

Speleograffiti

Volume 27 Number 2

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The Newsletter of the National University Caving Club (NUCC)

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Front Cover: Lachie Bailey abseiling in Waterfall of Moss Canyon, Blue Mountains, NSW. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Back Cover: Sump I in Argyle Hole, Bungonia National Park, NSW – with beautifully clear water and calcite rafts. Photo by Britt Meers.





Surface trogging at Wee Jasper, NSW. Photo by Chris Bradley.

NUCC Annual Report 2021

Despite multiple lockdowns and cave closures, NUCC maintained consistent attendance and involvement throughout the year. With a strong core of regular members, we remained one of the most active caving clubs in the country, with regular training and activities continuing despite not being allowed in most of our regularly visited caves.

Attendance at our weekly SRT rope training sessions has gone up by 31% from an average of 8.6 members per session in 2020 to 11.3 members in 2022, with our most busy session at 26 people. When the ACT lockdown was at its worst, the club hosted nine successful online trivia nights on Zoom in our normal Tuesday night SRT slot, with regular attendance. When restrictions were less harsh, we visited many great caving locations including Jenolan, Wee Jasper, Yarrangobilly, and a two-week Tasmania trip to Ida Bay and Junee-Florentine, plus multiple bushwalks and canyons.

Overall, the year was a great success for the club, demonstrating resilience and a strong sense of community under the challenging circumstances of bushfire-torn and locked-down Australia.

–Andy Waddell, 2021 NUCC President

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Lachie Bailey and Austin Zerk traversing the surface of Cooleman Plains. Photo by Britt Meers.

Trip reports



Yabba Falls Reccie

3 May 2021

Lachie Bailey

Participant: Lachie Bailey

Being back up in Queensland gave me a chance to do a reccie trip to support NUCC's planned Queensland canyoning adventures. I had a tip-off from Oxana about Yabba Falls¹, which apparently when combined with the downstream Baiyambora were south-east Queensland's answer to Bungonia gorge (Oxana's words, not mine). Anyway various tidbits gleaned off the internet suggested a few interesting features, so I stole my family 4WD for the day to go investigate. The 4WD turned out to be quite necessary – I'm not sure I could have managed the road from Borumba Dam without low range!

Access and land tenure is a little bit suspicious in the area, so I parked on the edge of Wrattens National Park, and walked out along the boundary firetrail. Even so, I'd veered off into land marked on the topo as a 'recreational area', so I followed the faint track from the lookout around towards the falls. This, as faint tracks usually do, degenerated into a vague footpad, and eventually some mild bush-bashing, but was generally ok.

It certainly got me to the top of the falls ok, which is still in the 'recreation area' that may or may not be private property. Certainly if you tried approaching Yabba Falls along any of the cleared ridges, you'd be on Old Yabba Station, although following the small creek that drains the western half of this 'recreation area' north of Yabba Falls might be ok. Following Yabba Ck downstream from Kingaham Road would probably also be legal, although I suspect you'd be swimming or fighting heavy scrub most of the way.

Anyway, despite the potentially dubious legality of my presence here, Yabba Falls are gorgeous. I found a nice set of bolts to abseil off, and got a great view of the pitches. It'd be a fantastic line, following the Falls down and into the Primaeval Forest – a big grove of old growth Hoop Pine (*Araucaria cunninghamii*) that the early loggers never felled because of its remoteness. Impressed, and excited by the idea of another potential canyon north of Brisbane (as a resident of Maleny, I'm somewhat miffed that most of the well known Queensland canyons are down south), and turned around to head back.

At around this point, I decided to try a different route back, using the obvious ridge that'd take me right back to the road. This was a Bad Idea! The ridge was disgustingly overgrown in lantana, to the point I basically vanished into a sea of the stuff. After a bit of miserable flogging through it, I emerged dispirited on the road, with all thoughts of checking out Kingaham Creek to the north long gone.

Dejectedly, I drove off, pausing to send Oxana and Corey photos (Corey was guilty by association) of the vile mess they'd gotten me into. On the positive side, Kingaham Road is in great nick, and you could get a 2WD in from the Kilcoy-Murgon Road, no trouble.

¹ Editor's note: NUCC had planned to run a canyoning trip to southeast Queensland later in the year, and Ian Stehbins (who had first shown myself and a group of others Yabba Falls, and campaigned to have the area included in the National Park boundary) had agreed to take us to the canyon. This trip was subsequently put on hold thanks to COVID. In the meantime, Lachie decided to explore the area while visiting family in Queensland.



Top and right: the view down from the first drop of Yabba Falls. Centre left: looking to the top of the first drop. Bottom left: the pair of bolts on the first drop. Photos by Lachie Bailey.

Bungonia CRS Filming

8 May 2021

Andy Waddell

NUCC participant: Andy Waddell

Watch the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/nswcaverescue/posts/1678145462381270>

Alan Green put an advertisement on the NUCC Facebook page looking for anyone interested in helping film a video for the NSW Cave Rescue Squad (CRS). After having much fun filming with Alan on previous trips, and curious to see how the CRS operates, I was quick to put my hand up. Only one person was needed, so I was the only representative from NUCC. I was briefed very little before the trip. All I knew was that I needed to take vertical caving gear. The plan was for me to head up on the Saturday as a day trip, and others would stay for the whole weekend.

On the Saturday morning, after bumping through some enormous potholes on Mountain Ash Road where road work had been followed by very heavy rain a few days before, I arrived bright and early at the carpark for Blowfly Cave. There were a couple of other cars there, and people

lingering, but I hardly knew anyone – I had only briefly met Al Warild and Allie Fenton in Tasmania. I introduced myself and began to meet the team. We suited up and walked over to the cave to start rigging the entrances. While this was happening, and while we waited for Alan to arrive (with all of the camera gear), it was a great opportunity to have a chat with the CRS members and learn a little more about what they do. Eventually Alan Green and Keir Vaughan-Taylor arrived, having driven all the way up from Sydney since 6am. It was good to catch up and learn the latest in matters such as the road into Jenolan, and Keir's recent electric water pump purchase for Mount Fairy.

Alan distributed cameras to Keir and myself, before gathering in a central location for Brian Evans to give us the official brief of what we



The stretcher on the Tyrolean traverse – a screenshot from the video linked above.

would be doing. After the brief we entered through B51 with all the gear to start filming from the bottom (right before a small rock pile and small squeeze). Filming started with communications. Operating a Michie phone at the base station, we got in touch with Al on the surface and ran through a couple of takes of the CRS communication

protocol. Then we put Tina Willmore in the stretcher and started to feed her through the small tunnel-passage. The idea was to film the sections of the cave that demonstrate the skills of cave rescue, and why they differ from other rescue services – the ability to operate effectively

within challenging areas such as squeezes or underground pitches. Filming through the small tunnel took about an hour, which was an unfortunately long time for Tina who was less pleased with her placement! After getting some good camera angles, Alan, Keir and I, who were filming, repositioned for the first vertical pitch. This pitch would demonstrate a difficult manoeuvre of switching the stretcher from vertical to horizontal, as well as the hauling technique using pulleys and someone prusiking as a counterweight.

The next challenging location to send the stretcher through was a tiny hole in the ceiling of the tube, that would require very accurate suspension of the stretcher in mid-air so as to not injure the casualty. I positioned myself above this hole and got ready to film, with my legs jammed into a tight section of rock so that I wouldn't fall down the hole. I lost feeling in my legs very quickly, which made it hard to keep myself suspended in the rock without sliding downwards, using my arms only. Eventually when the stretcher did arrive, I shot some great footage of Tina coming through the small hole. The manoeuvre took a few attempts as it was

difficult to send Tina through without jamming her into the rock. The team functioned well and proceeded to lift Tina out of the hole and most of the way up the entrance pitch before lowering her again and packing up this side of the cave. It took a while to regain feeling in my legs.

Having only taken a few hours underground, we

were in good time and decided to film some more. We went into B16 (the other entrance of Blowfly Cave that we had rigged earlier in the morning), to film a Tyrolean. This time Allie hopped in the stretcher just below the Dragon's Teeth, which was daring given the drop below

and the very small space provided by the cave for her entrance into the stretcher. This manoeuvre was especially technical and looked great on camera, as the team lowered her along the ceiling above a large room, and then down through a tight space, to the bottom of the entrance pitches. After filming this we put our packs on and headed back out of the cave. It was just getting dark when we surfaced.

We headed back to the Bungonia campground where I stayed for a little while to have a chat. Alan kindly offered me a beer and some dinner. The others continued to setup their tents as I said thanks and goodbye, beginning my return journey to Canberra in the dark. On the Sunday, the others did some above-ground filming and interviewed Brian. I was lucky to be home to celebrate Mother's Day.

The film was edited and produced by Alan and posted on the NSW Cave Rescue Squad Facebook page. I would highly recommend watching the short video as it gives a taste of what CRS does. It is also exciting to watch the stretcher traverse through the awkward squeezes that it did.



Manoeuvring the stretcher – another screenshot from the video.



Lewis looking out over the view from the top of P7 in Windows Canyon, back towards our cars and tents in the Wolgan Valley. Photo by Penny Sze.

Dry Canyoning from the Wolgan River

8–9 May 2021

Oxana Repina

Participants: Corey Hanrahan, Darcii Jean, Josh Coates, Lewis Russell,
Oxana Repina, Penny Sze (MSS), Tali de Mestre

Windows Canyon

I started with one set of coordinates from the Jamieson guide for Windows Canyon and nothing at all for Hole-in-the-Rock save a brief and intriguing description of a couple of pitches and the fact that it was ‘the next canyon over’ from Windows. After several hours trawling in search of obscure trip reports online, I had expanded this to a reasonable idea of the routes in and out, rough coordinates for the location of

Hole-in-the-Rock, and at least a vague idea of the number and size of the pitches in both. Good enough.

We had initially planned to camp at Barcoo Swamp and access these canyons via the Tiger Snake track, but I read that the usual access point for Windows was from the Wolgan Road and convinced everyone that we should camp at

Newnes Campground instead. Shortly after everyone had booked and paid the campground fee, I noticed that someone had commented online that the usual route to Windows had suffered badly in the floods and fires and was choked with a head-high, furry, smelly plant that looked much like a weed but was apparently a native (*Calomeria amaranthoides*, the incense plant). I nervously wondered if we'd made a terrible mistake.

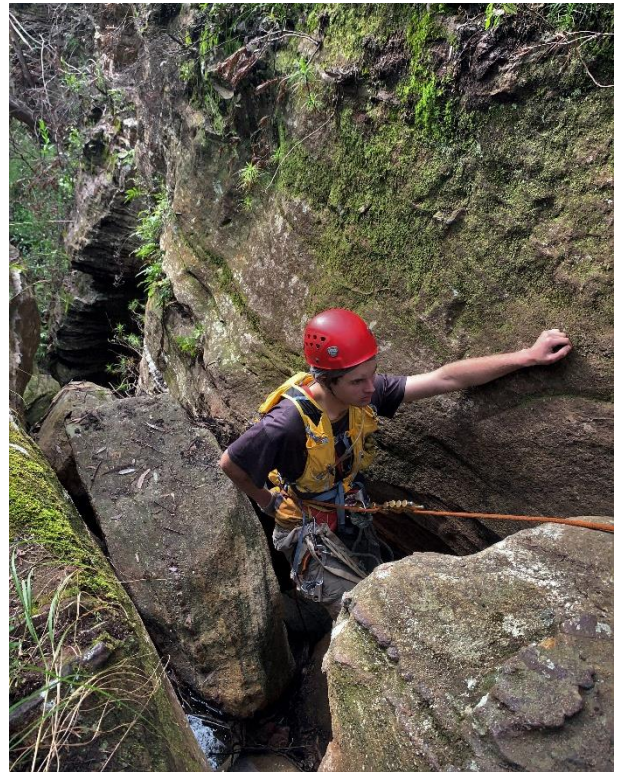
In fact, while we would indeed find the route choked with head-high smelly weed-like plants, camping at Newnes proved to be outstanding and highly regarded by everybody. While Barcoo Swamp is a non-descript foggy hollow in the middle of some non-descript woodland (not truly a swamp but fairly close to it), Newnes Campground is a beautiful wide clearing cradled by the Wolgan River on one side and the sheer side of the Newnes Plateau rearing abruptly on the other, which the sunrise hits first thing in the morning as kangaroos graze serenely among tents. It's an incredible spot.

We started with Windows Canyon, as it was the one we had slightly more information about. I'd been nervous about crossing the Wolgan River too, as I hadn't been to this side of Newnes before and didn't know what to expect after the recent rain. It transpired that my fears were misplaced, as the mysterious 'start coordinates' I had found conveniently placed us right next to a handy log bridge. We traipsed along the Old Coach Track, merrily chatting and remarking how easy-going the route was. Shortly thereafter we reached Penrose Gully and any sign of a route dissolved as we stared up at a steep gully filled with huge boulders, fallen trees, and burnt regenerating bush. I looked at the route I'd sketched in on my GPS at home and looked back at the gully, then somewhat dejectedly informed everyone that this indeed was meant to be the way.

Fortunately, Lewis and Josh took over route-finding through the boulder/burnt bush jumble and did so with great skill, while I intermittently called vague instructions from somewhere near the back of the group about 'keeping right-ish at



The handy log bridge over the Wolgan River.



Tali abseiling Windows P3.



The fiddlestick got some use on the optional P2 abseil in Windows. Photos by Penny Sze.



Josh starting down P5 of Windows. Photo by Penny Sze.



Corey at the top of P6, with the front of the group about to round the corner into the beautiful views at the top of P7. Photo by Penny Sze.

the fork' and 'aiming for *that* gap in the cliffs'. Trawling through trip reports and poring over aerial imagery, I had unearthed GPS coordinates for a small break in the cliff-line that this route used. The coordinates led us exactly there – a tiny, narrow ramp in between vertical rock, delivering us to the top of the cliffs and into great views over the valley like a magical staircase.

From there was a simple traverse over the ridge and down into the next gully. Previous trip reports had suggested that Penrose Gully was easy going but the ridge-top here was covered in nightmare scrub. It appeared that the fires and floods had reversed this; after the weed-choked gully, the ridge was now open and easy walking.

The canyon itself was a great way to spend a winter's day. We abseiled nine drops, though the first couple can be avoided and the third and fourth are probably best done as a single drop. The seventh of those we did looked down through a sandstone arch into a blue pool that looked like a pane of glass – the eponymous 'window' abseil. At the top of this abseil, there was a ledge on the left with beautiful views back down to the Wolgan River. The final drop was 31 m down an inclined sandstone wall that made for a great abseil.

From there, the half-hour downhill walk back to the cars was very popular, and everyone agreed that doing the long walk in the morning was an excellent way to do the canyon.



P7 of Windows, the eponymous abseil through a sandstone arch with a pool that looks like a pane of glass. The photo doesn't quite do it justice here. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Hole-in-the-Rock Canyon

A blind vote by the group decided that for Hole-in-the-Rock, we'd use other route in – walking the Old Coach Trail all the way around to the Tiger Snake carpark, then following the Tiger Snake track all the way down the ridge to the canyon. On the map, the distance was about five times longer – but nearly all on firetrails or tracks. Interestingly, both routes took almost exactly the same time, and if we hadn't spent an extra half hour searching for the top of the first pitch into Hole-in-the-Rock thanks to a vague coordinate, the second route would have been faster. Such is the power of tracks.

Which route is better depends on personal preference – after walking both, some of our group favoured the Penrose Gully option as the more gruelling but more interesting choice, and others the Tiger Snake route as the more boring but less mentally exhausting option. Everyone agreed that doing the two canyons each with a different route was a good move for the weekend.

The first abseil of Hole-in-the-Rock was outstanding – a 30 metre drop passing through a small, circular hole in the side of the cliff. From the top, the hole looks tighter than it is – I slipped through snugly but comfortably wearing my huge Rodcle pack on my back. As Josh put it, the abseil was like a big hug from the rock.

Shortly after this, the canyon took a dramatic turn for the worse, devolving into a frustrating mess of dense scrub and log jams. I lost some enthusiasm and grimly wondered if this was why the canyon was barely known ("the popular canyons are popular for a reason."). Thankfully, eventually we made it through the scrub and finished with four more great abseils.

The second of these had a deep pool of water. I had read about this, and Corey and I had devised a plan to set up a zipline like the one shown in the Canyoning Technical Manual that's used to pass over dangerous whitewater hydraulics at the base of waterfalls. One strand of the rope is used as the abseil strand, and the other is kept taught above the water by a person on the other



Oxana starting P1 of Hole-in-the-Rock.



Darcii about to drop into the 'hole in the rock' itself. It's (slightly) bigger than it looks! Photos by Penny Sze.

side of the pool. The abseiler clips a short cowstail into the taught zipline, and it theoretically directs their abseil above the pool. It did require the sacrifice of one person to get wet and swim across the pool first, which Penny nobly agreed to. Unfortunately, Corey and I didn't quite know exactly what we were doing with rigging this zipline, and really it should not have been rigged on this pitch at all (the Technical Manual is excellent at demonstrating how to rig, but lacks some key explanations on how and why the rigging approaches work – and therefore, when they don't work).

What we learned was that the angles matter a LOT. The larger the angle between the anchor and the zipline (that is, the further from vertical that the zipline is), the more force there is on both the top anchor and the person anchoring the zipline at the bottom. We ended up with huge forces on the zipline strand – in fact, greater than the weight of the abseiler on the abseil strand. The rope was rigged with a releasable figure-8 locked off with a canyon quickdraw, and the figure-8 was pulled right out away from the anchor to the furthest extent of the quickdraw, despite the weight of each abseiler.² Similarly, holding the zipline at the bottom was nearly impossible, and required one person to thread it through their descender and lock off, and have support from a second person to provide additional downward and outward force. This

issue arises on this pitch largely because the anchor is several metres back from the edge of the abseil, and the horizontal distance between the anchor and the far side of the pool is too great relative to the height of the abseil to provide a favourable zipline angle.

I watched the others in the group go down this set-up with increasing anxiety about the whole situation, and by the end wasn't willing to risk the zipline with the figure-8 unlocked from the quickdraw as the last person down. I abseiled normally, and then with caving-style acrobatics and a bit of help from the others in taking my pack and hauling on the back of my chest harness, I managed to bridge across the pool and stay dry.



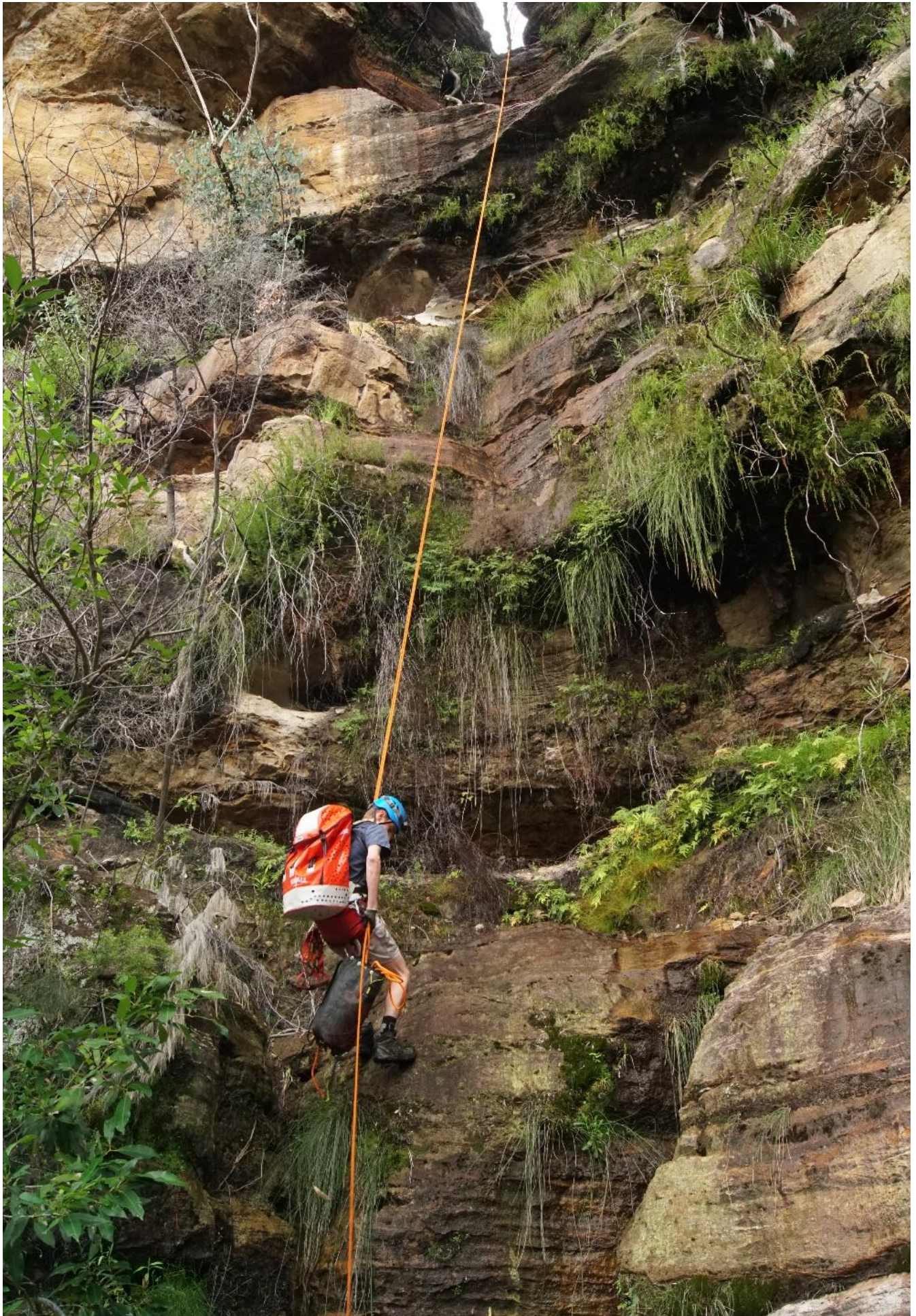
Lewis starting the final abseil of Hole-in-the-Rock. Photo by Penny Sze.

