good real caving is as opposed to just flogging around the scrub. We had over six hours underground in real caves, which was a bit of a novelty for me recently.