

an unlabelled pink tape on a cairn shortly before it). Whether it was the end or not was inconsequential – the distance we'd covered was a solid day's survey effort regardless so we started plotting our way out. We converted the old tape into a labelled survey station (MHC500) and also left labelled tapes at a few likely side passages/leads on the way (MHC517, 532, 551a and 572). We tied back into MHC398 and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

On the way back out we investigated the side lead at MHC345 (pink tape) from the 2018 trip. If it was short/not much then we'd survey it. An initially narrow vadose inlet was followed in small but comfortable/easy passage which was still going strongly after about 50+ m so we left it unsurveyed and not fully explored and continued out.



It's Mole Creek, so there had to be some pretties in there somewhere

Photos: Sarah Gilbert

I shot up the pitch first and used the time it took the other three to get up and derig it to do some solo surveying in the largish side passage heading off at station MHC171. It intersected a narrow ephemeral inlet which I followed 'upstream' till it got too vertical then surveyed my way back out to MHC171. I didn't survey it 'downstream' from the junction with the larger passage nor drop the ~7 m deep pit the passage traversed over the top of at one point. It is now quite clear to me that this is the same passage which Jeff Butt, Arthur Clarke, Darrell Carr and Lou Williams explored and surveyed in April 1985 (data from STC hard copy archives). Comparing their data and sketches with mine it looks like there's only 20 m or so of passage I didn't get to in the 'downstream' direction – pity I didn't finish it on the day but reassuring to know there isn't much else there. Plotting that data indicated that the nearby side lead Janice and I partly surveyed in 2018 (MHC172a-g series) isn't likely to connect to this Butt side passage, so we'll have to

go back in and force ourselves through the narrow bit to see where that one goes on a future trip.

We emerged to hot and windy conditions but thankfully no raging bushfires. The slog back up the short but steep hill was particularly unwelcome in those conditions, but we survived.

About 680 m of data collected on the day, bringing the total to date to just shy of 3 km. Hopefully one more decent trip will see all the remaining side passages tidied up and the underground component of the project deemed complete. Famous last words.



Partly calcified skeleton of a (reputed to be) ring-tailed possum

Photo: Sarah Gilbert

IB-14 Exit Cave: Mystery Creek Passage

9 January 2020

Janine McKinnon

Party: Karina Anders, Serena Benjamin, Rolan Eberhard, Alan Jackson, Gabriel Kinzler, Janine McKinnon

Riddle: When is a sump not a sump?

This story starts sometime early in 2019 when Chris Sharples and Rolan Eberhard were on a DPIPWE (no, I am not spelling the whole thing out) work trip of Rolan's, assessing parts of Exit Cave for management purposes, and so Rolan could play with some more string in there. They were up the far end of Mystery Creek Passage when they came upon a quite large pool of water at the end of the passage. It looked very inviting. After returning home they did some research, and called every old caver they could think of who had ever been into Exit, and discovered that no one seemed to either:

- a. know about this pool or
- b. have thought of pointing it out as having exploration potential if they had been there.

They thought it looked like a possible dive prospect for the fabled connection between Mystery Creek Cave and Exit Cave. It was in the right place and it was a large puddle of water. What more could you ask for? Yes, there is a major fault running through Marble Hill that interrupts all the known passages in both caves, but no dare, no win. So they brought me along on their next trip to assess the pool as a dive potential (SS 432, p. 19)

Several planned trips to dive the sump had failed to launch due to heavy rainfall, Sherpa unavailability and my out-of-state jaunts, but finally all the ducks were lined up. We had a good, fit team (apart from that old duck doing the dive, whom they couldn't leave behind), a lovely sunny day, and low water levels. VERY low water levels (there is a hint there for the answer to the riddle). We started the walk at 9:15 am, got to the cave at 10:30 am, and to the dive spot around midday. Everyone was still smiling and happy, despite the sometimes-athletic terrain and, in particular, the wet feet we had finally been unable to avoid (despite heroic efforts) only 5 minutes from the dive site.



The best option for base. A dry, convivial soup-drinking spot

Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

After site assessment, and soup and lunch, with help from the team gear was sorted and I got organised to dive. Now before we get too far along in the tale of the dive I might just go backwards a step or two to give you all an idea of the dive kit I had chosen to bring. This choice of gear was predicated upon discussions I had had with Rolan and Chris after our assessment trip. Potentially it is 300-odd metres from the pool to Mystery Creek Cave. That would take quite a while to swim, running line, and then to survey back from if all went spectacularly well.

I had suggested a reconnaissance dive with small, light, 3 litre tanks and a wetsuit. You can tell when you are in the company of screaming optimists when they tell you to bring all that would be needed to get all the way through.

