

TRIP REPORTS

Discovery on the Roe Plain

A Joint CEGSA, CEGWA and CDAA trip to the Nullarbor and Roe Plains.

Friday 30 September

Richard "Harry" Harris and I (Ken Smith) left Adelaide early in rainy conditions. Travelling with us were Harry's daughter Millie and friend Emma who had joined CEGSA for their first trip to the Nullarbor.

We arrived at Nullarbor Roadhouse in time for dinner and were joined later in the evening by Grant Pearce and Brian Kakuk who had made an early start from Mt Gambier. Brian is famous for his exploration work in the underwater caves of the Bahamas¹. This was Brian's first trip to Australia. He had given two excellent presentations at the CDAA AGM in Melbourne and had been conducting side-mount diving training courses at Mt Gambier.

Saturday 1 October

After the usual viewing of the Nullarbor cliffs we arrived at Weebubbie cave at about lunchtime. We set up camp and rigged the cave entrance with two aluminium ladders and handlines. Then began the hard work of carrying all our diving gear to the waters edge.

Sunday 2 October

Brian and I made the first dive this morning. We dived down the railway tunnel and spent some time looking at the passages which lead from the chamber at 42m depth. I called the dive when I had used a third of my air. Brian returned with me, although I think he had plenty of air to carry on. Back at the main lake we found Millie and Emma enjoying a snorkel dive.

In the afternoon Brian and I had a look at the huge passage beyond the air dome. Brian had a good look at the side mount passage at the end before we turned the dive. Back at the Lake we found Harry and Grant preparing for a rebreather dive.

Monday 3 October

This was our last day of diving at Weebubbie. We all dived the lake as Brian took photographs. Then Grant and I did a circuit of the air dome tunnel with two 50 watt HID video lights. This showed the spectacular size and beauty of this passage as Grant captured the scene on his helmet-mounted video camera.

Tuesday 3 October

Today we broke camp and moved to the Roe Plain. We were particularly keen to show Brian the spectacular caves there. These caves are suitable for sidemounted cylinders only and Brian would be in his element here. The Roe plain track is rarely used and at times it was difficult to see the wheel tracks through the dense grass. This grass sheds seeds which consist of a sharp seed with a thin fibre tail. These covered the front and underside of the vehicles in a dense mat. We stopped frequently to remove the mat from critical areas around the brakes and exhaust. A puncture in Grants front tyre caused us further delay.

We arrived at the campsite after dark to find Paul Hosie (CEGSA, CEGWA) and Al Polini (CEGWA) already established with a welcoming fire.

Wednesday 5 October

Paul, Brian and I dived Olwolgin Cave while Grant, Harry, Al and the girls went to Burnabbie cave. Once again I was amazed by the complexity and variety of passages in Olwolgin cave.

Thursday 6 October

Paul, Brian and I had another spectacular dive in Olwolgin this morning. Afterwards Brian and I accompanied Paul to another water filled feature that Paul knew. Paul has spent many years investigating features on the Roe plain and this feature was due for a closer inspection. Paul entered the water with his low profile side-mounted 7 litre cylinders. I joked with Brian that Paul would probably come back saying he had discovered a new cave and laid all his line. A few minutes later Paul came back and said exactly that! He had passed a long tight and silty side-mount restriction to find new cave beyond. He had laid 90m of his line and his reel was empty.

That evening Paul and Al dived the new cave and found the passage continued and got bigger as they laid more line. There seemed to be multiple passages to choose from and they made the simple decision to swim towards the greatest amount of darkness. At a distance of 370m into the cave they

turned the dive on thirds. They returned to camp at about 9pm. Initially we thought they were joking when we heard their story.