The final two abseils proceeded without incident, and both were very impressive drops, each a little over 30 m, looking back down towards the Wolgan River. The last one was

very similar to the final pitch of Windows. At the base of this pitch was a plaque honouring the canyoner Roy Barlow, who died in an unfortunate accident on this pitch in September 2020. The plaque was a sobering reminder of the risks of canyoning, and watching the rest of the group abseil the pitch was distinctly more uncomfortable and nerve-wracking than normal.

As with Windows, the half-hour downhill walk to the cars was a great way to finish the trip.

² Note that generally, not having the figure-8 pressed up against the anchor is a dangerous situation in itself, as the figure-8 block works in part by pinching the rope between the anchor and the figure-8. Without that pinching, the rope is more likely to feed through the figure-8 under the weight of the abseiler and fail. However, in our zipline situation, the rope had no way of feeding through like this because of the extreme forcing pulling it back through the figure-8 in the other direction.



Corey abseiling the second-to-last drop in Hole-in-the-Rock Canyon. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Bungonia: Drum Cave

16 May 2021

Britt Meers

Participants: Britt Meers, Corey Hanrahan, Lachie Bailey, Penny Sze (MSS), Rowan Phemister

The Canberra crew of Lachie, Rowan and Britt left ANU Sport at 8 am on the Sunday to meet up with Corey and Penny from Wollongong at Bungonia. We arrived and geared up, and were at the entrance just before 11 am. Corey rigged the main 50 m pitch as we all sat around and Rowan fiddled with his head torch to find that it could strobe various different colours.

Once Corey had the pitch rigged, it was decided that Rowan would go next, and me after him, as it was Rowan's first time in a vertical cave and we wanted some more experienced people either side in case he needed some help – but he managed beautifully.

I continued down after and found it to be a decent pitch. The rigging was good, with two rebelay. I did get my glove caught in my rack twice, at which point I put my ascenders on to unweight the rack and problem was solved. The main pitch smelled a little bit with the large population of bats and we tried not to disturb them.

Penny was next and none of us realised she had never done rebelay before or any extensive prusiking so Lachie was very thorough at verbally guiding her down the rope. Lachlan dropped his Pantin in the infamous bat urine

puddle on the way down which he left to come back and get on the return trip.

Once we were all down, we continued through to the small section of crawls. After the squeeze, we found ourselves in the Collapse Chamber. From here we started checking for foul air and continued on to find a small puddle to climb around before we got to the second pitch. The first little drop on the pitch was easier to free-climb so Corey rigged the rope from the first bolt

and then climbed down the rift using the rope as a handline. He then rigged a rebelay and continued over the edge where he tied a redirect from a bolt to avoid rub points on the rope. I found the pitch to be simple enough. We got everyone down and Rowan went off to explore the little section off to the side up a mudflow whilst we waited for everyone.

From this point we became exceedingly vigilant with lighters, with three of us carrying one and constantly checking for foul air. We found the flame would flicker and start to

separate if we moved it too quickly but it stayed alight so we continued.

We hopped down the old dry streamway and found ourselves in the Railway Tunnel. It was



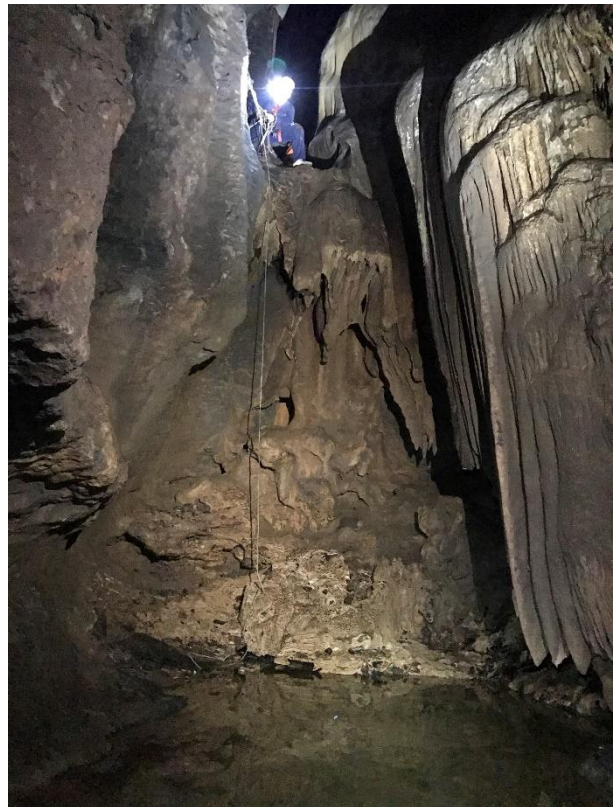
Some of the formations in the railway tunnel. Photo by Britt Meers.

absolutely spectacular and Lachie stated he had never made it this far before. We marvelled at the formations on the sides of the tunnel which were still active and surprisingly white for Bungonia. We left a pack here as it was not far to the sump, and we thought about going up into the Drum Extension.

We got to the next 6 m pitch and Lachie rigged this up. The main bolt was overhanging the drop slightly so we anchored from a jug of old flowstone as a back-up point in case he fell. After rigging the pitch we all descended and got to the bottom to find a puddle and a trickle in the streamway. Lachie had wandered ahead down to the sump, checking for foul air the whole way, and concluded it was safe enough – but not to hang around the sump for too long.

On one side of the sump was a large dry mudflow with an opening at the top. I decided I would like to attempt to climb it and see what was over there. I began the climb, only to realise a lot of the structure would crumble beneath me if I pushed too hard. I made it almost to the top but there was a bit more of a vertical section that I was worried about descending without a handline and so turned back and made a note to come back with a line.

We went back to the Railway Tunnel and had a bite to eat. We debated the extension but decided against it, so that we didn't tire out any of the inexperienced people we had with us, as we still had to climb up the entrance pitch. Climbing out of the entrance pitch took us around an hour or so by my estimate but we exited the cave at last light and arrived back at the car in the dark. There were no incidents and everyone had a great time.



The 6 m pitch with the puddle (not to be confused with the infamous bat urine puddle). Photo by Britt Meers.



Rowan abseiling the main 50 m pitch at the cave entrance. Photo by Britt Meers.



The goat was really just looking for a sunny patch on a chilly morning... Photo by Lewis Russell.

Long Gully and Large Goat

23 May 2021

Oxana Repina

Participants: Alex Motyka (SUSS), Corey Harahan, Kavita Joshi (MSS), Lachie Bailey,
Lewis Russell, Oxana Repina

This trip was notable for three reasons. The first was the flow of water in what was meant to be a dry winter canyon. The second was the tidy-up of the canyon anchors and the removal of a rope-bag-worth of tat. The third and standout reason was the face-off with a horned mountain goat on the side of 65 metre cliff.

We'd planned to do Fordham, but after an hour of looking at graphs from Water NSW and trying to guesstimate how much water would be in the Shoalhaven at our crossing point after all the rain, attempting a mental hydrological model to interpolate between a gauge 15 km away and a gauge 30 km away, we called it off after Lachie

found a photo he'd taken of the crossing at similar water levels a few years back which indicated we'd probably all be washed away if we tried it.

So instead we started the chilly morning at the Long Gully carpark. The first part of the canyon was uneventful; we cleaned up some anchors and discussed the finer points of releasables versus the stone knot. For once Lachie was outnumbered in trying to defend his stance in the debate. At the top of the 65 metre pitch, Corey and I looked up from faffing with the rope as the general group banter changed tone and found

that our group had been joined by none other than a wild goat.

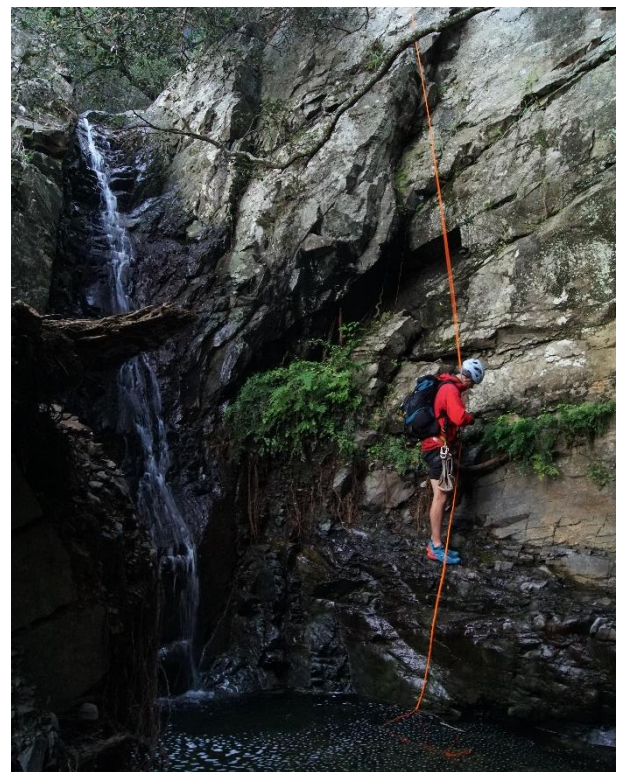
Now, a goat is fun and cool – until you perceive with sudden clarity that you standing on the wrong side of an unpredictable wild animal with long sharp horns a metre in front of you and a sheer cliff edge with a 65 metre drop behind you. The responses from our party were fascinatingly varied. Several people went for their camera. Some people tried to give it food. One person appeared to stifle a scream and tried to get away as far as possible. Corey increased the haste with which he was setting up the rope. And Lewis calmly and with great skill befriended the goat, appearing to gain a kind of mutual understanding and respect, and led it away from the cliff-edge and from us in the kind of relaxed fashion that one might expect from someone who regularly encounters wild goats on 65 metre cliff edges.

Unfortunately, once Lewis went down the rope, the goat came back. Lachie took over goat control and successfully gained mutual distrust and annoyance with the goat. Nonetheless, the goat was occupied, and I abseiled next, feeding the rope through quickly, and nervously eyeing the top of the pitch in paranoia that I would see a human figure fall screaming over the edge on the end of two sharp horns. Mercifully, I didn't. 'You know,' said Corey, once he abseiled down too as the last person, 'I think the goat just wanted to sit in that spot that we were sitting, where the sun came out and hit the rocks after you went down.'

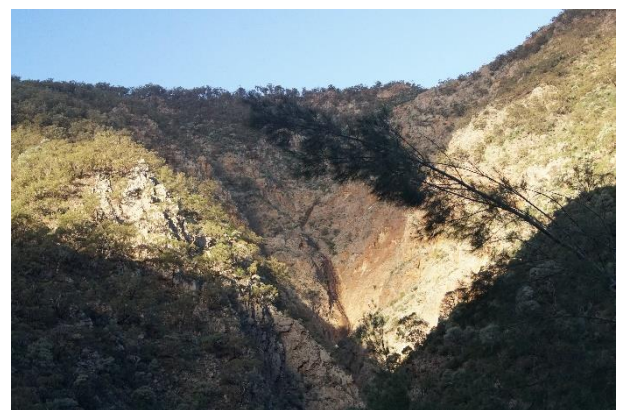
And it was understandable too, as it was a chilly day and we got pretty wet in the pitches. So much for a dry canyon. It looked like the rain that re-routed our Fordham trip also flushed out Long Gully and a reasonable amount of water was still spilling over each pitch. We spent a little extra time tidying anchors too, which didn't help with the cold. It was disappointing to see many sad and tangled tapes on most pitches. Presumably many people believe that whatever pre-existing tape is there is not to be trusted, and an additional tape or three would make things safer. In reality, it makes it much harder to check what

on earth the tangled mess actually is, and five tapes frayed through in the same blind spot are just as bad as a single tape frayed through.

When we reached the Shoalhaven, our crossing point for Fordham turned out not to be the chundering white-water I expected, but it was still flowing rapidly and would have been unpleasant to attempt, especially in the middle of winter. On the walk out, the setting sun pointed a spotlight of gold on our original target. Though hard to tell because of the distance, it looked like water was flowing down Fordham too. No matter – a trip for next time.



Lewis on P5, with a fair bit of water flowing down.



The setting sun illuminating Fordham Canyon on the walk out. Photos by Oxana Repina.



Hmm, thinks the goat, that is some unsatisfactory anchor tat in my canyon. Photo by Lewis Russell.



Neither party is particularly impressed by the other, not least of all thanks to the perceived incursion on 'their' canyon experience: Lachie versus the goat. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Wee Jasper Caving: Punchbowl

23 May 2021

Claud Tomkins

Participants: Britt Meers, Chris Bradley, Claud Tomkins, Dion Jones, Lauren Schenk, Riley Baird, Rowan Phemister

In search of inspiration for this trip report, I landed on a report from a very similar one-day NUCC trip out to Punchbowl at Wee Jasper... merely 27 years earlier.³ So here I am reading this report from 1994, and whilst it is clear that some things have changed big time, namely the switch over from ladders to SRT (one I am very grateful for), it was astounding just how little some other things had changed over 27 years. As I started reading Toyrn Chapman's trip report I could have easily been convinced that this was written only last week. Therefore, I want to start this recap with the same words Toyrn wrote all those years ago...

"Eight a.m. [Sunday] morning. Shouldn't be up. Should be asleep. Shouldn't be rummaging through the NUCC gear store, about to go caving. All the same, this particular morning saw [seven] people, more keen on throwing themselves down holes in the ground and rolling around in clay than staying under a nice warm doona, meeting at the gear store for a trip to Punchbowl Cave at Wee Jasper."

However, for me at least, the adventure had started the night before when at a quarter to midnight I raced on my bike to Uni to print off some maps of the cave. For you see, with this being my first-time trip leading, it wasn't until I was about to jump into bed that I remembered I should probably bring with me the maps Lachie had provided.

With my maps in hand and after grabbing all the gear on the list (minus a first aid kit, which I would place a bet was stowed away in Lachie's



Pretty banding of calcite. Photo by Claud Tomkins.



Some nice white formation. Photo by Britt Meers.

³ Sub-Editor's note: *Speleograffiti* 24.1, p14, I still want to know what the 'egg incident' on p10 was...

car... in Queensland), we headed off on the winding roads to Wee J.

Once we had arrived it wasn't long before Britt and I were slinging a couple of tapes around a column (which Lachie has kindly informed is "when two stals have joined"), under the watchful eye of Chris, rigging the entrance pitch. Then down I went, the fearless trip leader that I am, down into the dark abyss.

Whilst waiting for everyone to make their way down the pitch, Britt and I made a discovery unlike any other. A discovery so great that it became the highlight of the day – well, at least for me personally. This discovery was that the Black Diamond headtorches have blue, red and green light settings, and even better... you can make them strobe. This became a quick and effective way to really add a whole other dimension to caving, turning our innocent cave sing-a-longs into full blown cave raves. So, naturally, our caving adventure down in Punchbowl started with a strobe party and the ritualistic singing of Bohemian Rhapsody.

Once we were all down the pitch and had partied an acceptable amount, we set off into the depths of Punchbowl. For apparently being the 'trip leader', I can't say I did all that much leading. Instead, I like to believe it was more of a 'choose your own adventure' type deal. Through

Punchbowl we went, taking the time to explore every nook and cranny. From Pitch Chamber through the snicket into the Ballroom, down into the Fossil Wall Chamber for a look and an explore, then back into the Ballroom. Up we went into Far Chamber, side adventure into Mud Crack Chamber and down into Diprotodon Pit, then up through the Strawberry Shortcut to Loxin Chamber. From here we went for a slide

down the Slippery Dips (and, if you're Chris, a run back up for round two) and then around to the top of the Laundry Chute.

Come this point it was already 2pm and we were all getting really quite hungry so, despite all the adventuring that still could have been had and the multitude of random side passages that had not yet seen my face peering down them, we decided it was time to head through the window, back towards the entrance and back out to the surface.

Britt and I embarked on the prussik out first, charged with the task of BBQing our sausage sizzle lunch to perfection. Finally, by 4pm, everyone had joined us, and it was time to eat. Maybe it was because I arranged the

cooked sausages in a sausage Jenga stack, or maybe it just came down to the fact we were all so hungry, but I have to say, our sausage sizzle was Bunnings-snag-level good. And so, with our stomachs full, off we went, back to Canberra.



Chris chilling out near some formation. Photo by Britt Meers.



The infamous sausage Jenga stack. Photo by Britt Meers.



Blue Waterholes Gorge at Coolman Plains in the setting sun. Photo by Britt Meers.



Claud in the stunning gorge next to the Blue Waterholes. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

Cooleman Plains

29–30 May 2021

Britt Meers

Participants: Austin Zerk, Britt Meers, Claud Tomkins, Danny Feng, Lachie Bailey

Saturday 29 May: CP92/CP93

We met at ANU Sport around 8am to drive to Cooleman via Cooma and Adaminaby. We stopped briefly at the Yarrangobilly Caves office to pick up a trip registration document and continued out to the Blue Waterholes campground, setting up our campsite.

Heading to the cave (CP92 and CP93), we walked along the gorge track for a couple of kilometres before having to ascend up onto a ridge line. We then dropped down very steeply on the edge of the gorge to find the entrance to the cave. The cave had two main branches from the entrance chamber. We had heard that there

was nice formation to the left and so it was decided to take this route.

On the map, there was a small puddle marked in this section but we assumed it would be avoidable. The tunnel we had to take however was quite small and had a very low ceiling, so we were crawling on our stomach for quite a lot of the time. When we hit the first opening, the floor was a small pool of water that we managed to avoid by bridging over the top of it. The next small opening had a larger puddle that we could

not avoid and we had to drag ourselves through the water, which was consequently very cold. We reached the section where the formation begun and the cave continued on, but the floor was covered in very fragile rimstone pools. We attempted to change into detrog clothes and shoes, but we were already sitting in a puddle with not much room to move around and so we made the call not to continue any further so as not to ruin formation. At this, we all took turns to look into the small area with formation, and then ultimately crawled our way back to the entrance.

Lachie had gotten quite cold after crawling through the water and decided to head outside the cave to wait in the sun and warm up. The rest of us continued on to look into the left tunnel. It continued to a small branch, one of which choked out and the next ended in a flattener that was possible to squeeze through. I crawled through the flattener to find myself in a large chamber that was on a slope and choked by boulders, with many routes up and down and some holes in the floor. We first decided to head upwards towards some formation. The route continued up a few metres to a nice shawl and some flowstone. There was a gap that ascended to a higher level but it was right next to the shawl and so we made the call not to climb up it.

We all then looked around the chamber to see if there were any more routes. After a good investigation it was found the only way on was a hole in the floor, which Claud descended. It went down quite a few metres and ended in a small room filled with mud and some straws. We all went down and sat for a while and then thought it might be time to head out as Lachie was probably getting colder. When we exited, poor Lachie was quite cold as the sun had now dropped below the horizon.

We wandered down the edge of the ridge back into the gorge near a waterfall. At the top of the waterfall Lachie told us he was going to run back to camp to try and warm up. We arrived back at camp around 6–6:30pm, and it was quite cold. We all got changed and lit a fire and tried to dry our gear, which subsequently froze overnight.



Getting ready to head off. Photo by Britt Meers.



Another great view of the gorge. Photo by Lachie Bailey.



One of the many river crossings. Photo by Lachie Bailey.



