

JF229 Welcome Stranger

Sump dive

Janine McKinnon

26 November 2014

Cavers: Janine McKinnon, Jeffrey Prado & Ric Tunney.

I had read Nick's trip report from the early '80s (Hume 1981) and decided that this was worth another look-see. They had very basic gear and not much cave diving experience when this first attempt was made. Also, they are bigger guys than me, and things can change in a cave over 33 years. All good reasons to pop in and see for myself how it looked.

Ric was on hand to help, as usual, and Jeffrey was a visiting student from Tennessee, doing a 1 month project in Tassie, who was keen for a day out of Hobart. He was thus roped in to help get gear to the sump. I had inspected the sump about two months earlier, and whilst there was a large pile of sand and gravel at the start of the sump, I could see clear water under the wall that looked large enough to just fit through. I was hoping that it would enlarge once I got past the waterline at the wall.

As I dressed, Ric tied off the line around a boulder about 4 m back from the start of the dive, as the primary tie-off. He also put a silt stake into the gravel at the start of the sump, as a secondary tie-off. All geared up and ready to go, I grabbed the reel and I squeezed over the mound of gravels and under the wall.

I had visibility in the murky water, and could see somewhat less than 1 m. The width of the passage was extended arm, so 1.5-2 metres wide, as reported in Hume (1981). The height was significantly less than the "less than one metre" reported by Hume (1981). The walls are rock but the floor is silt and gravel and I could just fit. The floor sloped down at 30°.

Forward progress was very slow. I was pulling myself along the bottom and was pushed against the roof, so I was sliding along the gravel. The silt I stirred up soon enveloped me and I was in zero visibility. Flow was present but very low. The passage got tighter. I turned around at this point so I would be backing down, feet first. With the steepish angle and jammed body position, I felt more comfortable continuing feet first. I also thought it would be easier to retreat from such tight confines if I was already facing uphill. If it opened up then I could turn easily to head down again. So far this was not sounding like Nick's dive.

A few metres more of backing downhill with force, pushing against the gravel floor, and I could not move any further. I was jammed. The passage was still the same width as far as I could tell. My feet were still free to move, just nothing else. I put a silt stake in the floor, tied off and cut the line, and exited, counting knots as I went. My measurement of distance gained was 9 m. So I had not got as far as Nick had [30+ m - *Sub Ed.*] and the passage was much tighter than he had reported. He

would not have been able to fit through, I am sure.

There has been significant logging on the hillsides of the catchment for this cave in the intervening years. I postulate that this increased sedimentation has introduced more fill into the passages of the sump. It is quite a steep uphill slope to the dry passage, and the water flow is inadequate to push this sediment out of the sumped passages and into the "dry" cave to be washed downstream. This is why there is a mound at the start of the sump.

There is no prospect of further progress in this sump unless there is a massive flood event that washes out the gravels and silt considerably. This is not impossible, so I will keep an eye out (as long as I am diving) for such an event. I left the exploration line in situ.

Dive Summary

Depth: 4 m.

Dive time: 20 minutes.

Water temperature: 8°C.

Compass bearing into dive: 128° from magnetic north [Or that could be reported as 142.419° from grid north – *Ed.*].

Kit: 7 mm semi-dry suit. One Shearwater Petrel computer. Razor sidemount harness and MTD 9 kg mini-wing. 2 x 3 L tanks. Apeks cold water first and second stage regulators on short hoses. Mares fins (unnecessary). Alpha closed reel. Petzl helmet and Rude Nora cave/dive light. Two Nova backup lights mounted on helmet.

If you are interested in viewing a short video on this trip, it is on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/116629420>.

Reference

HUME, N. 1981. Florentine Valley – Welcome Stranger Sump Dive. *Speleo Spiel*, 168:5.

JF229 Welcome Stranger: sorting dive gear.

JF229 Welcome Stranger

26 November 2014

Philip Jackson

Cavers: Russel Fulton, Philip Jackson & Stewart Jackson.

We arrived at the entrance just as Janine, Ric and Jeffrey Prado had exited and locked the cave after bagging another sump. With the planets well aligned the gate was unlocked without too much cussin'. We wandered up the main streamway with a few minor diversions into the side passages. Stewart was impressed by the decorations, while Russel and I were

somewhat disturbed by the amount of straws that have completely disappeared. At the sump we encountered Janine's guideline into the sump. Sadly, despite our assurances Stewart couldn't be persuaded to take a deep breath and have a go. After a few moments pondering the sanity and fortitude of Tasmanian cave divers we ambled back to the entrance. By now the planets were fully misaligned and the gate required some inverted moonwalking and break dancing to relock.

Notwithstanding the loss of formation this was a blissful experience.