Friday 7 October

Paul generously suggested that Brian and I continue the exploration of the new cave this morning. We took larger 12 litre cylinders and Brian was happy to let me enter the cave first so I would have a chance of seeing the restriction. I followed Paul's line vertically down through a rocky letterbox and into a low silty flattener. Progress through the flattener was slow with my belly close to the silt, but I could see enough to choose the highest section. At one point a rocky restriction from the roof requires a bit of wriggle to get through. After that the passage gets bigger and I got more excited as the visibility improved. Suddenly I was in big beautiful clear passage. I left my personal line marker on the line and swam on in amazement. The further I swam the more beautiful it became. Lots of side leads, beautiful sculpted limestone, and interesting curtains of tree roots. I arrived at the reel just as Brian caught up with me.

As planned Brian picked up the reel and we swam off into virgin passage. The passage was still big and beautiful when Brian ran out of line 120m later. I connected my line and took the lead. I laid the line as Brian expertly did the tie offs behind me. The passage pinched down in a few places but opened up again after a small window. At 600m into the cave I had used all my line, and had used close to a third of my air. The passage kept going but it was time to turn for home. We begin surveying out, but I found that my hands were trembling with excitement and progress was slow. Brian has surveyed a huge amount of new cave in the Bahamas so we agreed he would do the survey and I would lead out the cave. I swam steadily back and found that restriction was not so difficult in reverse and I was soon on dry land. Brian soon arrived and we shook hands at this exciting achievement. The passage where we laid line was later named the B Tunnel.

Later Brian said he had a moment of concern when he got back to the restriction. He could not see anything however he could feel the line moving and thought I might be stuck, however the movement soon stopped and Brian exited without a problem. Brian normally explores and surveys alone and the presence of a buddy on this dive had caused him some anxiety.

Later that day Harry and Grant continued the exploration from where Brian and I turned. The passage (B tunnel) kept going in the same direction but with some tighter restrictions than encountered before. They turned at a penetration of 800m, however the passage continued beyond.

Paul Hosie and Al Polini explored two major side passages to penetrations of 250m (D Tunnel) and 500m (C Tunnel). Both of these passages continued.



Ken Smith and Brian Kakuk after laying line in the "Un-named cave" on the Roe Plain.

Saturday 8 October

Brian and I dived the cave again today. Brian went in first and the plan was for him to explore the side passages and do his own thing as an experienced solo cave diver. I went in about 15 minutes after Brian and had to tackle the restriction in zero visibility. I couldn't handle the letterbox initially. I could feel the line but I kept hitting rock. On my final try before giving up I found I was moving forward and I was soon in the cave. I swam the main line (B Tunnel) to retrieve a reel and I could see Brian's exploration line leading off at one point. On my way back his line was going down a different passage. I swam slowly for home and was soon overtaken by Brian who showed me an empty reel. We agreed Brian would exit first and I swam slowly, enjoying the scenery and allowing some time to the silt to clear in the entrance. When I surfaced Brian was almost dancing with excitement. He had laid all his line in the biggest passage yet found in this cave, and it was still going.

This was the last dive of the trip, so we left knowing that we would be back to continue exploration of this fascinating new cave.

Brian said he was thinking of our late friend Agnes Milowka² as he was laying line in the new passage. We all agreed we would call this passage Ag's Dreamtime Passage in memory of Agnes. It is shown as the A tunnel on the map.

Sunday 9 October

We packed up and began the long drive home. We spent the night at Ceduna and arrived back in Adelaide on Monday 10th October.

28-30 October

Paul Hosie and Al Polini returned to the cave to continue exploration and survey all passages discovered so far. This CEGWA trip also included divers Craig Challen and Kim Halliday. They were greatly assisted above water by Mark Brown, Jeff Gibson and Christie Allen. Amazingly the B tunnel continued but soon became very tight. Al decided to wait as Paul checked what they thought would be the end of the cave. Paul passed the restriction to find one of the biggest rooms yet which he named Sanctum. It was approximately 80 metres long by 30m wide and 3m high with a floor depth of approx 5m. At the end of this chamber Paul had to turn at a penetration on 940m. However the cave appeared to continue.