Looking back down from the side of the gorge. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

Sunday 30 May: Barber Cave to Black Range Cave

We all woke up around 8am and sat in the sun. All of our gear from the day before was frozen solid and so we put it all on Austin's car to defrost and dry. It wasn't until Lachie had his 5th cup of tea that we decided to get moving. By then it was 11:20am and the majority of our gear had dried.

It was decided that we would go into Barber Cave and follow it through to Black Range Cave up on the plateau. We started along the gorge walking track and headed to Barber Cave's dry entrance. We got to the point where this entrance dropped down into what was once the streamway. There is usually a small piece of wood with some foot-holds nailed into it to climb down, but we found a large metal folding ladder that we assumed someone had dragged in to make it easier access as this is a public access cave. We made a note to tell National Parks about this as the metal ladder would eventually corrode and wouldn't be safe for people or the cave.

Once down, we wandered our way through the passage and found some rocks that were nice platforms. We had brought a Bluetooth speaker in and a downloaded playlist on Spotify, and so it was decided that we should have a "cave rave". All the Black Diamond torches were set to the strobing colour mode and we stayed here for quite a while enjoying different songs. It was then suggested that we should continue on to Black Range Cave. We kept climbing out of Barber Cave which was just a lovely walk through in all honesty.

We exited onto the plateau and sat out in the sun for a snack break. We then got to the entrance to Black Range Cave and I descended in and found the small slot that lead into the rest of the cave. I tried to go in but found myself to get quite stuck. I pulled myself out and said I couldn't do it, and that I would wait for everyone else to go first. I didn't know that everyone took this as me not going in at all and so they left me behind. I got quite stressed and annoyed at this and did eventually force my way through the hole. Once



Some of the beautiful rimstone pools. Photo by Britt Meers.



Icicles, not stalactites! Photo by Britt Meers.

through, I had to yell and ask which way I was going as I was not clear on the way on. Luckily Danny wasn't far ahead of me and told me to follow his voice. I arrived in the main chamber where there were expanses of rimstone pools and it was quite spectacular to look at. I then declared that I was a bit annoyed that they left me behind but all was sorted.

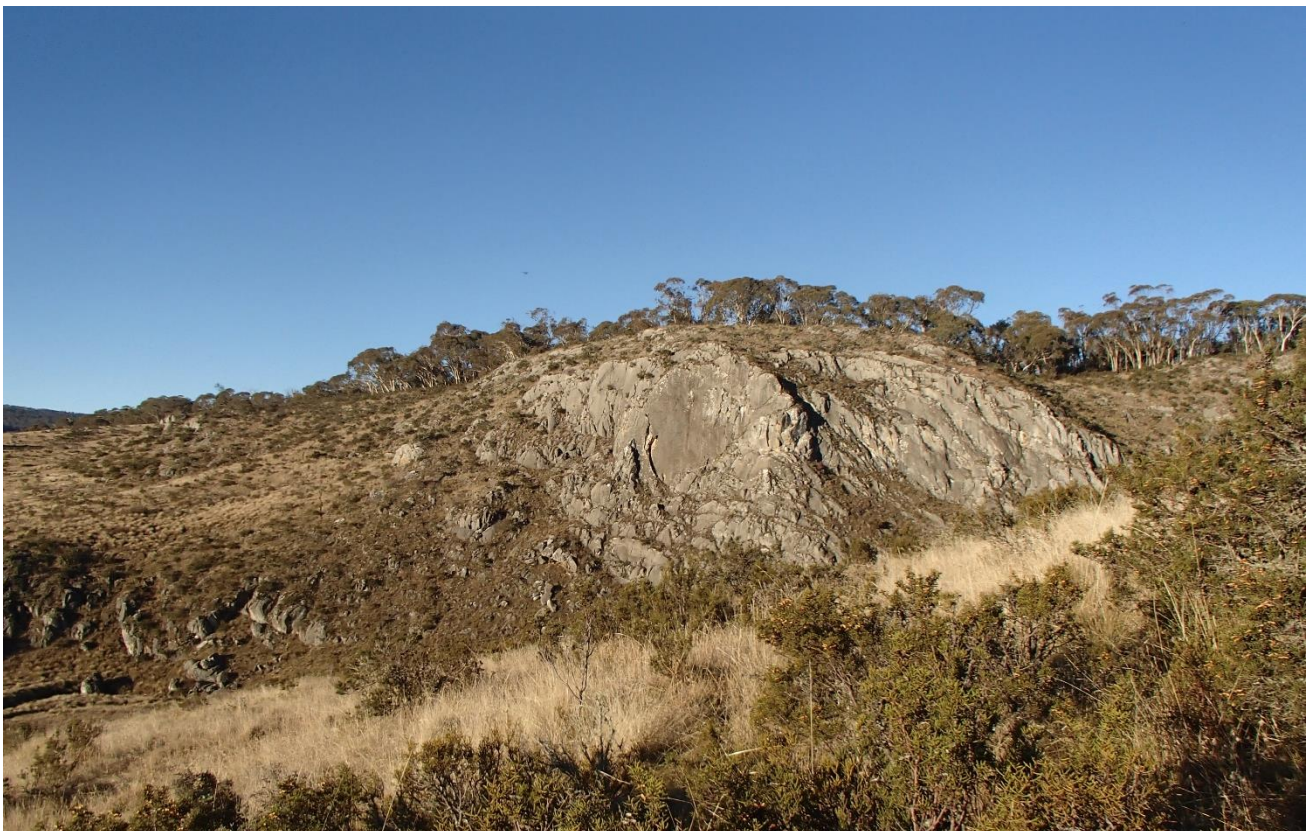
We followed the far wall to avoid the fragile pools and continued up and over into another tunnel that lead further into the cave. It was beautifully decorated with flowstone, stalactites and all sorts of strange and wonderful formation. We continued on to a small drop of about 1.5m that was right next to a crystal clear pool of water. We climbed down to take a drink from the pool as the water was very clean, being in an alpine area.

From here we kept following the tunnel and the roof started to get progressively lower. Claud found some “green” rocks while Austin continued on further in the tunnel. Austin declared that it turned into a bit of a gravel so we stopped and looked at rocks. After a little while the group turned back. We stopped in a few of the prettier spots to get some good photos before exiting the cave. Once we exited, Claud and Austin walked up the hill to look at the entrance to Fissure Cave but we ultimately decided that we wanted to get back to camp in daylight today.

Lachie said that he wanted to walk down the ridge on the surface and would meet us back in the gorge near the entrance to Barber Cave as

we all wanted to see what the “wet” route back through Barber Cave was like. We found the alternate entrance and actually found some icicles formed on the walls of the cave which were quite pretty. We did get a little disoriented at first when we found a few ways through, but we stuck with instinct and followed what looked to be an old riverbed which lead us back to the section of the cave we had entered in.

We exited and looked around for Lachie. We couldn't see him so cooeed and found that he was sitting on a small ledge just up the cliff near the cave. He climbed down to us and we continued back through the gorge and reached camp with daylight to spare. Lachie and Danny went for a drive up the road and managed to make a friend who was a little lost and invited him to come camp with us for the night. We all went to bed between 9–11pm and listened to the howling of wild dogs. Throughout the night, Lachie and myself were woken up by a howl that was only a few hundred metres from the camp which spooked us a little. But we woke up the next morning with no issues apparent.



Views across the landscape at Cooleman Plains. Photo by Britt Meers.

Monday 31 May: Glop Pot and River Cave

The morning routine was much the same as the day before, defrosting gear and drinking tea until 11am. We made the call to visit Glop Pot and River Cave. So we got geared up, I took a wetsuit, and we started the walk out. At Glop Pot, Lachie rigged the cave and we all took turns at going in. It was wetter than usual and there was quite a deep sump at the bottom which Lachie dropped his glove in (which he sadly did not end up retrieving as it sunk). It was a nice little trip up and down and in between people going in, a few of us waited out on the surface and had fun listening to music and exploring.

We then left our gear there and headed into River Cave. We found lots of icicles in the entrance. We headed further into the cave and

hit the river, and followed it upstream first to have a look. Myself and Danny decided to go for a swim... it was incredibly cold but I did warm up quickly once I got out thanks to the wetsuit I was in. It was still a wade through water for everyone else but we enjoyed it.

We then went downstream to the first duck-under and I had a look at it. I decided not to try the duck-under without someone in the next chamber beyond it. Danny was willing to try it but Lachie said no as the group was already very wet and cold. We then decided that we were a bit cold and to head out to the surface again. We then started the walk back and once back we packed up our gear and headed back to Cooma for dinner at the pub.



The team after a weekend of caving: Lachie, Claud, Austin and Danny; photo by Britt Meers.

Bungonia: let's get deep

6 June 2021

Chris Bradley

Participants: Alex Motyka (SUSS), Britt Meers, Chris Bradley, Claud Tomkins,
Danny Feng, Lachie Bailey

This was a quick daytrip out to Bungonia. One of the goals of the trip was to give some of the upcoming trip leaders, namely Claud and Britt, some practice rigging in an actual cave environment. We had been contemplating Blowfly and The Adytum but eventually settled on Canberra-Steampipe as a more welcoming cave to rig. Britt rigged the entrance and Claud rigged the exit, and it went nice and smoothly which was a nice contrast to someone's massive rope tangle last time I was here. The cave itself was remarkably underwhelming, with about 10m of horizontal cave, although the 30–40m abseil and prusik was fun and it was nice to sit and chat while waiting for everyone to ascend.

Next up, we had lunch and prepared for B4-5. Alex joined in because the cave rescue activities had finished for the weekend. I had forgotten how hot the Bungonia caves are, definitely a t-shirt and shorts kind of area in my opinion – I don't know how the guys coped in cordura overalls. Otherwise, the cave gave the usual fun crawly, climby, sporty goodness it always does, although I should have worn kneepads.

Britt and I had a rest in Signature Chamber while the others explored the tree roots section. Alex showed us an extra optional climb with some bolts on the way out of Signature Chamber, which I did once and decided I'll stick to my squeezezy route next time. My fear of heights is getting better, but I still much prefer the squeezezy options.

Our third and last cave for the day was Grill Cave. A few ladders down we ran into some tourists navigating out with just the torches on their smartphones – quite disconcerting (*Sub-Editor's note: I'm still amazed CRS doesn't have annual callouts to Grill Cave*). We got ourselves

turned around at the rockpile, and after a good half hour of fumbling around Lachie finally found the vadose passage that marked the way on. We made it a little past the loose boulders signpost before reaching the level of CO₂. The others spent some time playing in the CO₂ while I stayed back attempting to cool off (*Sub-Editor's note: Chris forgot to mention the pair of manky, decaying undies Alex and I found down past the Slippery Dips*. I know a loss of rational thought is one of the classic symptoms of foul air, but *really?!?!?*). Eventually, we turned around and exited the cave hot and sweaty and ready to go home.

I managed to get Lachie to sing on the way home, a magnificent rendition of Advance Australia Fair and Waltzing Matilda, marking the end of an enjoyable day (*Sub-Editor's note: that's two out of the four songs I know the lyrics of*).



Post-caving carpark balancing activities. Photo by Britt Meers.

Bungonia: Argyle Hole

14 June 2021

Lachie Bailey

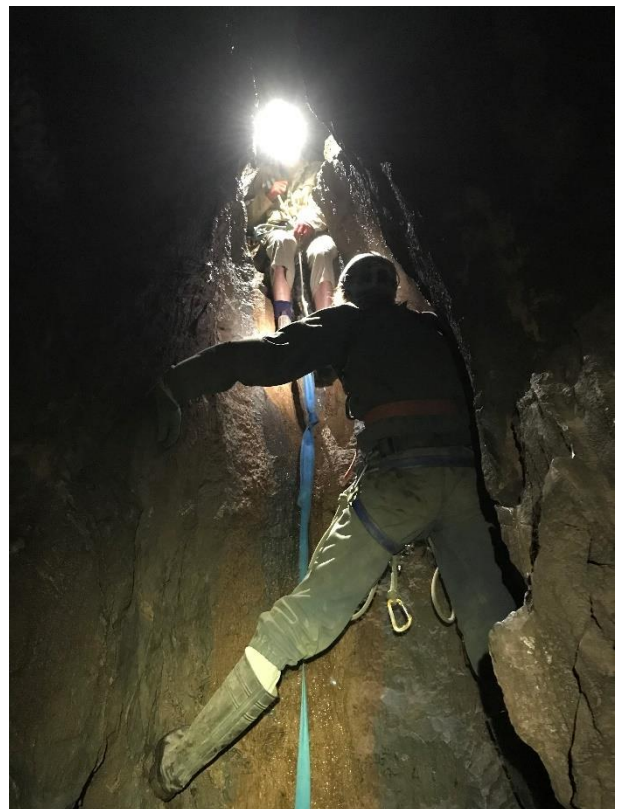
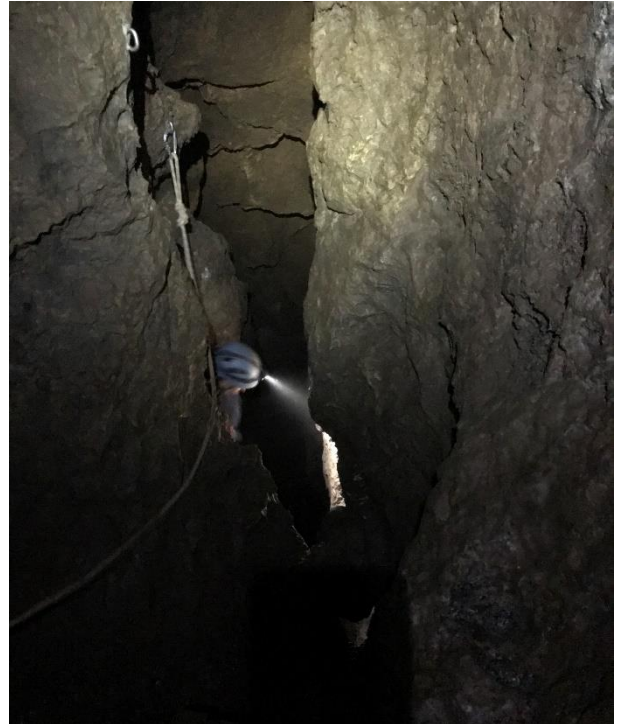
Participants: Britt Meers, Chris Bradley, Claud Tomkins, Lachie Bailey

Seeing as our plans to visit Buchan over the long weekend got ruined, we were keen to get at least a spot of caving in. So the plan was hatched to do a run through Argyle Hole (B31) at Bungonia. This is always a fun vertical cave, with multiple pitches down to two possible sumps. We had a pretty normal start, leaving Canberra at 8-ish, and jumped straight into the cave. Claud and Britt hadn't been introduced to The Flattener before, and were both delighted and astounded by its general nastiness.

We barrelled down the pitches, with Britt getting a taste of rigging. Argyle Hole has frustrating rigging – lots of bolts, but they're absent in plenty of places a rebelay would be appreciated. Naturals suffice, but they're a bittttttt average in spots. We had lunch at The Junction, and then started down The Stairs. Ordinarily, we just follow the floor down, but Chris and Britt spotted some high level bolts that avoid the worst squeeze at floor level. Sump I was very pretty and clear, with lots of calcite rafts. It certainly seemed unaffected by all the rain we've had recently, in comparison to the sump in Drum Cave. Makes sense I guess then that it's a perched sump, but it'd be great to get a diver into it (less great to get the gear out).

Coming back up was the usual slog that you have out of a 140m deep cave. Some bribery with chocolate was required to get the whole party up The Corkscrew and through The Flattener. As normal, it was brilliant to emerge from the stuffiness of Argyle Hole into the cool of the evening air. Not as enjoyable a vertical trip as Drum Cave, but still a pleasant day's outing.

Photos on right: some views of the vertical bits (i.e. *not* The Flattener). Photos by Britt Meers.





David Mason heading into the entrance of East Deep Creek Cave. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

Yarrangobilly

26–27 June 2021

Tali de Mestre

Participants: Alex Motyka (SUSS), Andy Waddell, Austin Zerk, Britt Meers, Chris Bradley, Lachie Bailey, Penny Sze (MSS), Riley Baird, Tali de Mestre, David Mason (MSS)

On the first day I was in a party with Chris, Andy, and Austin. First up was Old Inn Cave, which began with some downclimbing along an active stream, followed by some more downclimbing not along the stream, followed by more downclimbing along the aforementioned active stream.

After much consultation of the map, we made it down to Strawhaven Chamber and marvelled at the shawl. From here we dumped packs and explored many side-passages, before eventually returning for the exit trip. On the way out, we signed our names in the logbook (obviously this is the correct order to do things) and noted that

the last visitor was one ‘Lachlan Bailey’ about 18 months prior.

Next, we visited Coppermine, a relatively relaxed streamway/walkthrough cave up until the point where we turned around. Lots of very cool formation was present throughout the cave. A strange *thump* sound was heard as we paused for a snack break in the final chamber. The source of this sound remains a mystery (*Sub-Editor’s note*: possibly a platypus doing platypus things).

At the end of this, a car got bogged and we began to walk back to the campsite (which thankfully was not very far away). The next morning – with

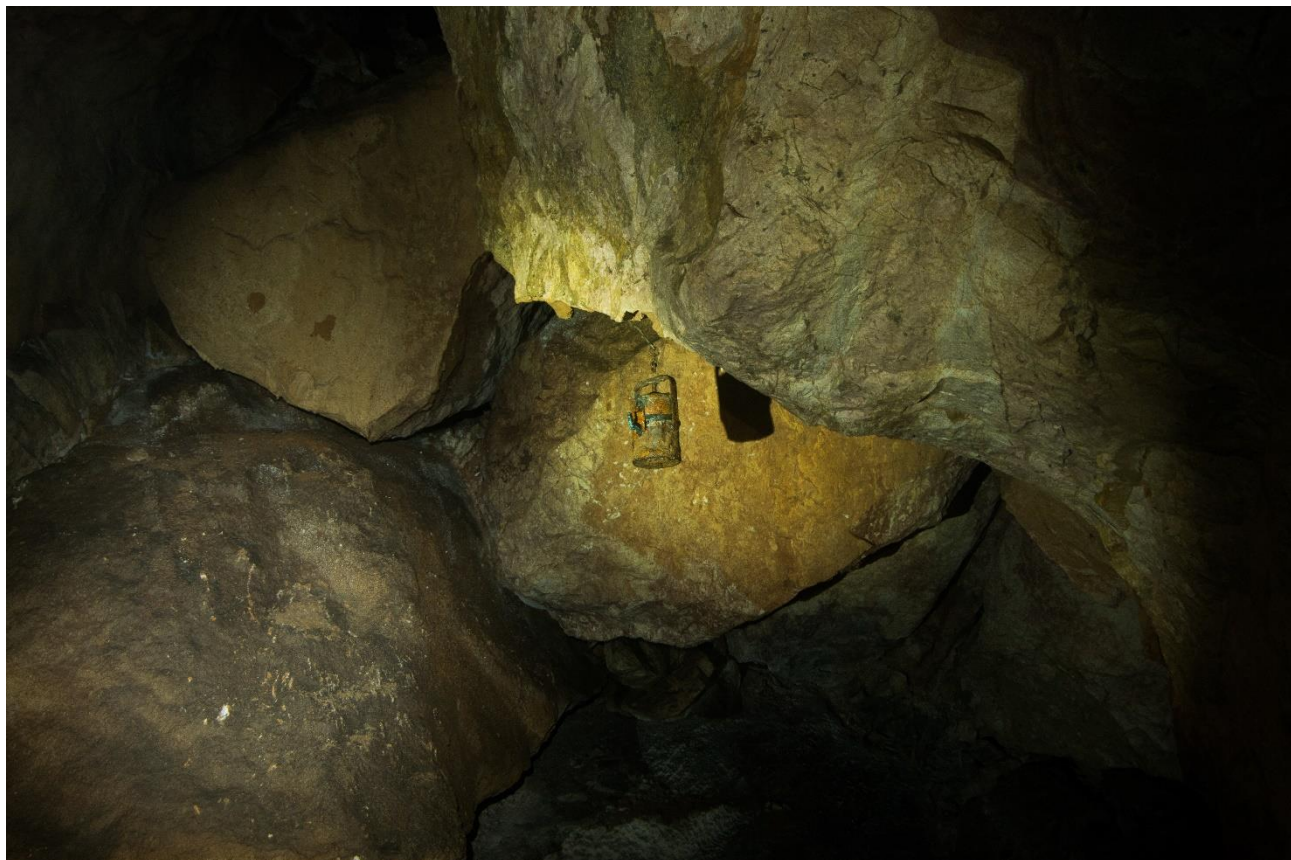
a lot of grit, strength, determination, and a stranger with a winch – the car was rescued.