So that's what I did. A drysuit (and undersuit), 7 litre tanks and 350 m of line on two reels. Plus all the other paraphernalia, which, in my defense, I had tried to keep as minimal as possible.



Rolan and Serena try not to get wet, unsuccessfully. It was very drippy. Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

Back at the dive site, I was ready to go. Gabriel was madly shooting video and stills of me looking as old and wrinkly as possible and the others just wanted me to get on with it so they could go back to the dry spot above the beach (where it was very drippy) and finish their soup. So on with it I got.

Now here is hint two to the riddle (which I'm sure you very smart caver-types have already solved). I swam straight down and headed along the floor looking for the passage-line. Visibility was about 20 cm in the still and very tannic water. After bumping off the wall a few times, and looking for the sparse tie-off points, I did a sharp left-hand turn and continued on. I surfaced after only about five or six minutes in a chamber, facing a wall of rockpile.



What the crew did to fill in time whilst I dived. A knot-tying session for Karina. Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

I called out a couple of times, in case there was an air connection back to the others but heard no response. I de-kitted and started looking around the small chamber for a way on. The rockpile looked pretty solid with only small gaps. I climbed up a boulder or two and poked about but didn't see any gaps a person could fit through. I was in a (very expensive) drysuit and didn't push super-hard though. I did a quick and very crappy sketch (I can't draw for nuts) of the chamber and then got my gear back on and surveyed out.

You will all be pleased to hear that the queen of the 30 m long sumps still has the touch. It was almost exactly that length.

When I got back to the beach no one was around (they showed such touching faith that I was going to get somewhere and take a lot of time) and I had to call to get their attention. Brief dive report given, most of the dive gear off, and Alan suggested that I swim along the surface of the pond and see how far the air space went. That sounded like a good plan. So I did. I swam to the far wall of the pool, turned left, and you have your answer to the riddle. I looked down a lake 25 m to the rockpile I had just left. I did swim the distance to be sure, and there was my line coming up out of the water. It would have made a good script for a Monty Python sketch. I laughed all the way back. It was that or cry.

I must say the team took the information in good spirits. I stayed in the water whilst I delivered it to save myself a potential instant lynching from the realisation that they had carried all that gear so far for nothing. When I realised that they weren't going to kill me in the emotion of the moment I thought it safe to get out.



Karina wasn't letting go of the wonderful knot she had tied

Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

It was about then that Serena asked if I could check out how hard it would be to collect the glowworms on the roof. She had been tasked by Chris Sharples, who had been tasked with the job by Dave Merritt, to collect glowworms from the 'sump' pool chamber, and also the entrance to the cave, to see how different they were from each other. She had discovered that the only glowworms in the sump chamber were in the roof over the pool. Enthusiasm for collecting them had rapidly waned. I swam out and could JUST touch them on the roof whilst floating, but when she said they wanted 10-20 specimens, and I would have to get them into the specimen jars whilst swimming, I quickly declared incompetence for the task.



Too many choices to pick one. Photo: Gabriel Kinzler

Anyway, we probably don't need to belabor this sad tale too much longer. I got a cup of soup (thanks Alan) whilst the others started packing around me (they were bored already), finished undressing (as Serena grabbed my undersuit and ground sheet and a few other things) and tried to be time-

efficient and laid-back at the same time. It didn't work very well.

We all waved goodbye to Serena, who wanted to get back to the entrance to collect her sample of glowworms from there before we got there, so as not to delay us on our trip home, and we started out around 4 pm (I think). We were about 10 minutes behind Serena. We were all trying to be laid-back, but only marginally successfully.

We took a slightly scenic route out, did a couple of detours, and were out of the cave by 6 pm. We were back at the cars at 7:45 pm.

It was a disappointing day for me, not sure about the others but they all said they enjoyed it and seemed happy, but at least we know what happens beyond that pool.

Answer: When it is a lake.

Moral of the tale: Never assess a potential sump dive in high water levels.

Postscript: There is some talk that a couple of us might go back with wetsuits soon, whilst the water levels are so low, and have a really hard look at the rockpile, and also do a "proper" dry cavers survey of that area and tie it into the last survey point in the passage. And Serena can get those glowworm samples.

Postscript to the postscript; We had one person from every age-decade from the 20's along. Two in their 30's. Not important, just saying.

JF-237 Niggly Cave

12 January 2020

Alan Jackson

Party: Alan Jackson, Anna Jackson

We needed to get out of the house and Niggly seemed as good a place as any. A late start and sedate pace made for a pleasant day. We went as far as the bottom of the 85 m pitch and did some p-hanging work on the way out, drilling lots of holes and filling a few of them with glue and stainless steel. Much more relaxing than any of the recent Niggly trips I've been on.



What the innovative do when they forget their pony-tail tie. This was very fortunate as the trip would have to be aborted with such vital gear forgotten. Photo: Alan Jackson