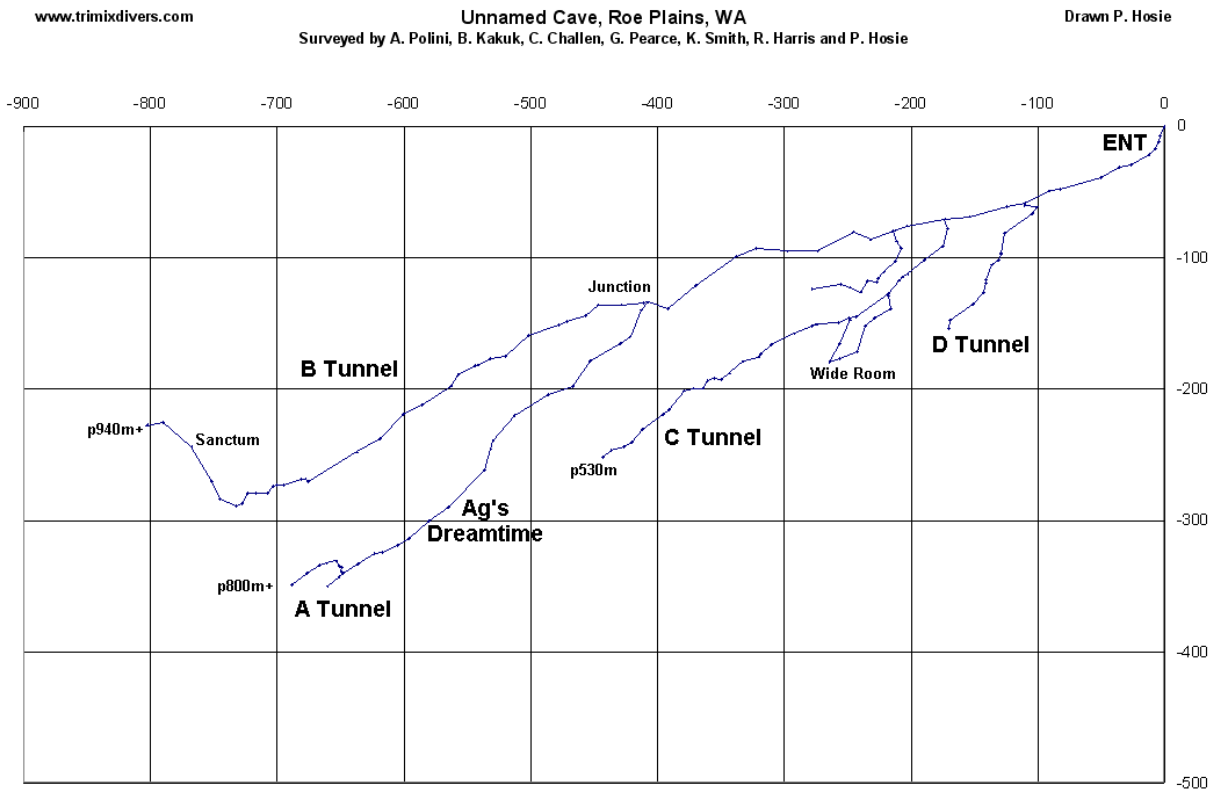
The side passages were also mapped further. The current map is included with this report.

NOTES

1 - Information on Brian Kakuk's work in the Bahamas can be seen at the following web sites. Brian is working hard with the Bahamian government to get a national park declared to protect the caves on Abaco island. All cavers should consider supporting this work.

www.bahamasunderground.com www.bahamascaves.com

2 - Agnes Milowka died in a cave diving accident in Tank Cave, Mt Gambier on February 27 2011.



Explored and Surveyed 6-8th and 28-30th October 2011

All distances in metres. North is top of page

Ken Smith.

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Past Trips from General Meetings

November 2011

Nil trips reported.

January 2012

Neville Skinner spent two weeks at the first two weeks of January at Mount Gambier where he visited many caves. Fossil cave (L81) has been badly damaged by digging activity.