On the second day, we set out for North Deep Creek. After faffing about at the entrance, we managed to find the gate and set off into the cave. A big chamber quickly narrows into a series of short and small squeezes, which eventually open back into a chamber, which then narrows back into a series of squeezes. The whole time you are doing this you are heading down, getting distinctly deeper and deeper

underground. There are several downclimbs throughout this, the last of which was rigged with a belay as it was about 10 m high. Some members of the party descended without belay, some with belay, and some decided the risk of the climb was too great and returned to the surface. This was the point I returned to the surface, where I had some lovely chats. I was informed that there was some cooler formations deeper in the cave, but I have no regrets! I'll bring an SRT kit next time.



Top: Alex looking over one of the pools in Upper East Deep Creek. Bottom left: Penny descending into the entrance of the cave. Bottom right: Alex admiring the formation in one of the de-trog sections. Photos by Lachie Bailey.



Looking up into the ceiling where the lamp was found hanging. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

Finding Brian O'Brien's lamp in East Deep Creek Cave (Britt Meers)

The first day in Yarrangobilly we decided to go to Upper East Deep Creek, with the goal of making it to the main chamber where the de-trog section was. Once in the rock pile, navigation became a little hard. We tried to tentatively follow trog markings, picking a direction and following it. We ended up in what we thought was Shattered Passage, so in other words, a little bit lost. I had followed a muddy slide up into the passage and was looking around when someone in our group mentioned "oh, at least we know people have been here," and pointed to the ceiling. An object was hanging there. Lachlan got very excited and exclaimed that he thought it was the carbide lamp that Brian O'Brien left in the cave 50 years ago when he got lost for three days and miraculously survived. We made a mental note of where it was and to discuss the matter with National Parks and Brian's friends and family. We then discovered that all the ways beyond that chamber were very large drops and decided to head back in the direction we came to try and find the way on to the 'pretty section'.



A close-up of the lamp, looking fairly corroded after hanging in the cave for 50 years. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

Wee Jasper

10–11 July 2021

Rowan Phemister

Participants: Britt Meers, Chris Bradley, Lachie Bailey, Lisa Renee, Rowan Phemister,
Tali de Mestre

Initially this trip was planned for Buchan, but everyone's favourite virus closed the Victorian border so we grabbed the SRT kits and rerouted to Wee Jasper instead. We set up camp at Fitzpatrick in a leisurely fashion where Lisa impressed all of us by setting up her swag inside Tali's tent for extra luxury. Eventually, trip leader Lachie got bored and insisted we do some caving. The Dip Cave Series 5 was elected as our destination and we set off in high spirits.

Finding a parking spot that wasn't a driveway was surprisingly difficult, but we managed it in the end. We inspected the rubbish tip on the way to Dip Cave which the local farmers have converted into a dead sheep recycling facility. We arrived at the cave entrance which Britt and Chris started rigging while Lachie walked a little further around the hill to set up rope to abseil out on.

Dip was Lisa's first cave and she looked suitably excited. The entrance to Dip is an inconspicuous hole in the middle of a paddock, but after a few metres of abseiling it opens up into a fairly spacious room. We quickly dumped the SRT kits and cave packs and set off exploring. Lisa got to experience her first squeeze while investigating a side passage, and Tali and Chris found a purple vein of rock. After a few hours we got hungry and returned to the cave packs for a non-crumbly, nutritious and cave-friendly lunch – i.e. snakes and dark chocolate.

While we were eating lunch we turned off our headlights to help with digestion. Out of the darkness, Tali felt a gentle 'hand' emerge which started patting his shoulder. He turned on his head torch and was surprised to find it was in fact a very hungry rat which was trying to steal his peanuts. We named our new friend 'Steve' and



Lachie getting ready (sitting around?) at camp.



Prepping cake with a sparkler candle.



Surface trogging. Photos by Chris Bradley.



Rowan the monument. Photo by Chris Bradley.

attempted to lure him into a cave pack with more peanuts. We figured the only exit from the cave involved abseiling and Steve's survival chances weren't wonderful if he remained in the cave. Despite our best intentions, Steve elected to jump out of the cave pack as Lachie attempted to bag him so we left him to his own devices.

On the way to the exit I went for a solo adventure into a large side passage. Soon I found a lot of bat guano but no bats in sight unfortunately. Upon rejoining the group at the final room before the exit, I was surprised to find large rock that looked like Elvis' face staring down at me. Under Elvis' watchful eye, we prusiked our way up the rope Lachie had rigged beforehand and exited the cave into the dusky evening. We headed back to Fitzpatrick for hot showers, dinner and a camp fire.

We rose bright and early the next day to begin a spot of surface trogging up the hill from the campground. We split into groups of two or three and started searching for any holes that looked promising. We climbed down two or three holes, most of which came to a dead end. My group decided WJ21 Montys Hole looked the most promising and set some rigging at the entrance. After a few metres of abseiling things got pretty

squishy, but I managed to get through the squeeze and found some fairly pristine formation. Unfortunately, it appeared any promising passages have filled up with dirt over the years so I prusiked back up and rejoined the group for lunch.

Towards the end of the day, we decided to rig another promising lead, known as Howler Hole or WJ18. Howler Hole is a tight vertical pitch which we had read about in the Karst Index over lunch. This adventure did not go to plan and one member of our group got stuck in a squeeze while on rope, half-way down the pitch. The trip leaders managed to get him out the squeeze and lowered him down to the bottom of the pitch. At this point, we decided that hauling the caver out on our own wasn't a viable option and we called in NSW Emergency Services who were able to successfully extract the stuck caver. Thankfully no-one was injured and everyone got out safely by the end of the night. While this was extremely stressful, NUCC is fortunate to have some amazing trip leaders whose leadership and caving experience kept everyone safe. This ordeal didn't dampen the group's thirst for caving and we had an amazing trip to Mammoth Cave at Jenolan the very next weekend.



Top: the group sitting above Howler Hole. Bottom left: Britt surface trogging. Centre right: Lulu enjoying Dip Cave. Bottom right: Tali in Dip Cave Series 5. Photos by Chris Bradley.

Jenolan

17-18 July 2021

Nick Jowett

Participants: Chris Bradley, Claud Tomkins, Lachie Bailey, Lisa Renee, Nick Jowett, Rowan Phemister, Tali de Mestre

Friday 16 – Saturday 17 July: arrival and car rescues

On the 16th of July, seven members of NUCC made their way to Jenolan for an intended weekend's worth of camping and caving. This trip to Jenolan was NUCC's first trip back there since the destruction of the Cavers Cottage⁴ in the Green Wattle Creek fire⁵ in January 2020. The group first met at the Reef Reserve by Lake Oberon later into the evening. While travelling to Oberon some groups had to avoid towns such as Goulburn due to recent reports of COVID-19 cases popping up. Most group members instead stopped for dinner in the Taralga pub, ensuring to wear masks and use the relevant check-in app for NSW. Upon arriving at the campsite most members opted to move their vehicles and tents further up the hill to a more protected area to avoid the wind. Although this would result in a beautiful view of the lake in the morning it was, in the author's opinion, a mistake.

The first members of the group began to wake up the next morning at about 8:00am, enjoying the view of the lake; not prepared for the disaster of a day they were about to have.

Once everyone was up, it was decided to drive to Jenolan and have breakfast there rather than prepare meals in the cold. The first car to get stranded for the day was the Toyota Kluger, which got bogged after trying to drive down a muddy embankment leading down to the road. While the Kluger was a 4WD it did not have a diff lock, which resulted in two wheels getting stuck and the other two uselessly spinning in the mud.

After having his hand accidentally crushed between the front driver's door and the frame of the car while trying to push, the author offered to drive into town with his car to get hot chocolates. This was no easy task however, as the author's car was also parked at the top of the same hill the Kluger had just failed to disembark from. What's worse is that, let alone lacking four wheel drive, the author's car was only a little VW Golf, designed for inner city driving. With this in mind the group decided to try and return the Golf to the road that it had originally come from, rather than going down the more adventurous route of the Kluger. Thus, with a little bit of elbow grease, some mostly steady driving from the Golf (God bless manual cars), and a lot of mud, the team managed to push the car back up the slimy embankment and onto the much firmer road from the previous night.

While in town buying hot chocolates it began to snow. Despite being reported as a fairly warm July, this particular weekend would be noted for having some of the lowest temperatures on record, as well as some of the deepest snow since the year 2000⁶. As such the temperature remained at a fairly chilly -2° for a good part of the trip, resulting in much of the greater Oberon area being blanketed in snow.

Despite this, our team pushed on, still confident to go caving despite the conditions. Once the duo had returned from town with the drinks it wasn't long before NRMA arrived to rescue the Kluger. While waiting, some members of the

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/65963976973/posts/10158005583941974>

⁵ <https://www.goulburnpost.com.au/story/6606414/its-been-a-difficult-time-green-wattle-creek-fire-contained/>

⁶ <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/month/nsw/summary.shtml>

group amused themselves by making snow angels and building a snowman. Once free, the Golf and Kluger set off for Jenolan, with a couple of members staying behind with the third car, an Astra, to complete the snowman.

Before departing Oberon, a plan was made to stop just before the descent leading into Jenolan so that the Golf would be spared from driving down a road it wasn't capable of. Unfortunately, while moving gear between the two cars, the engine of the Kluger was turned off. Normally this would be a responsible and environmentally friendly notion, however in negative temperatures and blanketed in snow the already unreliable battery of the Kluger decided to die. In addition to this, while driving back into Oberon to buy jumper leads for the Kluger, the members of the Golf received a phone call from the Astra informing them that they were not only lost but also stranded at the bottom of a frozen intersection. After finishing the snowman and leaving Oberon, the pair had only just avoided sliding off of the road after the Astra lost traction while braking for the intersection. At this point, with only one of three cars still functional, the

team decided that the day was a lost cause and all efforts were instead put into rescuing the two cars and their chilly occupants (no battery, no heating). After the Golf (ol' reliable) returned with the jumper leads and completed the Kluger's second rescue for that morning, the group was now faced with the task of driving back to Oberon in snow thick enough to completely obscure the road.

At one point the Golf, while ascending a particularly steep section of blanketed road, actually began to slide sideways on the road despite having traction control.

Once the group had returned to town they briefly stopped for a rest at a rest stop near the Oberon skate park. A small snowball war was waged. They then moved further into town and spent the rest of the day in one of the pubs playing pool with some friendly locals (come on Chris!).

Finally, after leaving the pub in the evening and returning to the campsite, it was discovered that several tents had collapsed under the weight of the snow. Undeterred, the owners simply slept in their cars instead.



A representative scene of the weekend: the second of many car rescues. Photo by Nick Jowett.



Top: the first car bogging and rescue of the day. Photos by Chris Bradley. Bottom: the snow cleared enough on the second day to actually go caving. Photo by Nick Jowett.

Sunday 18 July: Mammoth Cave

In the morning the group awoke to discover all of the snow had melted overnight, rekindling hope of actually making it to a cave. After a quick breakfast the group departed Oberon and returned to Jenolan.

Once at the caves the group geared up then drove to the top of Burma Road. Two members opted to walk rather than drive. On the way they briefly stopped to inspect the ruins of the old Cavers Cottage, destroyed during the

aforementioned fires. After departing the cars and continuing on foot to Mammoth Cave, they stopped once again to take note of McKeown's Creek which was running higher than usual. Once at Mammoth Cave, after a brief misdirection, everyone except Chris went into the cave, to ensure that only six members of the group were together per COVID-19 protocol.

We roamed across to Horseshoe Aven, with Lachie struggling slightly to find the Jughandle

after a two-year absence from Jenolan. The track-marking in Horseshoe Cavern had been buried under a new layer of mud deposited in one of the floods, so we were very careful to stick to the faint remains of the previous route so as not to impact the mud. Happily, there were lots of cave worms present, a relief after their prolonged absence through the 2018–19 drought.

The group trundled along Railway Tunnel and took the turn to Hellhole. We had originally been planning to go via Snakes Gut, but figured that as this would likely require digging and we only had a limited amount of time, we'd go the other way. Lachie took the climby bypass, while another intrepid caver took the group through Hellhole itself (said intrepid caver was subsequently heard muttering "why did I come caving again?" as he exited Hellhole). From Hellhole, it was the usual nice rifty meander along to Ice Pick Lake itself. The Lake showed clear signs of having been much higher since cavers last visited, as there were new, untouched mud banks just above the final slotty downclimb to Ice Pick Lake. The climb above that (where you leave the main Hellhole-Ice Pick Lake rift that dead ends) also looked suspiciously like it had been at least partially flooded. It would have been amazing to

have been able to visit the cave and see what it was like during the 2020 and 2021 floods!

No one could be enticed to swim at Ice Pick Lake (one brave soul promised to next time), so the group headed out. There was an amusing moment on one of the dowclimbs where Claud slipped slightly, so Lachie loudly proclaimed 'no, you need to use *these* footholds!', and slipped in exactly the same spot and position as Claud. On the way back out through Railway Tunnel, a fun detour was made into High Shawl Room to admire the excellent formation. However, the group was starting to get tired at this point, so a planned sidetrip to Lower River to investigate the water level was cancelled in favour of an earlier return to Canberra. A relaxed exit from Mammoth was made, back out into the cold outside world.

After finishing in Mammoth the group returned to the cars and then to Jenolan. While de-gearing at Jenolan someone (cough Lachie cough) managed to trigger the burglar alarm in the old school house, although no one blamed the group for the incident. Finally we returned to Oberon to collect our tents (or what was left of them) before returning to Canberra, once again stopping at Taralga for dinner.



The Jenolan Caves sign in winter mode. Photo by Lachie Bailey.



Walking through Monolith Valley. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

The Castle

31 July–1 August 2021

Josh Coates

Participants: Andy Waddell, Elisa Scorsini, Josh Coates, Lachie Bailey, Rowan Phemister

The Castle is among the most iconic walks in the Budawangs. This weekend, five NUCCers set out to figure out why. The Castle was something of an unusual trip for NUCC as it didn't involve any SRT or ropework. Well, almost.

We set out Friday evening, all piled in Rowan's car (thanks Rowan!) and arrived at the Long Gully campground at the base of the walk that night. Our plan was to get up the next morning, walk ~8 km to spend the night in camping caves at Mt Cole, and then walk back ~9 km via the Castle. The planned route wasn't especially lengthy, but involved plenty of ascent.

We set off on the Saturday morning in high spirits. The trail was well trodden and the carpark full, being the most popular walk in the

area. Despite this, we saw surprisingly few people on our outing. We set a leisurely pace, figuring we didn't have too far to walk. Before long the ascent began, albeit gradually at first (thankfully). Sweaty backs were rewarded with brilliant views as we reached the base of the Castle. It is truly an impressive landmark in an idyllic landscape. We then skirted west around the base of the Castle, traversing some scrambly, technical terrain (my favourite). Definitely plenty of potential to roll ankles on this walk.

As we walked into a valley with the Castle to our right and Mt Cole to our left, the real ascent began. When we initially looked up at our route it seemed like a lot of elevation to conquer. When we eventually got the top, I don't think anyone had changed their mind on this. We trudged foot

after foot up the hill, making full use of the roughly hewn log stairs in steeper sections. Nonetheless, the views continued to get steadily better the whole way, which made the jelly legs worthwhile. Rather than heading east to begin the Castle climb, we headed west towards Monolith Valley. We would return to this junction tomorrow to conquer the Castle.

The rest of the walk through Monolith Valley was thankfully relatively flat. I say relatively, as it was still fairly involved at points. Appropriately named, the Valley sports massive jutting sculpturesque features all along its sides. There are a few that look like heads, and one particularly distinctive hunk of rock was the subject of some debate. Dinosaur? Sphinx? Camel? Definitely distinctive, that's for sure. The landscape was also noteworthy due to its recovery from recent fires, and must've looked very different beforehand. Our hands were plenty blackened from the charcoal of the trees we passed along the way. We lost the trail a few times but eventually made our way to our destination for the night.



Ready to start the walk! Photo by Lachie Bailey.



Already, a challenging start... Photo by Lachie Bailey.



Josh on the rock-scrambly route. Photo by Lachie Bailey.



Ascending into nothingness. Photo by Lachie Bailey.



The summit plateau, shrouded in cloud. Photo by Lachie Bailey.

The camping cave was spacious, and we each found a flat spot to set up for the night. 'Cave' is perhaps a strong word, especially to those accustomed to deep limestone labyrinths. An eroded sandstone overhang is a better descriptor. Regardless, it offered protection from the elements (or so we thought). We set up a campfire and milled around chatting and eating for a while, but the exhaustion of the day saw us off to bed early. Unfortunately that night was ridiculously windy, and the overhang only sought

to act as a wind tunnel. The wind kept many of us awake, blew my pillow across to the other side of the cave, and almost pushed Andy off the edge of the cave. Certainly a novel experience!

The next day we packed up and retraced our steps back to the junction at the foot of the Castle. Unfortunately, as we reached the foot of the Castle the weather started to turn, with heavy fog and light rain rolling in. We quickened our pace, still determined to summit but anxious to avoid the tricky terrain while wet. The Castle involves some very exposed scrambles, including hand-over-hand climbs up permanently placed ropes. Some of these ropes looked like they'd been there a long time, with worn rub points the likes of which made us squirm. In some ways the increasing fog cover was a blessing, as it shrouded the sheer heights and exposure from view as we trusted our lives to the frayed ropes and steep rocks. The downside of course was the lack of views. Challenging terrain and exposure were not new to those of us on this trip, but nonetheless parts of this climb left us well and truly spooked. There's nothing like a bush walk with a bit of adrenaline.

We reached the top of the Castle to a plateau shrouded in fog. This left us with no context for the height we had reached, but was an experience in and of itself. The inclement conditions left us with the whole place to ourselves too. Quite the experience, almost otherworldly given the extensive fire damage that left the trees like skeletons in the fog. After some time trotting about the expansive fog-shrouded plateau, we again descended, chuffed with our efforts.

We retraced our steps back down the valley towards our point of origin. Going down is often better than going up such terrain, and we made good time on the way back to the car. All in all, an excellent trip spent in great company, and certainly one well worth repeating! Thanks to all that came along.

Wee Jasper

7 August 2021

Ben Hofmann

Back in the first week of August, before the trivia madness set in, NUCCs ran a beginners trip out to Wee Jasper to explore Gong and Signature Caves. It was great to see quite a few other beginners joining me in learning how to cave as Lachlan gave us a good little SRT refresher to help get down the ladder.

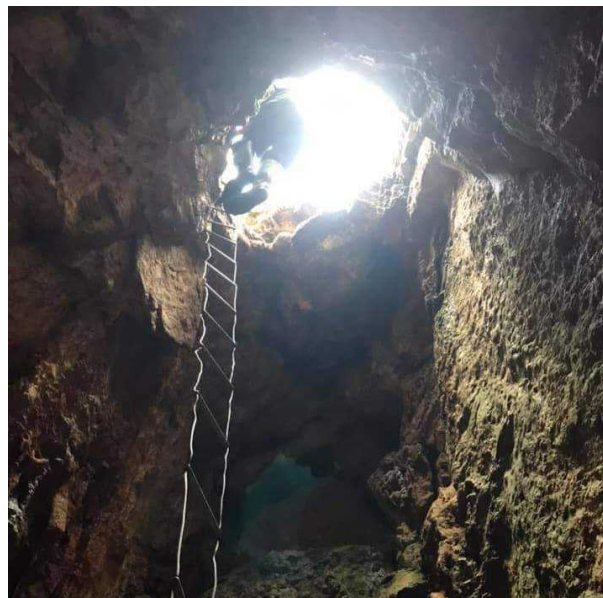
Once down, it was quite a surprise to find a dead snake at the bottom as well as the bags left by a previous caving group. The trip was my first proper experience of caving outside of a boardwalk and certainly lived up to it. It was really exciting/surprising to:

1. be able to really explore each section, and
2. be absolutely covered in mud from beginning to end. Not sure what I was expecting after going into a hole in the ground.

Gong Cave required a lot more rock climbing/sliding skills than expected but was super satisfying to pass through, learning lots along the way. There were a number of first experiences and memorable moments for me:

- being taught about formation and ‘cave bacon’ by Andy,
- learning that a lack of speakers will not diminish a cave rave,
- how seedlings will randomly grow underground,
- being taught about ‘cave bacon’ by Andy (this isn’t just me trying to add filler words, this is now 90% of my memory of the trip),
- being told rocks are different, still doubtful.

Once finished with Gong, most of the group took a much more relaxed stroll through Signature and then a sizzle for lunch. I really enjoyed the trip and would recommend it as a great introduction to caving and the caving club.



The ladder pitch into Gong. Photo by Ben Hofmann.



Lachie and Claud at the entrance. Photo by Britt Meers.



Everyone listening to Lachie's presentation, except Claud. Photo by Britt Meers.

