

Some Recent Explorations in WA

(The Jeff Butt Spirit Lives On...)

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IN 2007 I received the inaugural ASF Jeff Butt Award for Exploration, mostly for discoveries made out on the Nullarbor. Since receiving this award I have tried to honour the legacy and spirit of Jeff, in his determination to explore underground ... but this time a little bit closer to home!

So where do you look in WA when many areas have been thoroughly explored by WA clubs? I chose to focus my efforts on the WA coastal limestone north of Perth and early indications are that it promises to give many exciting discoveries for years to come.

The area of coastal limestone north of Perth between Ledge Point and Dongara has been divided by cavers into three karst regions: South Hill, Jurien and Eneabba. This stretch of coast is home to some fascinating hydrology, as a number of perennial lakes and rivers drain or disappear directly into the aeolian limestone before following tortuous subterranean paths to springs along the coast.

Some of the well known caves include Weelawadgi, Brown Bone, Tombstones and the Stockyard Gully system.

What is probably not as well known is that this same area is home to a stunning array of seasonal wildflowers which makes searching for new caves a very pleasurable experience. It was whilst on one of these cave hunting trips in October 2008, with the wildflowers in full bloom, that Peter Rattigan discovered a shallow sandy depression containing a blocked solution tube.

One month later, we excavated the solution tube and to our delight, the resultant hole was just large enough to squeeze down.

From the bottom of the solution tube 3 m below the surface, a short 2 m pitch dropped us straight down to the rocky floor of the cave's upper chamber. The 10 m wide chamber descends steeply to the west down a talus slope into a further two smaller chambers where at the bottom a small lead continues further downwards into as yet unexplored territory.

Although the calcite decoration is sparse,

the wide, flat brown soil floor at the eastern end of the upper chamber contains some very unusual deposits.

The best description for these formations would be mud stalagmites, though it would be interesting to know the actual mechanism of their formation, as it was in no way obvious to a simple cave diver.

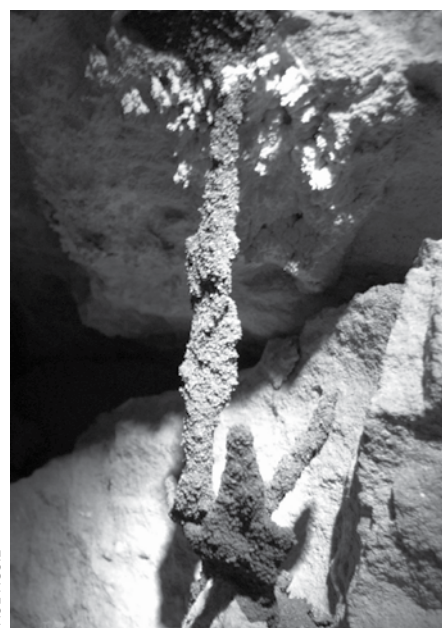
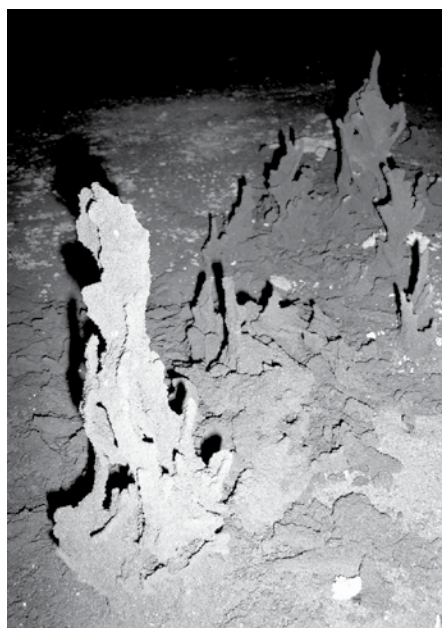
The height of the formations shown in the pictures here is a maximum of 150 mm and an average of 80 mm. Anyone wishing to help classify these features is welcome to email the author.

How many more caves there are to discover is a question that will surely remain unanswered for many years to come.

It is our intention to honour the memory of Jeff Butt with his inimitable enthusiasm for exploration and discovery and in so doing, hopefully inspire a new generation of Australian cavers.



Peter Rattigan commences the new cave dig



Two examples of soil stalagmites – the author is curious as to how these would form