

SCRUBBY CREEK CAVE

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In the North-West corner of the Buchan district is a cave called "Scrubby Creek". Not a very impressive name maybe, but the name belies the character of the cave. Scrubby Creek has been the scene of many an epic trip, not because of its being vertical and long, but because of the mud and water. It certainly is one of the hardest Victorian Caves and is possibly one of the finest sporting caves in Australia.

Geology

The cave is situated along the western edge of the Buchan Basin. The surface Scrubby Creek flows along the contact between the rugged, heavily forested Snowy River Volcanics and the more gentle cleared slopes of the Buchan Caves Limestone. The contact is considered to be depositional, with the limestones sitting conformably on the volcanics. The beds dip at moderate (thirty to fifty degrees) angles toward the east. The first part of the cave appears to mainly cut across the strike until the sump is reached. The sump is a very low section of passage extending some fifty metres. This lowness is possibly due to presence of a dolomite-rich portion of the limestone. This hasn't been tested, but dolomite is quite common in this part of the sequence.

From this point, the cave roughly follows the dip. Where the Loo extension comes in, the passage swings around ninety degrees and follows the strike. This is quite obvious in the large galleries at the far end, the roofs of which are large expanses of bedding plane dipping at about thirty degrees to the east.

The final rockpile appears to line up with a fault shown on Teichart and Talent's geological map.

Description

The resurgence of the cave is at the head of some large, scrub-covered tufa banks. The usual entrance is nearby and leads down to a few metres of low, dusty crawls, past the gate to a high, narrow passage. This goes over a deep pool of water via a bridge of star stakes. A second pool is crossed using a wooden bridge. These pools are actually a large water-filled chamber over which one walks. Beyond this, there are two possibilities to get to the sump. The first way is straight ahead to a small pool with a waterfall. Above this is a hairy climb of three metres (usually requiring a scaling pole). Climbing through a short section of rockpile brings one to the stream. This is followed over some gravel terraces and in waist-deep water to the start of the sump. This way is usually reserved for gear carting on work trips. For those on sporting trips, the rockpile to the left is negotiated. These two routes converge at the start of the sump. The sump is the most famous part of the cave. It is about fifty metres long and up to five metres wide. In places the roof dips down to and under the water but a way can be found through the higher bits where most of the head is kept dry. Half way in is a small pocket where two people can get their heads and shoulders out. The next two to three metres is real 'roof-sniffing' stuff. The danger lies in that there are virtually no sides to the sump. A false move followed by panic could see the victim off to the sides with no air space whatsoever. Fortunately there have not been any accidents yet but there have been a number of near misses. A safety line is usually rigged through the sump.

After the sump the passage is still reasonably low but gradually increases in height, especially where the Grand Fissure comes in. This is a reasonably well decorated high passage running above and slightly to the side of the passage back towards the entrance. It is possibly the remains of an old upper level of the stream.

The main passage continues on as a spacious but sparsely decorated stream passage until the first rockpile. This presents a few difficulties owing to the muddiness of the rocks and cavers and the constriction of wet suits.

After the rockpile the stream is rejoined. To the right and through some rocks is the Loo extension. This is a drained phreatic tube, barely walking height, which is about 200 metres long. At the moment it is the principal floodwater feeder for the system. It ends at the Siren Sump which has been traversed once. It is about sixty metres long with air space ranging down to one nostril, and with pockets of foul air present. This sump ends in a small chamber with a water-filled siphon on the other side which is only sixty metres away from Storm-water Cave, an inflow cave.

Back at the rockpile, the main passage heads off to the left and is the start of the infamous Trogs Wallow, 200 metres of glutinous mud. Walking is impossible, backstroke alternating with freestyle is recommended. At the end of this is the second rockpile, incorporating a squeeze. Soon after the rockpile, Whispering Chamber starts. This is a large passage running along the strike, with a stream flowing along the floor and next to some large talus. The roof is formed by the bedding planes which disappear into the blackness to the left.

About 150 metres further on is a large pile of talus across the passage. The stream flows under it on the left. This is in Xmas Hall, which is thirty metres or more high up. Up on the left is the beckoning hole which has been the target of a number of scaling attempts.

The passage gives up about 100 metres beyond Xmas Hall in a smaller stream passage where it reaches the impenetrable jumble of the third rockpile. This rockpile has "temporarily" halted progress for fifteen years.

History of Exploration

The resurgence of Scrubby Creek was first noted by A.E.Kitson in 1907, when he recorded the tufa banks down to the Buchan River. Frank Moon, the man credited with a lot of the early exploration work around Buchan, was always convinced of a large system in the hill. Sometime in the 1930s he made a free diving attempt on the resurgence, where he almost came to grief.