A Caving Epic: discovering the underground link between Australia and New Zealand

14 September 2021

Andy Waddell

Participants: Andy Waddell, Lachie Bailey

Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/0w4ADJlrj8>



Lachie trawling the archives in search of the answer...

Exactly two years ago today, five members of NUCC were busily scrubbing muddy caving gear within a small hut in the mountains. The water was cold, but the hut was warm. In less than 24 hours we would be presenting this gear to Customs. There was a lot of gear, and we knew that drying it in record time would be a mammoth task. But what the heck, we had just completed a 16-hour roundtrip the day before, inclusive of a 173 m abseil. So, we could do anything. Read our 2019 edition of *Speleograffiti* to find out more on this.

Once we finished our cleaning tasks, I sat down and looked through the NSG hut window at the surrounding Takaka Hill (South Island, New Zealand). I thought, wow, this is a big caving system I'm sitting on – I wonder how big it really is? Indeed, by that stage I knew that it was nothing short of an enormous system. It literally includes 'Middle Earth' Cave which, as it turns out, goes above and beyond its name in cavern

size in my opinion. But little did I know exactly how big that system was. That question would be answered two years later in the most unsuspecting of places.

Fast forward in your mind now to a rather boring 2021 Canberra lockdown. Lachie is relaxing in his backyard, fishing in his rather humble pond. Suddenly, through sheer accident, he knocks the NUCC cashbox into the pond and reaches his arm in to retrieve it. But he can't find it. In fact, he can't even find the pond floor. It is at this moment that he knows exactly what he is dealing with. A cave. Naturally, his first instinct is to call me. We live nearby and he wishes he was as heroic as me. Once I arrived at his house, I climbed in the pond, but was unsuccessful finding anything, and naively conclude that it didn't go anywhere. So, we left it at that.

While I was busy doing real work, Lachie, not satisfied with the result on the cave, had been

trawling through the last 100 years of old caving books and club journals to look for hints. That's when he came across the most curious of discoveries. Buried deep within a bootleg copy of the STC (Southern Tasmanian Caverneers) archive (obtained from the black market at a high price of five golden flowstone coins) were rumours of an underground connection between Australia and New Zealand. It was accompanied by a revised map of Australia and New Zealand where New Zealand was drawn a lot closer to Australia than previously thought, and in more realistic proportions. Lachie knew it had to be true, so he called me up to investigate. We had a look at the evidence and were both fully convinced without a doubt that not only was there a connection, but remnants of a map and route to get there – from his backyard!

We knew we had stumbled across a very important piece of information. We knew not to disclose the location of the entrance to the cave, but I am now allowed to say that is in Lachie's backyard (it is gated). So, in full secrecy, and utilising the powers granted to us by the ACT Government health directive, we did what anyone does at the start of an expedition: setup

base camp. At base camp we spent time stocking our cave packs with essential supplies for a long caving journey. Supplies such as a spare duvet, 25 caving helmets, NUCC's secret 6000 m rope and pre-soaked soggy bread rolls would prove essential for our survival.

It would be a shame for me to spoil the details of our underground adventure to you right here, right now, without first showing you the documentary that we filmed along the way, which tells the story better than I can now. You can find our documentary on YouTube (linked at the start of this report) or search for "*A Caving Epic*". Suffice to say, after a few gruelling days underground, we surfaced in New Zealand at Farewell Spit, only 50 km from where I had sat two years earlier, wondering about the extent of the Takaka cave system. Since our discovery, we've been working on connecting all of Australia's and New Zealand's caves into a central system we will call 'Down Under'. Stay tuned over the next decade to find out more. But in the meantime, be sure to watch our documentary. If you're reading this and you're still in a hopeless lockdown as we are, then we hope it will cheer you up!



Hard at work in the director's suite, reviewing edits to the documentary. Photo by Andy Waddell.

Greater Sydney Canyoning: Better Offer & Serendipity

29–31 October 2021

Corey Hanrahan

Participants: Corey Hanrahan, Oxana Repina, Penney Sze (MSS)

Better Offer Canyon



The new Kong GiGi in action on the first pitch of Better Offer Canyon. Photo by Oxana Repina.

After an extended lockdown in Greater Sydney, covid restrictions had finally eased enough to allow canyoning again. Still confined to our Greater Sydney bubble, Oxana and I organised with Penny to do a canyoning weekend at Mount Wilson. We arrived on Friday night to find a very busy Cathedral Reserve campground. Clearly, everyone was making use of their new-found freedoms!

On Saturday, our goal was Better Offer Canyon. While Oxana and I hadn't done the canyon before, Penny was a seasoned 'veteran'. In Penny's previous trip, she broke her ankle early on, and managed to limp out of the canyon with minimal enjoyment. So, with a firm rule against broken bones, I promptly led us from the carpark in the wrong direction. This would also not be my last navigational challenge of the trip.

The walk in followed a fairly obvious track down a ridge. This track was lost after a scenic detour for a photo opportunity. Thankfully, a somewhat hairy bush-bash down a steep slope led us back on track.

In the spirit of avoiding broken bones, we chose to abseil the first drop to avoid a sketchy climb-down. This also provided the first opportunity to rig a pitch with our new Kong GiGi. On trips with large groups, NUCC commonly uses a stone knot to isolate the strands of the rope, allowing for single-rope abseiling on either strand. However, the stone knot is not releasable, and is relatively difficult to tie and inspect. Enter the GiGi – a small, easily-inspected piece of hardware that allows both rope strands to be isolated, and either one to be released. Since both strands are equal, the next abseiler can begin to get on rope on the other strand while the previous abseiler finishes descending on the first strand, which can speed things up a lot in big groups. Given our party of three, it didn't provide much additional benefit, but it was nice to practice in an actual canyon.

The canyon itself was enjoyable. It wasn't particularly wet, but the first section had pleasant abseils and nice constrictions. We then enjoyed a relaxing lunch in a sunny patch, before continuing to the larger drops towards the end.

One of these drops was a spectacular 20 metre free-hanging abseil!

Soon enough, we arrived at the boulder field marking the end of the canyon. The track notes say to follow the cliff, but strongly emphasise not be stay *too high*. Apparently, it was easy to find yourself on a ledge with no safe way forwards.

With this knowledge in mind, I effectively led us directly onto the ledge in question. We had to back-track, but at least we had a nice view!

Originally, we had planned to exit by reversing Birrabang Canyon. However, we made slow progress upstream to the usual Better Offer exit point, and decided to leave this for another day.

Before exiting the creek we spied out five crayfish in a still, clear pool. Oxana leapt at the chance to try some underwater videography with our new GoPro. The main challenge seemed to be that standing in the water dredged up the silt in the creek, so the clear water quickly became murky while filming. This kept us busy for a while, and the results were quite cool.

Leaving the crayfish in peace, we walked up the steep, but well-defined

track back to the ridge top. The entry/exit track also turned out to be much easier to follow on the way out. We were back at the car before we knew it. Back at camp, we had plenty of time to relax, sort out gear, and either read magazines or prepare for job interviews.



Corey rigging the next pitch; looking back up at the big free-hanging one. Photo by Oxana Repina.



One of the huge yabbies! Photo by Oxana Repina.



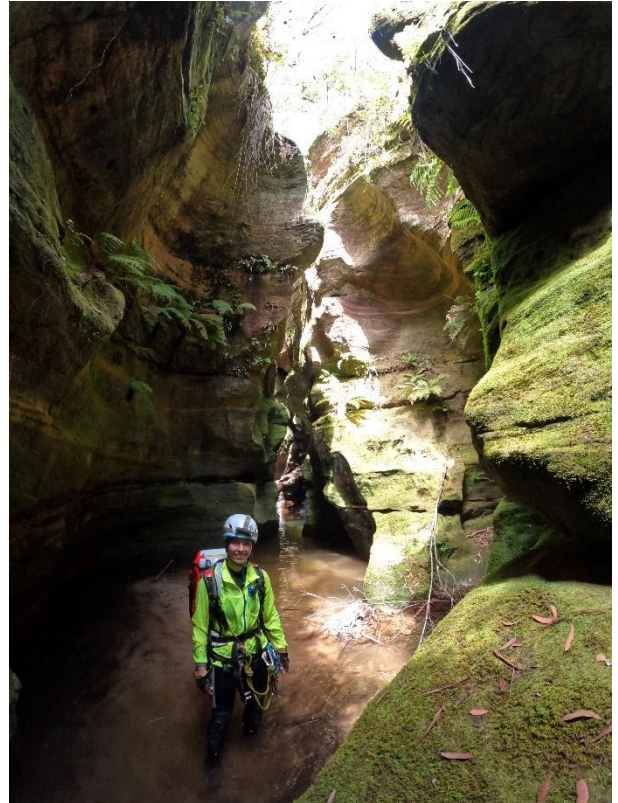
Top: wading up the Wollangambe on the exit from Serendipity. Photo by Oxana Repina. Left: the view from the cliff-line ledge we were specifically meant to avoid at Better Offer. Photo by Penny Sze. Centre right: Oxana on the first pitch of Serendipity. Bottom right: Penny abseiling in Serendipity. Photos by Corey Hanrahan.

Serendipity Canyon

Today's objective was originally Yileen Canyon. However, upon arriving at the carpark, we found that Pierce's Pass was closed due to earthworks. An alternative was in order. We settled on Serendipity Canyon as it had been ages since Oxana and I had done it, and Penny had never been!

The canyon itself was pleasant and uncomplicated. I still maintain that Serendipity has one of the best enjoyment-to-effort ratios of the Blue Mountains canyons. Apart from the canyon itself, the highlight for me was eating lunch on a sunny rock next the Wollangambe at the canyon exit. This scenic location was enhanced by several water dragons who seemed to enjoy the sunny slabs as much as we did!

We exited feeling satisfied with our first weekend away in ages.



Oxana in Serendipity. Photo by Penny Sze.



The big sun-lit rocks at the Serendipity exit lunch spot. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Bungonia Post-Lockdown

31 October 2021

David Quarel

Participants: Austin Zerk, Britt Meers, David Quarel, Lachie Bailey,
Max Etherington, Rowan Phemister

Caving required far more endurance, both mentally and physically, than I had anticipated. While the SRT sessions involved heights, I knew that I was safe, both due to the equipment that I was using and the supervision provided by more experienced cavers. In the unlikely scenario that I would panic or otherwise become unable to safely descend, the belayer would immediately lock up the equipment and halt my descent.

Caving is entirely a different beast. In several sections, I am required to free climb a few

meters, or navigate over/around large pitches, with only a hand line for additional support. With one exception (for a particularly tall climb), no safety line would catch me if I slipped, and while I was not in any real mortal danger, a slip could easily result in a fall nasty enough to break an ankle or leg.

The inability to abandon a cave halfway (unlike outdoor SRT) also presents a mild sense of trepidation, but also a sense of achievement once finally out of the cave.

Cave 1 (B4-5)

The start of this cave is by far the most difficult. One is required to ascend up a rather slippery section with a nasty drop below. Several sections of the cave provide little headroom, requiring crawling on all fours or even crawling on one's belly to proceed. Some brief rest stops with adequate standing room were a welcome

reprieve. Several sections required a degree of contortion to navigate through, but I felt I was in safe hands with the guidance of others to show me the safest choices for foot/handholds. I found this cave more intense than I anticipated, straying a bit beyond my comfort zone, but it was overall a good experience.

Cave 2 (Grill Cave)

Comparatively, the second cave was much more forgiving. The caverns are much more open, allowing full movement as opposed to scuttling around. Several ladders and handrails are also present, and there were few difficult sections. Those that were present also had shallow drops, helping alleviate some of the anxiety for a newcomer.

I had noticed my breathing become more rapid and harsh as we descended, and we could not proceed too far for risk of foul air. Thankfully, we could get far enough in to see the "Crystal

Palace"; a wonderful collection of cave formations in the form of straws and helictites hanging from the ceiling. One can crawl on their belly in some narrow sections to see the straws up close.

This cave was also damp as opposed to the first cave which was bone dry. This meant that several sections were more slippery and required a degree of caution when relying on footholds, but on the other hand, movement in the cave didn't kick dust into the air.



Rowan abseiling in Waterfall of Moss Canyon. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Waterfall of Moss and Geronimo Canyons

4–5 December 2021

Oxana Repina

Participants: Corey Hanrahan, Lachie Bailey, Oxana Repina, Penny Sze (MSS), Rowan Phemister



The team left to right: Corey, Lachie, Penny, Rowan and Oxana.

A pleasant if slightly drizzly night in Cathedral Reserve turned into a relaxed morning pottering around with marking ropes, gear faffing, and general catching up after having spent three months in lockdown in separate cities. After a mishap involving the failure of the Blue Mountains train to stop at Bell Station despite being asked to do so and the resulting 30 minute detour to Lithgow plus a 30 minute drive back to Cathedral Reserve, our group was fully assembled and ready to go. Luckily the walk in to the canyon started at the campground itself.

The route out was fairly standard for canyons in this area, with nice views along the ridgeline. The nose of the ridge required some scrambling down eroded sections to reach the Wollangambe River. During the walk, the initial ‘isn’t it too cold to swim across the Gambe in this drizzle?’ turned

into ‘wow, I’m really warm and looking forward to that swim!’. However, some members of the group remained notably silent during this conversation, and subsequently compensated for this with reluctant whinging and extended faffing prior to finally making it into the water.

On the far side was a somewhat involved climb up a slippery little cliff a few metres high using a handline, made more involved by heavy packs full of rope that had conveniently just picked up a lot of water. We continued climbing up the ridge on the other side, taking a while to find the right route in between cliffhines. We eventually found a footpad that fizzled out before the canyon start but the GPS coordinates got us there. A quick lunch and we were abseiling in.

As we’d read, most of the pitches were fairly awkward, with overhangs plus slabs that

changed the line of the abseil partway down and risked a rope-rubbing swing. However, the canyon was very scenic, with plenty of ferns and moss. It's less of a canyon and more of a 'gorge', which in my opinion (and counter to most Blue Mountains canyons) is a good thing because photography is easier and it's not so cold. The last abseil down the 'waterfall of moss' itself was beautiful.

The final swim/wade down the Wollangambe back to the crossing point was also scenic, but the lack of wetsuits combined with a very unseasonably cold day meant that by the time we got there everyone was frozen and shivering. No matter; luckily for us we had a long slog up a great big hill to keep us warm.

Back at the cars, given the weather and the fact that Penny had to be dropped off at Lithgow Station, we had no other option but to spend the rest of the evening at the pub in Blackheath. With more-or-less good timing we caught the second NUCC group on their way up from Canberra for dinner together before making our way back to the drizzle and dampness of camp.

The original plan for Sunday had been Claustral, and the group fresh from Canberra were still keen for it; but variously due to a sore knee (Corey), a lack of motivation for a long day and late drive home (Oxana), general canyon ambivalence (Lachlan), and a lack of choice due to carpooling (Rowan) our group decided to bail on Claustral and re-route to Geronimo Canyon.

Sunday turned out to be even drizzlier than Saturday. Discussion on the walk into Geronimo turned to hot pies, coffee and pastries at Bakehouse on Wentworth (unarguably the best bakery in the Blue Mountains, as every canyoner knows). As we walked, Corey's knee unfortunately continued to play up and he made the difficult decision to head back to the car and skip canyoning for the day for fear of making it worse.

Lachie, Rowan and I continued down to meet the Wollangambe. Unlike yesterday, the ford was knee-deep; no swimming required – a relief as swimming would have been a nuisance: too early

on to put on wetsuits, but much too cold in this weather to swim in our walking clothes. Route-finding on the other side was a little vague but doable, and after scrambling through the initial lower cliffhills we made it to the walking part of the ridge. The gloomy weather and long walk in had led to a gradual decline in morale. We thought of Corey now enjoying warmth and freshly baked goods and seriously began to question whether he'd picked the better day after all.

But as we finally made it to the creek and changed into thermals and wetsuits (still dry – what luxury!), the excitement of another canyon took over. The pitches were much friendlier than yesterday's, meaning less mental energy was used up trying to abseil very carefully over annoying overhangs and more could be spent on enjoying the canyon. Everything was lush and vibrant – presumably, while the lockdowns and rain had kept out canyons, the canyons themselves flourished during this time. Fish and yabbies darted around in the water.

We'd managed to keep our top half dry through the first section of the canyon, so it was with dismay that we came across the first swimming-depth pool. Glumly I looked out across it, and noticed the very long, thin log stretching through the middle like a flimsy and unstable ray of hope. I stepped up on the log and started balancing across, then switched to precariously bridging against the canyon wall. Lachie and Rowan laughed and awaited the splash. But – we're a caving club after all – this sort of thing is meant to be what we do! I made it across, much to the surprise of the others. They cautiously followed, and everyone stayed dry.

The final pitch required a slightly dodgy climb up to the anchor, and the drop itself was made up of two stages. A big log blocked the convenient route down the second stage, and Lachie chose to bum-slide down it instead. After this we were back in the Wollangambe, and swam, waded and scrambled our way back to our sandy island crossing point. The wetsuits meant that this time it was much more pleasant than yesterday, and the mist and drizzle gave the canyon a beautiful

atmosphere – though the atmosphere was less pleasant for the subsequent walk back.

Overall a great weekend, with three big wins:

1. Fitting in a couple of canyons between lockdowns and rain,
2. Introducing Rowan to canyoning for the first time, and Rowan realising that it *was* fun

and not a lame downgrade from caving after all (no thanks to Lachie),

3. And introducing Lachie to rope bags, and him begrudgingly agreeing that it was at least slightly useful because it permitted easier access to lunch as one does not have to pull out 70 metres of tangled loose rope bit-by-bit to get to it.



Penny climbing the handline up the far side of the Wollangambe en route to Waterfall of Moss, with Lachie waiting at the bottom. Photo by Corey Hanrahan.



Top: Lachie on the first pitch of Geronimo Canyon. Bottom: Rowan expertly bridging along the Log of Hope For Dry Thermals. Photos by Oxana Repina.

Hell Hole Falls

19 December 2021

Lachie Bailey

Participants: Corey Hanrahan, Lachie Bailey, Oxana Repina, many tourists



One of the locals, spotted during an earlier reccie trip. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Hell Hole Falls is a very popular tourist location in Mount Jerusalem NP. It's well known for its nice, deep swimming hole right above a waterfall. Corey and Oxana had done a reccie there on a previous visit up to Queensland, and the three of us were keen to check it out next time we were all up north seeing our respective families. Cue: a mess of COVID-induced bureaucracy to get across the border, but the upside was that we had plenty of time for a relaxed canyon trip.

It's a pleasant stroll in to the falls from the parking spot, almost all along firetrail except for the last few hundred metres. At the top of the falls, Corey and Oxana jumped to rigging while I pontificated to the nearby tourists about the pros and cons of different types of bolts. Well, they did ask... We didn't like the two carrots available as an anchor (very poor positioning), and I was even more unimpressed by the fact that they appeared relatively new.

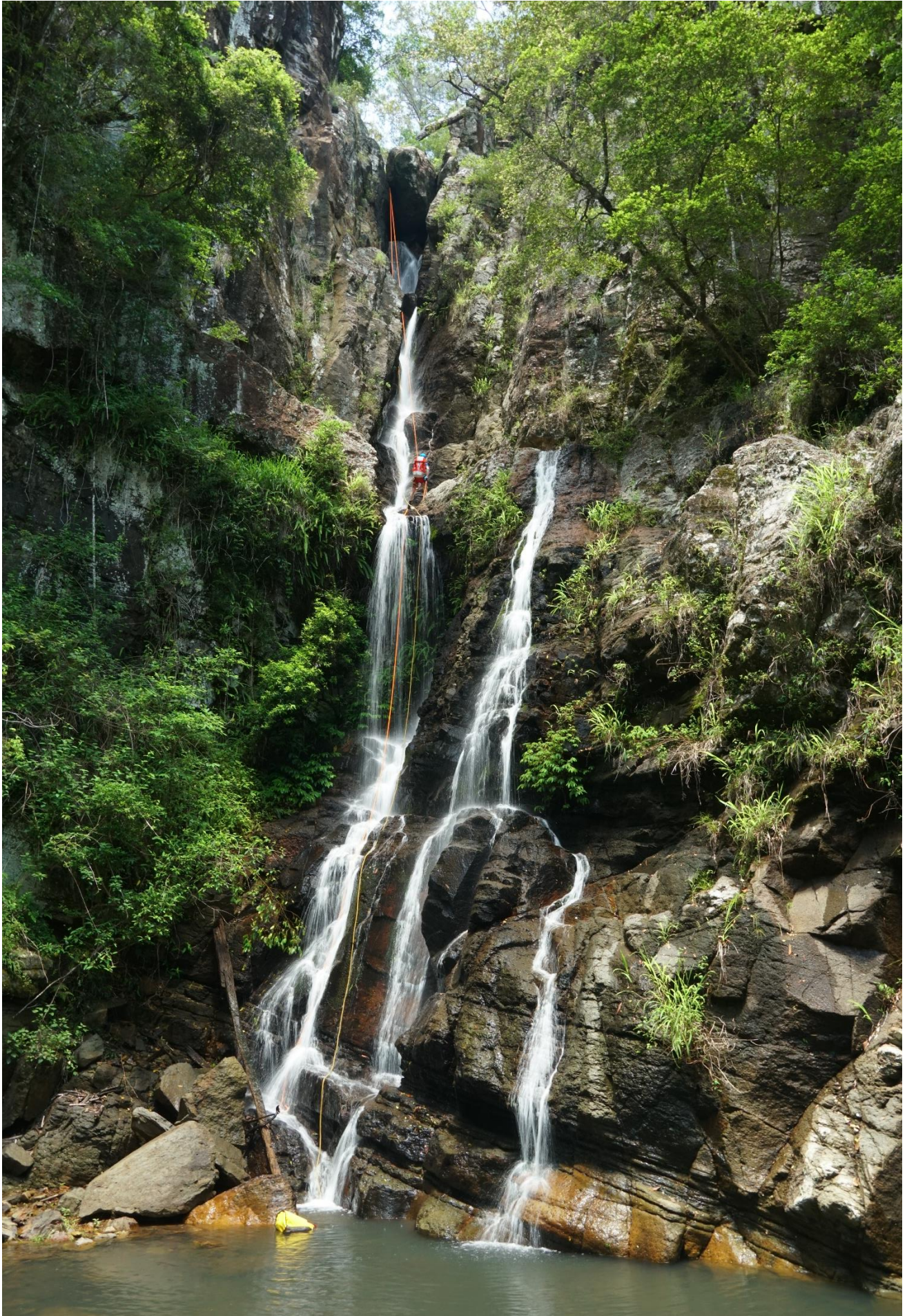
P1 was soon rigged (no faffing allowed when Oxana is rigging), and we were off. The abseil is a marginally tricky start, but the pitch is rather

simple. Very pretty though, and the water was a delightful temperature. P2 is immediately after the pool at the bottom of P1, and has two expansion bolts. Strangely, we also spotted two random carrots floating on the wall opposite the head of P2 – perhaps the remains of some climbing route? It looked like pretty nice rock for it.

P2 is even more lovely than P1. It could very easily be broken into two pitches, but we did it in one haul. It has a nasty crack at the top (plenty of cheesegrater opportunities), but opens up to be a delight. The only disappointment about P2 is that it ends all too soon, and there's no subsequent pitches to follow it up! The exit is a sweaty haul up the true left immediately after P2. There was an entirely new set of tourists to chat to at the top of the falls while we retrieved our bolt plates, who were a bit irked by the idea of abseiling the waterfall. We accidentally sprung a couple noodling⁷ in one of the swimming holes on the walk out, proving the undeniable risks of canyoning at a popular tourist spot.

No carpet python this time though.

⁷ Trying to catch catfish with your bare hands, of course...



Corey abseiling the second and final pitch of Hell Hole Falls. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Bulls Falls Canyoning

December 2021

Lachie Bailey

Participants: Corey Hanrahan, Lachie Bailey, Oxana Repina, a new set of tourists



Lachie abseiling one of the lower pitches. Photo by Oxana Repina.


NUCC's Queensland department decided to continue its exploration of the canyoning options up north over the summer break. Unfortunately, due to COVID and the weather, we were rather restricted in our options, so chose to have a pass at Bulls Falls in D'Aguilar NP.

Bulls Falls has to count as one of the simplest canyons to get to: drive to lookout, walk a few hundred metres, canyon. The proximity to the lookout and to Christmas did mean we had a cast of rubberneckers watching us setting up the first pitch. The abseils all come in quick succession and are quite scenic, but nowhere near as enjoyable as Burnett Ck in terms of simple fun! Still, it is definitely a beautiful waterfall, especially on the last two pitches.

The recent heavy rainfall meant the water in Bulls Creek was turbid and brown, making it a

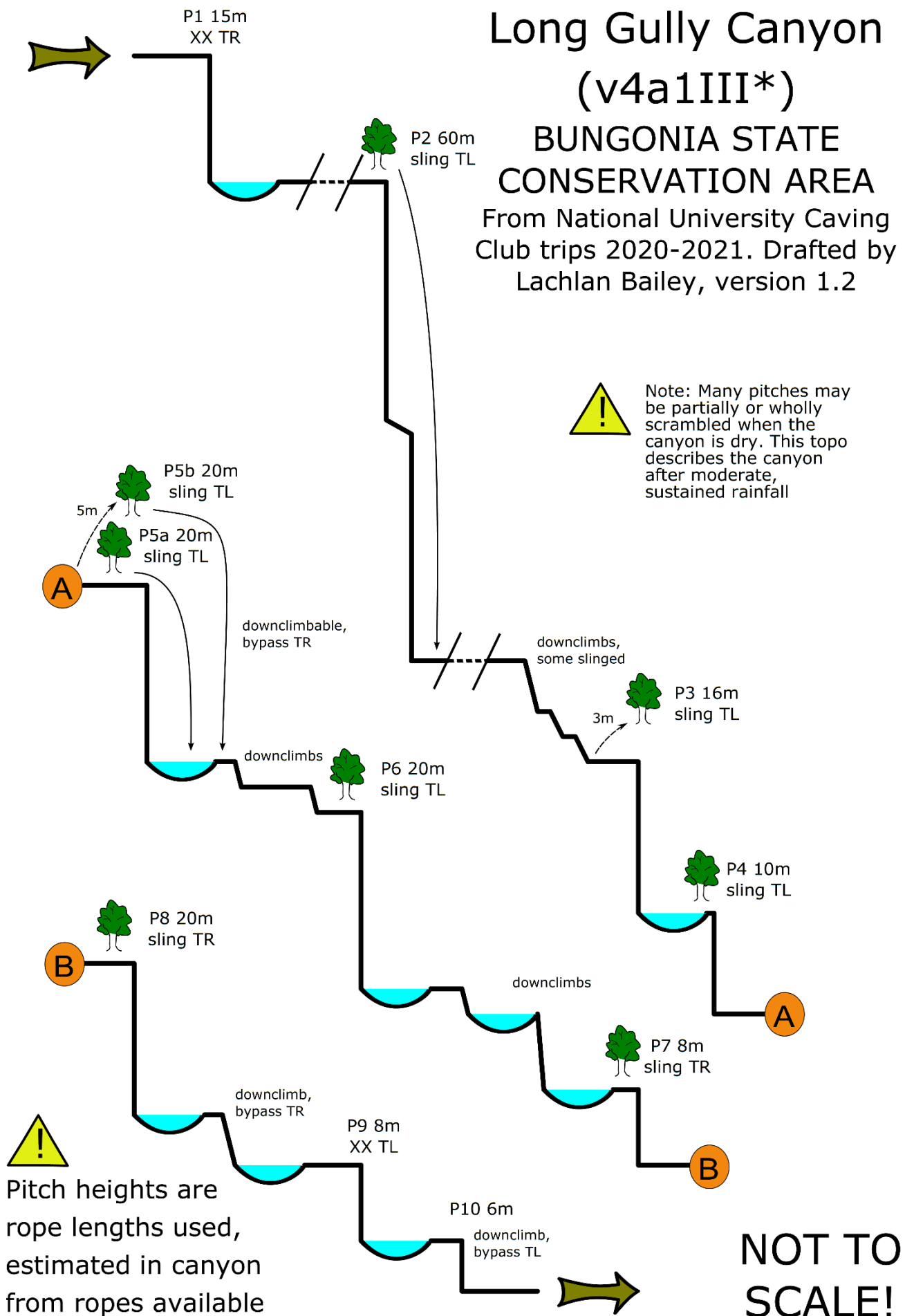
little unpleasant to get into. All of the 4WD mud-wallows in the Mount Mee State Forest immediately upstream probably don't help either! There was a lot of old tat on a few pitches, some of which was in a nearly lethal condition, which we cleaned up on our way through.

After the short and sweet canyon section, we chose to walk out along Bulls Ck to a prepositioned car shuffle on Neurum Ck Rd where it crosses Bulls Ck just upstream of the junction with Neurum Ck. Apparently this road can get a bit gnarly at times, but it was certainly fine for 2WDs in the dry. The walk out down the creek was nice, but nothing to write home about. It was probably easier than exiting up a ridge, but I doubt it really saved much time. There was another optional pitch further down that could be easily rigged – we didn't do it, but I probably would next time just for shits and giggles.

A full-page photograph of a person abseiling a steep, dark rock face. The person is wearing a blue jacket, dark pants, and a red backpack, and is suspended by an orange rope. The background features a canyon with reddish-brown rock walls and green trees under a cloudy sky.

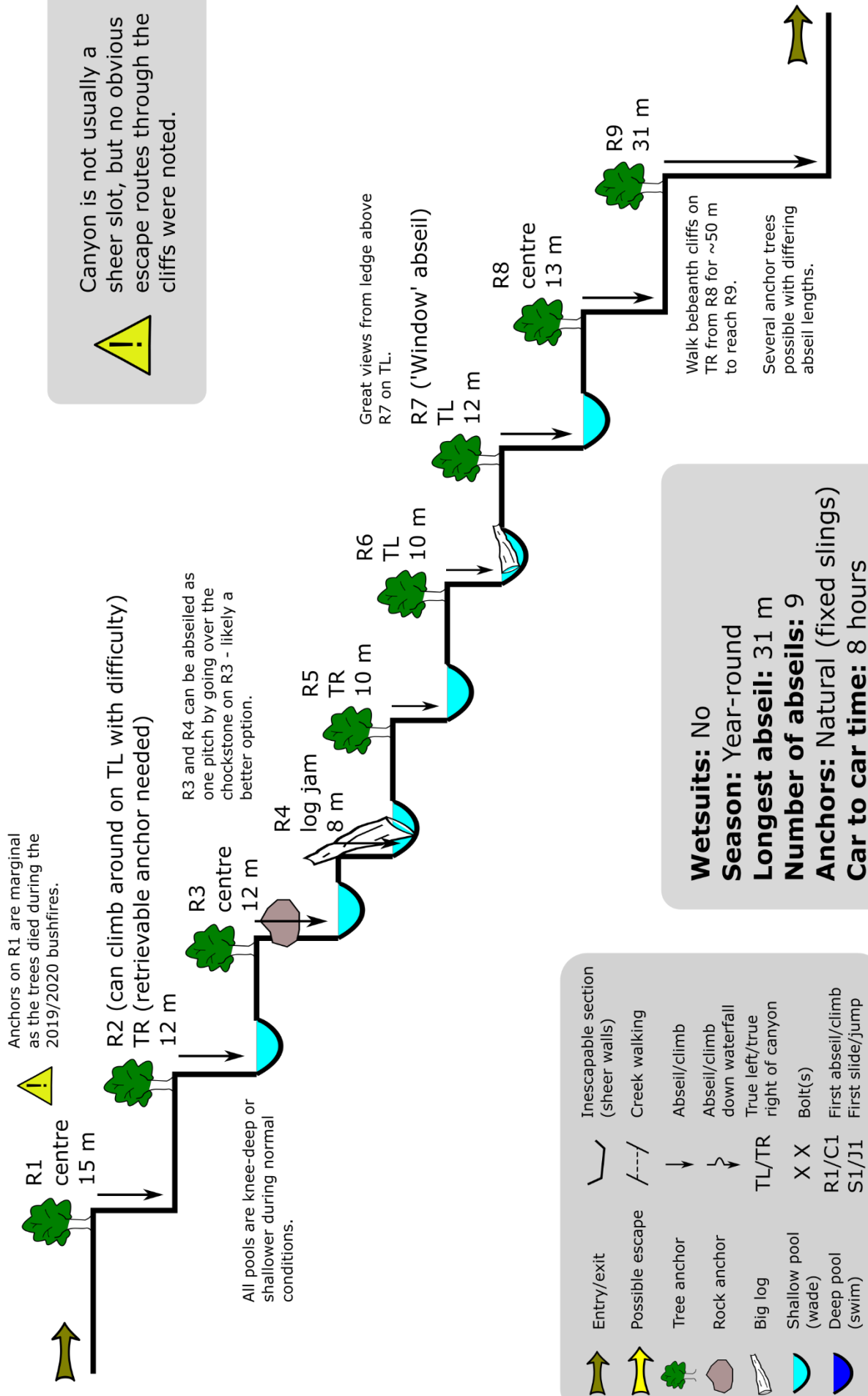
Corey Hanrahan abseiling the final pitch of Windows Canyon, Wollemi National Park, NSW. Photo by Penny Sze.

Canyon topos



Windows Canyon (v3a1III**), Wollemi National Park

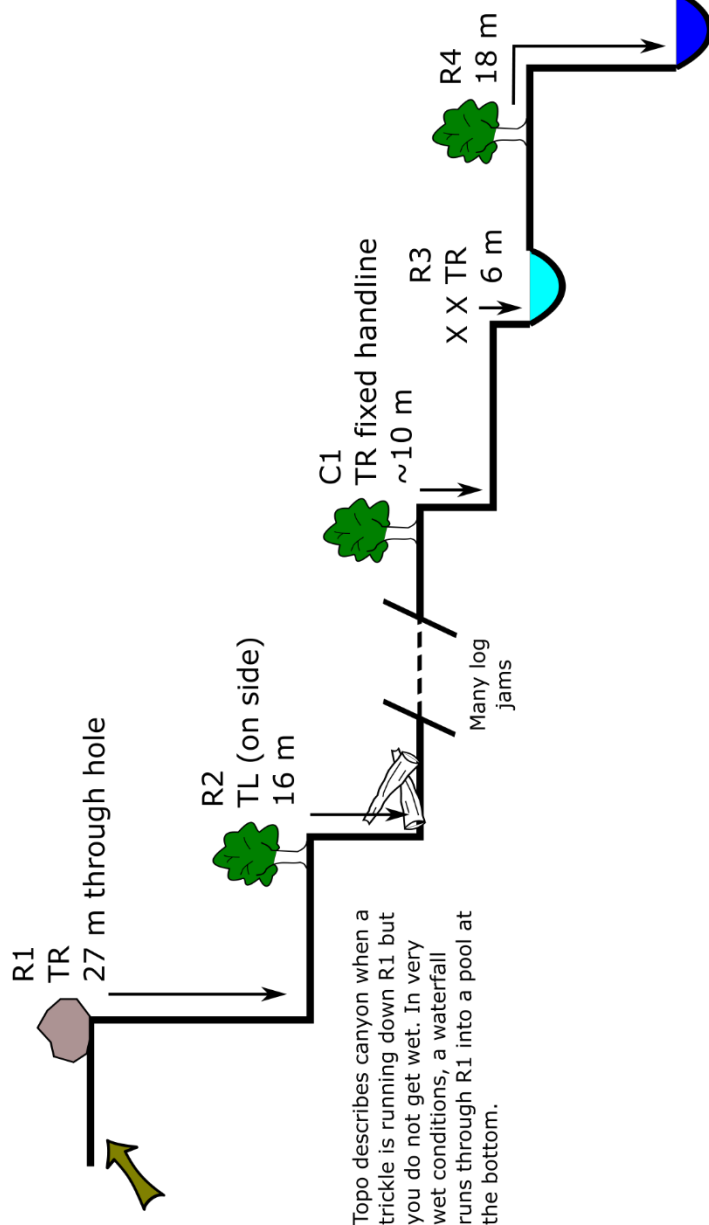
Mapped from trip on 8 May 2021



Hole-in-the-Rock Canyon (v3a2III**)

Wollemi National Park

Mapped from trip on 9 May 2021



! Canyon is not usually a sheer slot, but no obvious escape routes through the cliffs were noted.

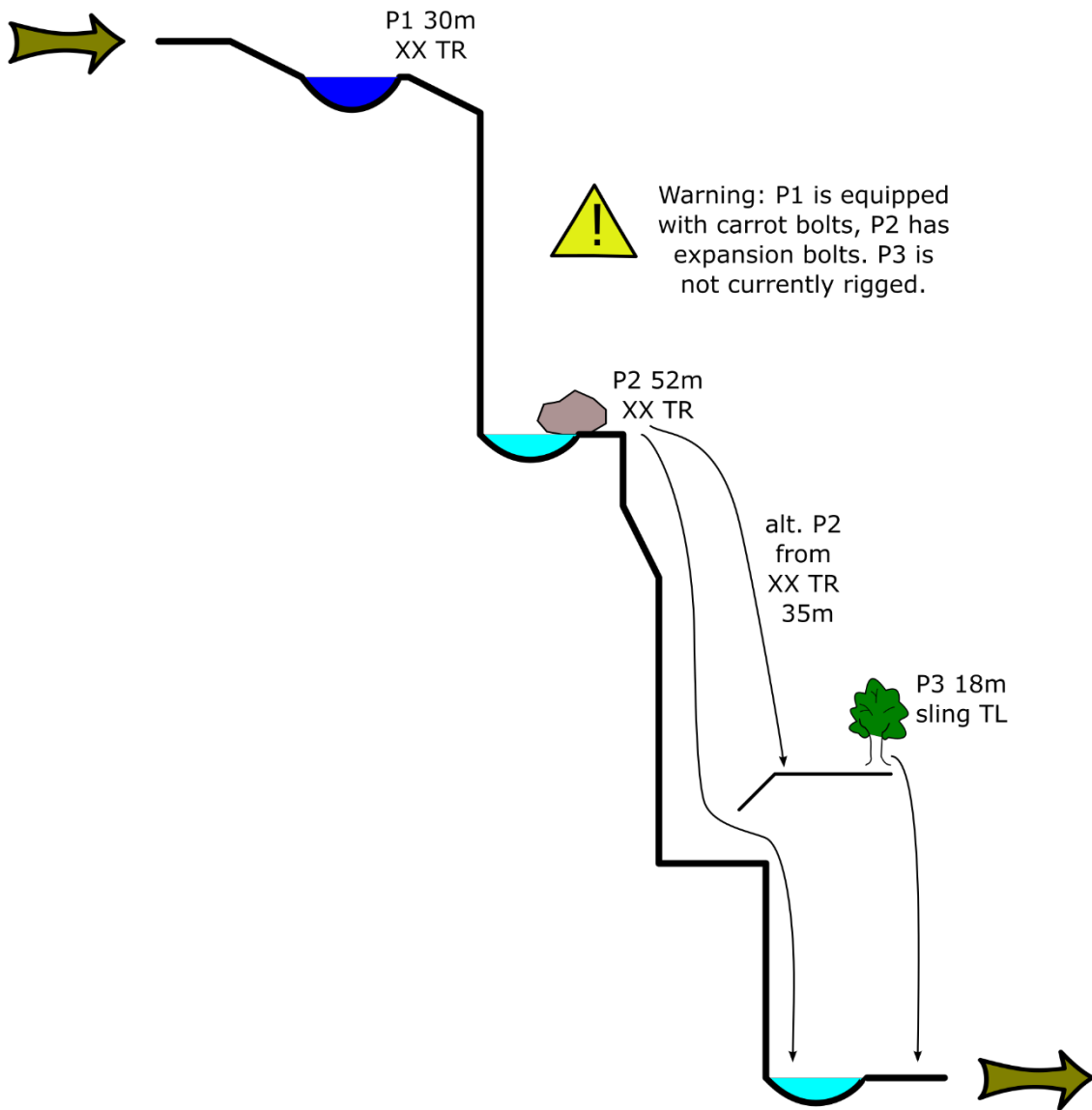
! Sharp rock - bring rope protectors and beware of rub-points.

! Difficult pull-down. Recommend sling or chains to extend anchor closer to the edge.

Wetsuits: No
Season: Year-round
Longest abseil: 33 m
Number of abseils: 6
Anchors: Natural (fixed slings)
Car to car time: 8 hours

Entry/exit	Inescapable section (sheer walls)
Possible escape	Creek walking
Tree anchor	Abseil/climb
Rock anchor	Abseil/climb down waterfall
Big log	True left/true right of canyon
Shallow pool (wade)	Bolt(s)
Deep pool (swim)	First abseil/climb
	First slide/jump

Hell Hole Falls (v4a1II*) MOUNT JERUSALEM NATIONAL PARK From National University Caving Club trip 2021. Drafted by Lachlan Bailey, version 1.2



Pitch heights are
derived from the
rope lengths used,
estimated in canyon

NOT TO
SCALE!