VCES and SASS speleos knew about the resurgence in the late 1950s but had done nothing owing to the difficulties involved. However on 3 September 1960 John Driscoll of SASS made a diving attempt using a hookah line. He reached a chamber but his line wedged between some rocks and he had some difficulties. In July of the following year a blasting attempt was made to widen the fissure to make diving easier and safer. When this was finished Peter Matthews went to have another look at an unpromising hole which he had found earlier, only this time the hole had a strong draught coming from a rockpile at the bottom. Serge Vercion and John Driscoll then joined Peter and they all commenced to dig

out the rockpile. The first small chamber was entered and excavations came to a halt approximately where the gate is now located.

On the following weekend John Driscoll, Jan Ling and Peter Matthews completed the dig and broke through, exploring as far as the main sump. On the next day, a large party consisting of Jan John, Peter, Ron Addison, John Noonan, Serge Vercion, Silva Vercion and Lorraine Newman, again moved to the sump where John Driscoll and John Noonan pushed the sump far enough to hear running water on the other at this time the water was too high for the sump to be penetrated.

On 26/27 August 1961, an abortive trip was made on the sump by John Driscoll, where he once again had difficulties. As the water was again too high owing to heavy rain, a phone line was installed to the sump and a survey commenced.

During September access to the sump was made easier by the installation of two bridges over deep pools, which made gear hauling much easier. Finally on 24 December John Driscoll, John Noonan and Ron Addison penetrated the sump while Peter Matthews and Lorraine Newman tended the safety line and found the sump to be about fifty metres long. The advance party extended the phone line through the sump and then pushed on to the start of Trog's Wallow, where they stopped owing to lack of time.

Three days later, John Driscoll, Peter Matthews and W. Kunert went through the sump, backed up by Serge Vercion stationed at the telephone at the entrance side of the sump. In ten hours, the main party pushed on to the final rockpile and returned. At the time this rockpile was considered a temporary halt to progress. However this was not to be so and many attempts have been made at this barrier.

The first of these was in April 1962 when a camping trip was undertaken by Elery Hamilton Smith, Ron Addison, John Driscoll, Lorraine Newman and Beth Sowden. Their intention was to thoroughly explore the cave and collect biological specimens. Total caving time amounted to 84 hours, which at that time was an Australian record. It was on this trip that Whispering Chamber got its name owing to occasional rocks (whole chunks of strata) falling from the ceiling, and the apparent need to whisper to prevent more rocks from falling. During this time Noonan, Serge Vercion and Peter Matthews completed the survey in trips of twelve, sixteen and fourteen hours.

For ten years after reaching of the final rockpile, many trips entered the cave, but discovered nothing new. Many of these trips tried cracking the final rockpile by various means but all failed. However, in 1971, a number of side passages were discovered, and two of these turned out to be quite important. The first of these is the Loo and is on the right just before Trog's Wallow. This was discovered by Daryl Carr and Lou Williams who, when venturing up the cave after some heavy flooding, noticed a sudden drop in the flood levels on the wall. Poking around the rockpile wall on the right, they noticed a four gallon drum squashed against some rocks. Further poking revealed the start of the Loo. The first sixty-five odd metres were reasonably easy drained phreatic tube. The next 100 metres is Buchan's longest and most dangerous sump, which is named Siren Sump. A total of fifty hours was spent in digging an eighteen metre long channel to lower the water in this sump to get through. Lou and Daryl penetrated the sump and found it to be approximately 100 metres long with an air space ranging from three to twenty-two centimetres, containing pockets of foul air. The sump finished in a large chamber with a

siphon halting further progress.

The second extension was found by Dave North around the same time. Little information is known about this for conservation reasons. When found it was supposedly incredibly beautiful. The discoverers kept it a deadly secret until they had formulated a way to keep it in its pristine state.

The discoverers surveyed it, photographed it, marked out trails and clean areas and then gated it. A comprehensive Conservation Policy was drawn up (Matthews 1973) which has been strictly adhered to. As a result, the section is probably still in immaculate condition (I don't know. I haven't seen it).

Soon after this Lou Williams noticed a large hole in the Xmas Hole wall. To get to it would require at least twenty-seven metre climb. So in November 1973, he led a trip in to try and scale the wall. (Williams, 1974). Derek Lord and Daryl Carr tried using conventional rock climbing techniques, but failed owing to the walls being of case-hardened mud

A re-think was needed, so in the first week of 1976, Lou led two parties equipped with scaling poles to Xmas Hall (Mill 1970). This also failed because there were not enough poles.

Since then a number of trips have gone into the cave, mainly to familiarize the younger members with the cave. One of these trips penetrated the final rockpile a little further, with some prospects of cracking it. All signs point to more big stream passage beyond it. The surface above the cave has a few small holes and caves, which at times emit gusts of hot air.

Scrubby Creek still has excellent prospects for extensions, and who knows, maybe the next generation of cavers will make the big breakthrough.