Hell Hole Falls Track Notes

December 2021

Lachie Bailey and Oxana Repina

Access

Park at the locked gate at the end of Middle Ridge Rd in Mount Jerusalem National Park. Continue along the firetrail, then turn onto the first major firetrail off to the left that you see (Sand Ridge Rd). This goes steeply downhill and crosses a small creek on a derelict bridge. Leave the firetrail just after the bridge and follow the creek downstream for 200 m along an intermittent track, crossing as required. Skirt the plunge-pool to arrive at the top of the falls.

Pitches

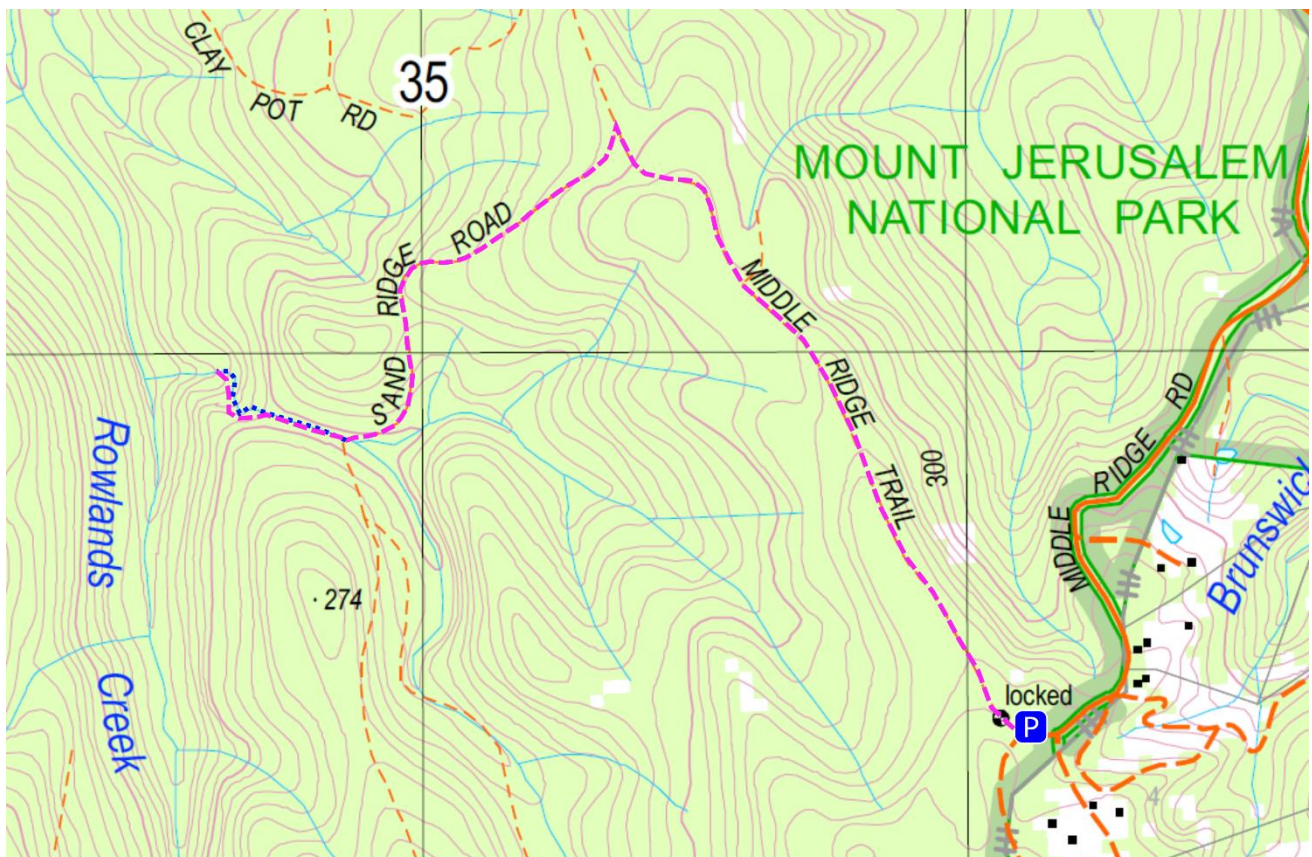
P1 (28 m) – TR, 2x carrot bolts perched back from the falls. Make sure you bring two hanger plates and carabiners to use them.

P2 (52 m) – TR, 2x expansion bolts with hanger plates. Ignore carrot bolts on TL. P2 would be approximately 32 m if P3 is done too.

P3 (20 m, optional) – TL, tree with sling 5m out on ledge. Not currently rigged, but would reduce potential for getting the rope hung-up on P2. P3 can be easily downclimbed.

Exit

Up the ridge on the TL of the canyon just after the canyon end. If you round the bend visible from the bottom of the canyon, you've gone too far. There's no track, but visible evidence other people have exited the same way. You climb up above the top of P1 and drop down to the plunge-pool. Don't forget to retrieve your carabiners and carrot plates from the top of P1.



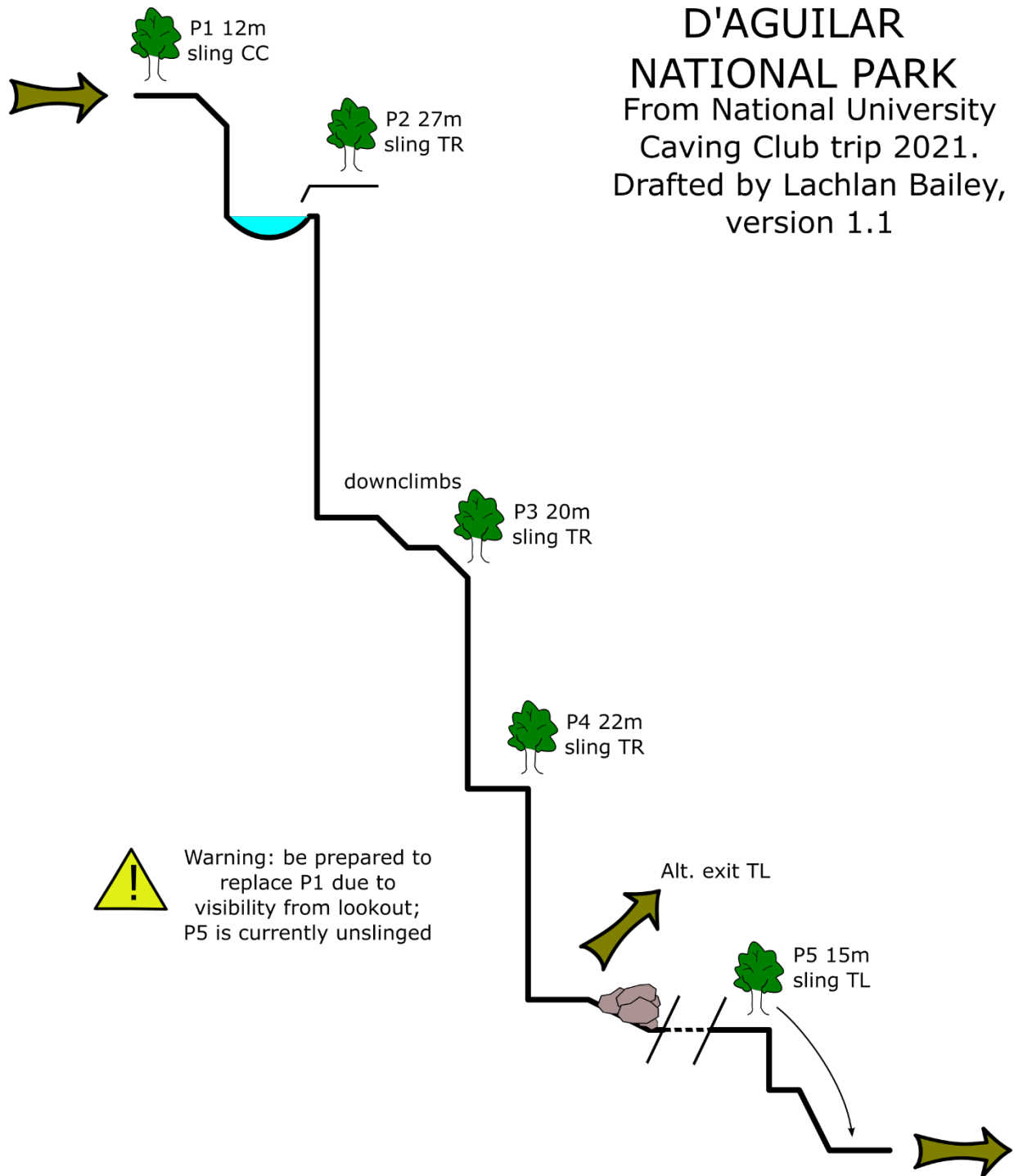
Bulls Falls Canyon (v3a1II*)

D'AGUILAR

NATIONAL PARK

From National University
Caving Club trip 2021.

Drafted by Lachlan Bailey,
version 1.1



Warning: be prepared to
replace P1 due to
visibility from lookout;
P5 is currently unslinged



Pitch heights are
derived from the
rope legths used,
estimated in canyon

**NOT TO
SCALE!**

Bulls Falls Canyon Track Notes

December 2021

Lachie Bailey and Oxana Repina

Access

Most simple access is from Mount Mee via Sellin Rd to D'Aguilar National Park. Turn onto Neurum Ck Rd at The Gantry, parking at -27.086746, 152.697380 on Bulls Falls Rd, a short spur off Neurum Ck Rd. A car shuffle may be established by parking near where Neurum Ck Rd crosses the Bulls Falls creek (-27.073022, 152.702895), but this is not necessary. A short 500 m walk is required to access the falls from the second lookout encountered. Climb down to the left of the lookout to access P1, which is directly adjacent to the lookout.

Note: there is a sealed road to The Gantry, and usually 2WD access to the carpark on Bulls Falls Rd. Neurum Ck Rd past Bulls Falls Rd is more unpredictable, and can be 4WD only.

Pitches

P1 (12 m) – CC, sling around roots fig tree 6 m back from pitch. Be prepared to replace due to visibility for tourists.

P2 (27 m) – TR, sling around small tree. P2 immediately follows P1, a rocky cascade with downclimbs to P3.

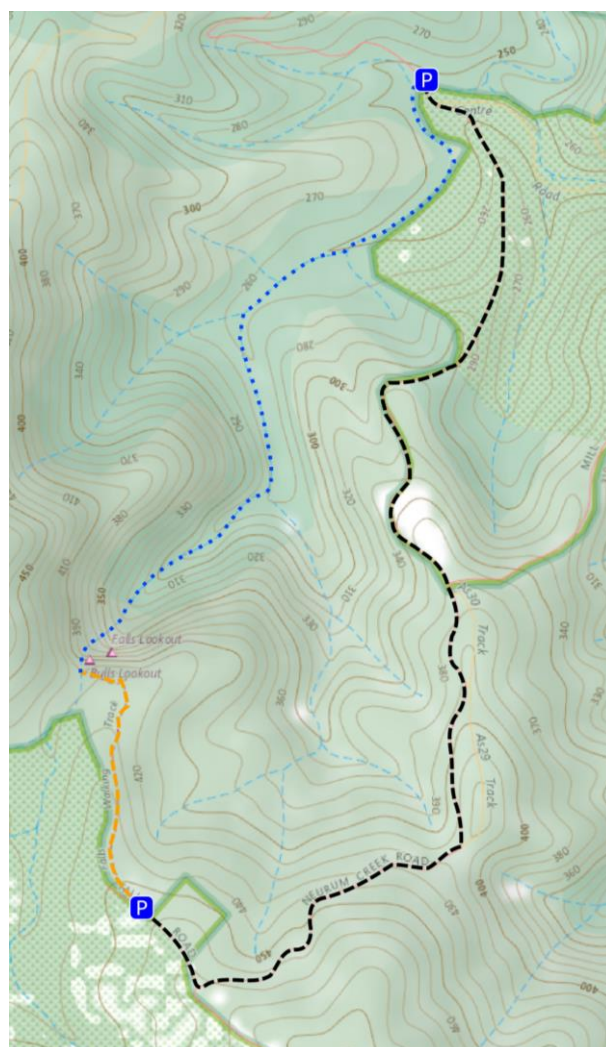
P3 (20 m) – TR, sling around tree.

P4 (22 m) – TR, sling around tree. Immediately following P3. Canyon degenerates into boulder pile and occasional creek walking to P4.

P5 (15 m) – no current anchor, but plenty of options. Short, two-tiered semi-vertical waterfall. Easily bypassable on TL or TR. P5 is notably distant downstream of P4.

Exit

Bulls Creek is easily escapable at almost any point, and P1–P4 all appear to be bypassable by downclimbing on the TL. If a car shuffle was established, continue downstream from P4 along the Bulls Falls stream until Neurum Ck Rd is encountered, with the going easier after P5. Otherwise, the simplest exit is probably up the TL of the canyon immediately following P4.



Other reports



The resident water dragon at the Serendipity Canyon exit. Photo by Oxana Repina.

WJ18 Howler Hole Incident Report

11 July 2021

Lachie Bailey

Second day of a two day NUCC caving trip to Wee Jasper caves, organised as a replacement for a Buchan trip cancelled due to COVID. All participants were current NUCC members. Arrived Wee Jasper Saturday 10-7-2021, caved Saturday, and camped overnight at the Fitzpatrick Trackhead Campground. Intention for Sunday was a day of surface trogging, looking for unmarked holes and tags on Punchbowl Hill. This was undertaken successfully, with a break for lunch about 2:30–3pm. After lunch, we returned to a cave located earlier in the day, tagged WJ18 (and identified at lunch as Howler Hole) that we wished to visit before returning to Canberra.

Howler Hole was simple to rig, although there was a lack of highly suitable natural anchors. First descent into the cave is estimated at about 4pm. It is not a frequently visited cave, and we were curious to investigate it for potential exploration leads. It is visibly a tight vertical pot from the entrance, with two constrictions at 5m and 10m down. The Karst Index describes it as having a vertical extent of 40m with two pitches, 15m and 25m, and we rigged it with a 40m rope using this information.

The first member of the party to descend has a medium-sized build, and decided he did not want to pass the constriction approximately 5m down. He did a changeover, and returned to the surface. As he exited the cave, he accidentally dropped a camera down the pitch past the constriction. We were willing to abandon the camera, but a second member of the party decided he wished to descend to have a look at the cave and retrieve the camera in the process. He is of significantly smaller build than the first member of the party to descend, and was the only member of the party likely to be able to pass the constriction.

He descended without issue, reporting that the constriction was very tight, but negotiable with care on descent, including temporarily removing his helmet in the constriction and descending while breathing out to make his chest smaller. Once below the surface, the pitch became wider but still very narrow. He landed in a small chamber approximately 10m below the first constriction. Here he retrieved the camera, and several other pieces of rubbish that had been deposited in the cave. He took some photos of the second deeper pitch, but did not attempt to descend any further into the cave. He descended with no additional gear beyond his helmet, headtorch, and SRT kit, as manoeuvring a cave pack would have been difficult due to the tight nature of the pitch. Three members of the party had remained at the entrance to Howler Hole with additional equipment at all times while descent was undertaken. We were able to maintain voice contact from the surface to the party member in the cave at all times. Visual contact was lost once the caver descended below the 5m constriction.

The party member in the cave began ascending out at this point, at approximately 5:45pm. He was using a Frog-style setup with a chest ascender and a hand ascender, the latter tethered onto his harness by a permanent dynamic lanyard. Upon reaching the constriction above him, the caver again removed his helmet and attempted to negotiate it. After multiple efforts to pass, he reported to the surface that he was not making any progress through the constriction, and that he was 'spent'.

The surface party had noted the tight nature of the cave, and had thus begun rigging a pulley system as the caver descended, to assist the caver out of Howler Hole if required. On hearing the caver was exhausted, one surface party

member communicated with him to better determine the nature of the constriction, while the other four prepared the pulley system with a second, 30m rope. The caver reported that his chest was physically trapped in the constriction and he was unable to release his chest ascender, making most standard caving self-rescue moves impossible. Attempts were made at this point at a changeover, down-prusiking, and several methods of altering the dynamics of the ascending gear to give the stuck caver purchase to progress through the constriction. All were unsuccessful due to the enclosed nature of the pitch, although he reported that he believed he could move down if his chest ascender was disengaged.

Due to the failure of the self-rescue efforts, a simple hauling system was attempted first, hoping to assist the stuck caver to move past the constriction under his own movement. This was unsuccessful, so the simple pulley system was converted into a Z-haul system. While the Z-haul was able to move the stuck caver upwards slightly, but this also had the unfortunate result of jamming him more tightly in the constriction. The stuck caver was not confident in the manoeuvre, and felt his chest could be injured if he was forced any further into the constriction, so it was abandoned as unrealistic and potentially dangerous. At all times previously, the stuck caver had been able to move enough to keep his body active and prevent numbness, but now there was a real risk of harness hang, as his new position in the constriction pinned one hand above his head resulting in numbness in his right arm.

Due to this changed situation, the decision was made at approximately 6:50pm on the surface that group-rescue was no longer viable, and we needed to escalate the incident. As we had phone reception, the second most experienced party contacted his call-out person (his dad, with extensive previous caving experience) to inform them of the situation, and then proceeded to contact Police. The initial call to Emergency Services was placed at 6:56pm. Simultaneously, a second member of the surface party contacted a Canberra-based member of the NSW Cave

Rescue Squad (NSW CRS) to inform them of the developing situation and potential for a call-out. The Trip Leader requested the NSW CRS member come out to Wee Jasper to provide us assistance if necessary. Due to the access to phone reception, it was decided not to set off the PLB that we had with us.

Following this, two members of the party returned to the campsite at Fitzpatrick Trackhead (approximately 500m away), and retrieved warm clothing, extra equipment, food, and water. The trip leader remained at the pitch in communication with the stuck caver. It was suggested to cut one of the rigging tapes to release some of the back-up slack into the system, which both the stuck caver and the trip leader agreed to. The stuck caver believed he had sufficient foot and hand holds to support himself if necessary. Cutting one rigging tape allowed the stuck caver to lower himself back down into a more comfortable position in the constriction and increased his mobility on rope.

Due to this success, and the failure of the hauling systems, it was decided by the group that the best course of action was to lower the stuck caver to the bottom of the cave using a 50m rope that had been retrieved from the campsite. The group then converted the pulley system into a basic lowering system with a rack for a belay using the 50m rope. The stuck caver was able to attach this second rope onto his long cow's tail. The primary 40m rope at the top of the pitch was then cut, and using the lowering system, the stuck caver was successfully lowered to the bottom of the pitch safely. Food, water, space blankets, warm clothing, and a candle were lowered to him at the base of the pitch. He had a lighter and was regularly testing for foul air, which was not observed in the cave, but was a possibility due to limited air movement. The stuck caver put on the warm clothes as a precaution, but the cave itself was reasonably warm and there was no real danger of hypothermia. He was able to physically recover some strength after eating some food and drinking a small amount of water. Contact was also made with the stuck caver's mother, to

inform her of the situation. As she lived locally, she began preparations to arrive at the location.

Shortly after the pack of supplies was lowered to the stuck caver, the first members of the Police response team from Yass arrived. This was around 8:20pm. They assessed the situation, and began coordinating the arrival of Fire Rescue, Paramedics, and Police Rescue. They lowered a two-way radio down to the stuck caver along with a gas measuring device. Air quality readings were within the safe range, reducing concerns about foul air. Members of the NUCC party assisted as best possible, keeping communication with the stuck caver, guiding parties up and down the hill, and fetching supplies for party members. The NSW CRS member from Canberra remained on scene, but ultimately was not required due to the successful lowering of the stuck party member to the base of the pitch. Overall, there was approximately 25–30 people involved, including several paramedics who arrived via helicopter based in Bankstown.

Once Police Rescue arrived at Howler Hole, they established the site, and prepared extensive rigging. They fixed a winch over the entrance pitch, and one Police Rescue member descended into a nook just above the constriction to assist the stuck caver. The stuck caver was able to observe the fine control afforded by the winch as the Rescue Squad member slowly descended into the cave, which had previously been an area of concern. The stuck caver's harness was stripped down to remove potential obstructing elements in the constriction, except for the foot loop. Unnecessary gear was sent back up the pitch in a cave pack, allowing the Police rescue member to observe the best route through the restriction. The rescue squad member instructed the stuck caver to refrain from climbing while on the winch to conserve his energy and the caver was hauled up to the restriction successfully. Once the stuck caver reached the main constriction, the stuck caver realised the remaining carabiner would crush into his chest during the constriction. He suggested removing it and tying the D-ring directly into the rope attached to the winch. The Police Rescue

member agreed, and as the caver had sufficient footholds, he was able to briefly come off rope 10m above the ground and remove the crab. Using the added flexibility of the winch, better positioning directly over the pitch, removal of obstructing gear, and immediate assistance in the constriction, it was possible for the stuck caver to be guided past the Police Rescue member and safely exit from Howler Hole, followed shortly by the Police Rescue member. This was at approximately 11:30pm.

He was extracted safely, with an on-site paramedic confirming no significant injuries or breathing difficulties, and released back to the group and his mother. The site was then disestablished, and gear all carted back to Fitzpatrick Trackhead around 11:50pm. Rescue personnel then departed, while the group struck camp. The party member who was entrapped in Howler Hole departed with his mother, and the rest of the party departed for Canberra approximately 12:30am. All party members arrived home safely by around 2:30am.



Two images showing the rescue response and emergency personnel at the top of Howler Hole. Photos by Chris Bradley.



Elisa and her sculpture Stàlagma at the Unearthed exhibition.

Unearthed: the exhibition

June 2021

Elisa Scorsini

The exhibition

'Unearthed' is an archaeology and anthropology student-lead exhibition held at the ANU in June 2021. The exhibition showed the capabilities of students in conveying academic/scientific research to a broader community using non-conventional approaches. This event also proved how important non-verbal communication is, and its potential in exploring new insights in the artistic or scientific fields. The exhibition had great success among academics, including those outside the niche areas of archaeology or anthropology. I personally found the opportunity to collaborate with my colleagues very inspiring. To make the experience even more challenging, I decided to create a sculpture representing stalagmites and stalactites.

Where is my idea from?

Combining geology and archaeology allows us to reconstruct past human sites. Speleothem morphologies formed through the precipitation of calcium carbonate from groundwater, such as stalagmites and stalactites, act as multi-proxy datasets for paleoclimate. Stable isotopes of oxygen and carbon ratios in speleothem analysis record key information about rainfall variability, sea level rise/fall, and vegetation response (White, 2007). Through their concentric geometry and incremental growth, speleothems can provide time spans of 10,000 to 100,000 years per meter of formation (McDermott, 2004). Interpreting the lithostratigraphy of an archaeological site also provides data on environmental changes and land management.

Soil stratigraphy guides the reconstruction of landscape evolution, human activities, and how both are intrinsically connected. For this reason, geological studies in caves and archaeological environmental research contributes to gaining a holistic understanding of the past environment.

The sculpture

Stalagma arises from combining my 'early-stage' geoarchaeological interest and my adventurous and exploring spirit through south Tasmanian caves. The formation of speleothems and sedimentary stratigraphy are both ongoing and ever-growing processes, whilst the cave or the soil is 'living'.

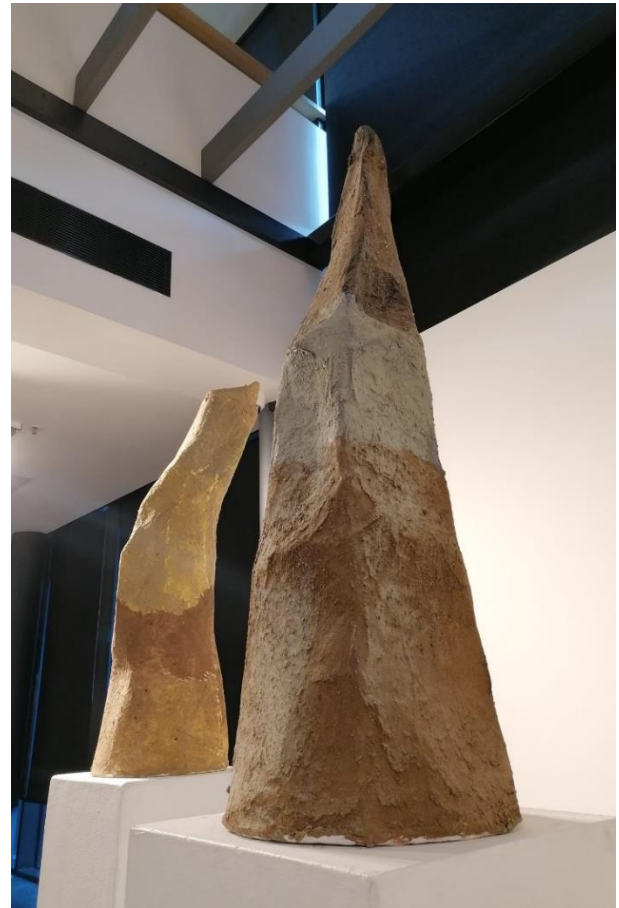
Throughout last year, my nostalgia for archaeological fieldwork and my impatient desire for a promising future gave my soul inspiration in creating my own stratigraphic interpretation of life, and my personal portable cave! To create the two stalagmites and the two stalactites I used vegetable cages, papier-mâché, paint, sand/gravel and lots of LOVE and PASSION.

So, cavers from the underground, if you are stuck in lockdown or unable to go exploring, I hope that my art piece will be for you an inspiration! Oops, sorry, you can't abseil though – that's the fun part, isn't it?

References

McDermott F., 2004 'Palaeo-climate reconstruction from stable isotope variations in speleothems: a review', *Quaternary Science Reviews*, vol. 23, no. 7-8, pp. 901-918.

White W.B., 2007, 'Cave Sediments and Paleoclimate', *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 76-93.





Hat Hill Canyon. Photo by Oxana Repina.

Incident Report: Rocky Creek at Breakfast Creek Canyon, Wollemi National Park

4 April 2021

Lachie Bailey

A party of 14 canyoneers from a group of ASF caving clubs and Victorian university outdoors clubs met up for a long-weekend of canyoning on Newnes Plateau, with only 13 of the group canyoning due to a previous injury (unrelated to canyoning) sustained by one of the participants. The trip was organised and led by Lachie Bailey from NUCC, but contained autonomous sub-groups from several other clubs. On Sunday 4th April, the group split into three sub-groups. A party of two headed out to Bridge Canyon, whilst the remaining 11 canyoneers split into two parties, of six and five people, to visit canyons in the South Wolgan area. The group of six went to Closet Canyon, and the group of five went to Breakfast Creek Canyon. Both canyons are vertical, constricted, and wet, with active streams in the canyon.

Both parties successfully completed their canyons and began the walk out. The Closet party negotiated the pass in the cliffs at GR 493164, and returned along the ridge to SH1014. In the saddle between SH1014 and Galah Mountain, the Closet party spotted headtorches and encountered two members of the Breakfast Creek party. Shortly after exiting Breakfast Creek and beginning to walk upstream on Rocky Creek to the exit pass, one member of the Breakfast Creek party had slipped and injured her ankle while climbing over a fallen log at 4:30pm AEST. She was in a lot of pain and unable to bear weight on the ankle. In light of the apparent severity of the injury (assessed as likely sprained and possibly fractured ankle) and complexity of the exit route from the Rocky Creek gorge, the party leader decided (with the assent of her party) to trigger her personal PLB and initiate a callout. The area has extremely limited mobile reception, and is very rugged in the vicinity of Rocky Creek

with multiple layers of cliffs. Navigation in the area is also currently difficult due to the regeneration of the forest after the 2019/20 fires.

It was decided amongst the party that two members of the group should remain with the injured member, and two walk out. Expecting an overnight stay, warm clothing, a space blanket, medical supplies, headtorches, food, water purification tablets, and firemaking equipment was left with the stranded party. The other party took their personal canyoning equipment, limited food and water, and a GPS to track their route out. A waypoint of the accident site was taken, however position accuracy was likely limited in the constrained environment of Rocky Creek. It should be emphasised that while the party was stranded in complex terrain, it was no longer in a canyon environment, and there were nearby supplies of wood and water, and there was space for the stranded party to bivouac at the site of the accident. Had the accident occurred in Breakfast Creek Canyon itself, a different response would likely have been required, likely featuring self-extraction to Rocky Creek.

The walkout from the area was challenging, due to the multiple layers of cliffs in the region. The chosen exit route required precarious scrambling, and was difficult in the failing light. It would have been impossible for the injured canyoneer in any circumstances.

The two combined parties of eight canyoneers walked out from the saddle together, picking up the firetrail at Galah Mountain. On arrival at the Galah Mountain Road Carpark (GR 466143), the combined party was met by the member who had stayed at camp due to a previous injury. She was appraised of the situation, and informed the

group that she had spotted emergency services personnel in the area. Almost immediately after arrival at the carpark, members of the Lithgow and District Rescue Squad of the VRA arrived, responding to activation of the PLB earlier. Known details of the accident were passed on to them, and then radioed on to Police Rescue and paramedics, who were on the way to the site and arrived shortly afterwards. The two party leaders had been formulating a group response to the situation on the walk out, although a plan had not been finalised by the arrival of VRA. In the absence of emergency services personnel, likely we would have:

- Sent the majority of the party back to camp to cook food for the whole group and get some rest.
- Dispatched one car back to reception (the nearest known reception was at the Waratah Ridge Road–Glowworm Tunnel Road junction) with a written description of the accident and instructions to contact Police on 000.
- The two party leaders would have returned to camp to collect gear to bivouac overnight, along with extra warm clothes, food, medical supplies, and shelter for the stranded party. They would likely have also taken SRT equipment to pass multiple lines of cliffs, as both parties had anchor building equipment, and access to approximately 350–400m of static rope.
- Due to the difficulty of the passes down to Rocky Creek in the vicinity of Breakfast Creek and the rough walking along Rocky Creek, the assistance party would either have camped on the tops to wait for daylight to safely pass down to Rocky Creek, or have constructed a SRT route down the cliffs close to the site of the stranded party.
- In either situation, the assistance party would have remained with the stranded party until help arrived.

This was rendered irrelevant by the presence of Emergency Services, who took over control of the incident and response to it. Response personnel set off several hours after arrival at the site, and arrived at the party location on Rocky Creek in the early hours of the morning. No further input was required from any of the members of the party. Due to the difficulty of access to the location, extraction was not possible at night, although a helicopter did make a pass to investigate possibility of extracting the party. Some modification was also required to the site of the accident to make it safe for helicopter operations.

All three canyoners who had overnighted on Rocky Creek, and the members of the response party, were winched out by helicopter after daylight on the 5th. Due to the number of people involved, two helicopter extraction trips were required. All were taken to Nepean Hospital, and assessed for illness and injury. The remainder of the party, camped at Barcoo Swamp, was informed that their presence was no longer required, and the incident was wrapped up at approximately 11am on Monday the 5th April. Members of the party departed either for home or for Nepean Hospital to pick up the evacuated party members.



Looking across the gorge that the Bungonia Efflux lies in. Photo by Stephen Lambert.

Wyoming Visit – Learning about the Bungonia Efflux

3 January 2022

Andy Waddell

We were chatting around the camping stove at Abercrombie when the Bungonia Efflux was brought up in conversation. I mentioned that my great Uncle Stephen Lambert had been involved in measuring the flow rates during the project in the 1960s. Being historians at heart, Rod O'Brian (Sydney University Speleological Society) and Cathi Humphrey-Hood (Metropolitan Speleological Society) expressed a great deal of interest in learning about Stephen's experiences working on the efflux, as well as his caving experiences when he was a member of SSS (Sydney Speleological Society) in the 1960s and 1970s. So, without any persuasion at all we made eager plans to visit Stephen in Gosford later in the year to have a chat.

On 21 December 2021 I travelled up to the region and was staying with my sister in Broadmeadow when on the morning of our planned visit I was identified as a close contact for COVID-19, and had to cancel the visit. No Christmas for me! Nonetheless we were back in town on 3 January 2022 to try again.

Driving down the Central Coast with Rod and Cathi, I learnt a lot about their recent surface trogging trip to Wombeyan Caves. It was a nice drive, particularly towards the end, as Stephen lives in a very pretty part of town up the hill from Wyoming, surrounded by bush. When we arrived, we were warmly greeted by Stephen who was full of life and energy. At 87, Stephen is incredibly switched on – more so than us!

We were shown plenty of slides from Stephen's caving days in SSS 60 years ago, including some of scouting trips to the Blue Mountains in the 1960s, a trip to Uluru with family, and places such as the Nullarbor and Yarrangobilly Caves. We learnt about exciting events and incidents that took place with Ben Nurse and John Bonwick in the 1960s, including the day they blew into the Efflux. There were some extraordinary photos of the Efflux included in the mix, which are now a part of the ASF library. Stephen also shared with us the vintage camera that was used to take the photos. The camera has been donated to the ASF library. Having been very involved in the Efflux project, Stephen was able to share a lot of the details with us. He was responsible for measuring the flow rates and recorded his findings in a notebook which is now



Andy and Stephen, and the vintage camera!

available in the ASF library in digital form, and includes an informative article on the hydrology of the Efflux at the end. We also learnt about why the project came to an end – in his words, they “ran out of puff!” For Stephen, it came to an end because he left the Sydney region to work at an oilseed laboratory in Narrabri. Overall, we had a very enjoyable and interesting conversation with Stephen, learning about what it was like to cave in the 1960s (and with access to explosives!). We learnt a lot about Bungonia and Stephen's experiences and were able to document a lot for the ASF library. We were very grateful to have his company for the visit

and look forward to being back to learn more at another time in the future. What was the Bungonia Efflux project? It is best put in Stephen's words.



Left: Cavers hard at work removing spoil from the Efflux dig. Right: View from above of the Bungonia Efflux drainage trench. The trench is still visible, but has suffered from many years of abandonment by cavers. The dream of draining the Efflux is likely to never be realised. Photos by Stephen Lambert.

The Bungonia Efflux Project

Stephen Lambert

So called “foul air” seems always to have been a feature of the Bungonia Caves. It consists mostly of carbon dioxide (CO₂), and is formed by the decay of fallen foliage and twigs. It is colourless, almost odourless, and in high concentrations it can be lethal. Leaves and branches dropped into the ‘sinkholes’ – also called ‘dolines’ or ‘swallets’ (which lead to caves such as The Grill, the largest and most popular tourist cave; The Drum, a bat-breeding cave with a huge drop near its entrance; and The Fossil Cave, interconnecting with Hogans Hole and very popular with novice troglaphiles) – are washed into the cave system by run-off from storms. Storms are predicted to

become more frequent and more intense due to climate change and major La Nina events.

Heavier than normal air, CO₂ becomes most dangerous to those intrepid speleologists who, with more enthusiasm than sense, negotiate the flatteners and crawl spaces in the depths of various cave systems, most of which lead into the terminal sump at “the Efflux”. These stalwarts do not carry ‘canaries’ or lighted candles or CO₂ measuring apparatus. Their only guide to a possibly lethal atmosphere are changes to their own breathing, or the distress of their companions.

The Efflux

The principal reason for the tremendous amount of work done by Monsignor Favier's group in the 1950s and members of the Sydney Speleological Society, myself included, in the 1960s – who between them dug down and removed more than 750 tonnes of rock and detritus, and exposed over 15 metres more of vertical cliff face – was not only to get basal entry to the caves but *to restore an air tunnel through the entire system*, providing a “chimney” effect and a discharge vent for foul air, thus improving safety for everyone and a possible future forming of speleothems on bare rock, which has been leached by the carbonic acid from foul air.

Estimates of the age of the rockfall which blocked the Efflux can be gauged by four phenomena. First is the deposition of lime from the carbonate-saturated water from the Efflux further down the gorge than the current post-blockage outlet. Another is the almost total erosion of speleothems in the caves at Bungonia, except in some higher levels of major caves in the system. Thirdly, the red cedar tree (*Toona ciliata*) growing near the foot of the rockfall at the Efflux would also give some indication to a dendrochronologist. My own gut feeling is that

the rockfall was caused by a land tremor, which occurred between 1,000 and 10,000 years ago, and the water-worn rocks which we uncovered in the trench a metre or so above the 24/9/1967 discharge point are a fourth indication of the age of that rockfall.

The blockage at the debouchment of the Efflux stream from the cliff face below the Mass Cave and the Chalk Cave is caused by a massive boulder which has detached from the “facade slab”, a huge super-slab, whose size can be gauged from the extent and width of the crack immediately above and behind the terminal sump, to which we gained entry, on Sunday 24th September 1967 by using several half-sticks of gelignite an60, removing an interfering “nose” of rock, and giving access, across this boulder, to the terminal sump and the rear of the facade slab. This blocking boulder, which I was given to believe is around six metres deep (Nurse & Bonwick, pers. comment during their exploratory dive, Oct. 1967) and evidently detached from the super-slab, possibly due to hydraulic action, has a surface roughly corresponding to that portion of the super-slab above it.



In certain circumstances, a jackhammer is an indispensable piece of caving equipment. Photo by Stephen Lambert.

Poem: the Ideal Cave

14 September 2021

Tali de Mestre

During lockdown, NUCC held several trivia nights over Zoom and the final bonus-points challenge in one of them was to describe your ideal cave to live in...

Dark, but not too dark

Damp, but not too damp

Cramped, but not too cramped

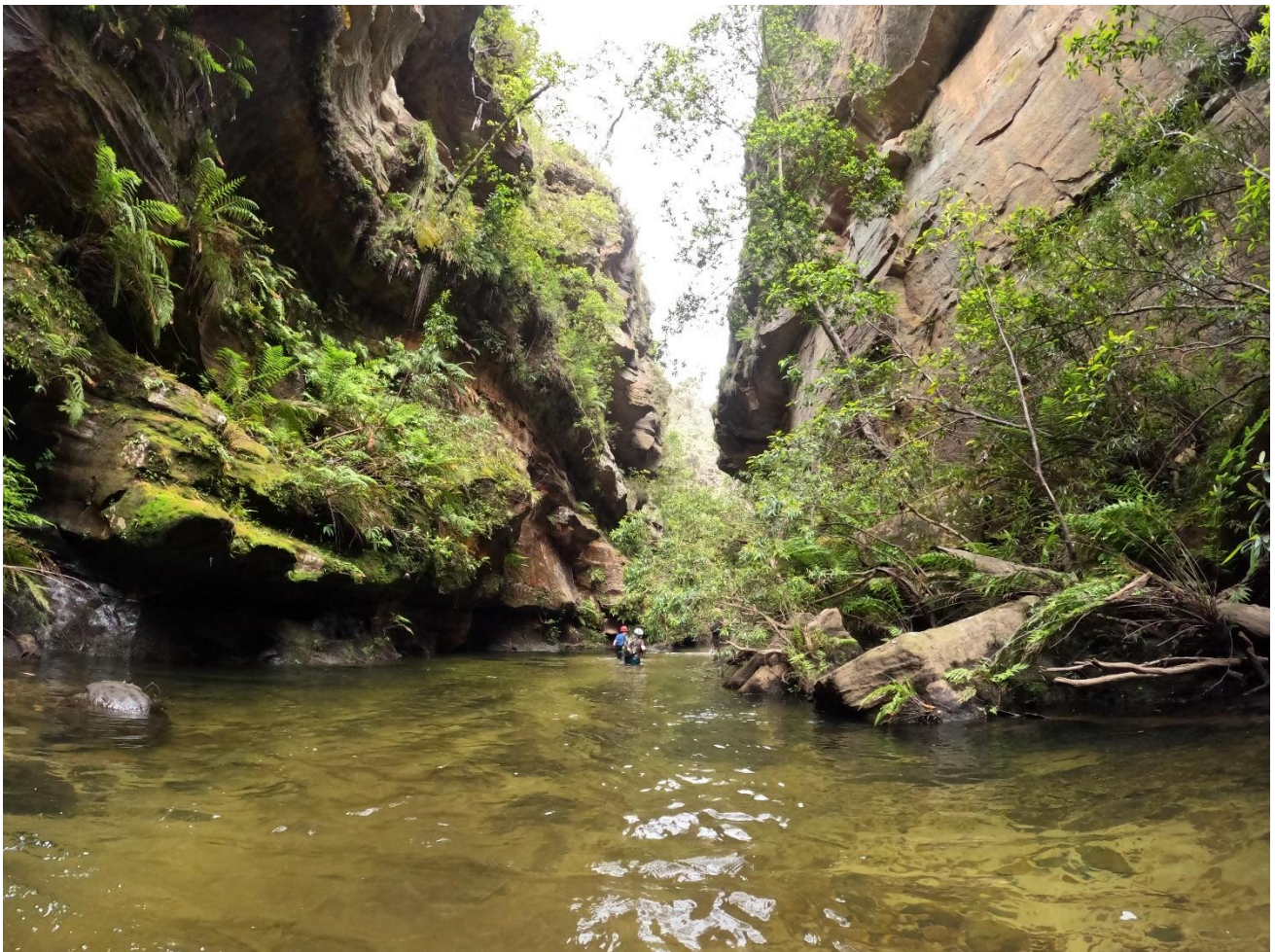
I'd like views, I'd like brews, I'd like a place to do poos,

I'd like it over there, and built with care. Most of all, I'd like fresh air

But that is all of no care, for home is where there are friends that care.

So I would like to live

In a canyon.



The Wollangambe on the exit from Waterfall of Moss Canyon. Photo by Oxana Repina.

