

SOUTH-WEST TASMANIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TWO CAVE AREAS

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Tasmania is the Mecca of Australian cavers seeking deep and extremely sporting caves. Most know of the deep caves of the Junee-Florentine area, the exquisitely decorated caves of Mole Creek or the extensive passages of Exit Cave. However, many other limestone areas are present in Tasmania. The majority of these lie remote in the South-West Wilderness, remaining virtually unexplored.

Two such areas are Exit Hill and the Cracroft. Of the cave areas hidden in the South West, these are two of the most accessible and best explored areas. And yet despite this lead, these two areas remain still, virtually unknown. Obviously we have barely touched the cave resource in the South West.

Located south of Hobart, Exit Hill has the large Exit system developed through it. On the west side, Mystery Creek disappears underground forming Entrance Cave. The creek reappears in Exit Cave on the east side of the hill, Australia's longest cave, with over 17 km of known passage. Numerous shafts penetrate the hill but only one of these, Mini-Martin, had been explored prior to 1980. A track was first cut across the hill some 22 years ago in the first exploratory trip to Exit Cave. It was not until some 8 years later in 1967 that Exit Hill itself was explored for caves. Several entrances were located, but only Mini-Martin was descended. Mini-Martin emerges in Exit Cave near Camp 2. At that time it was the deepest cave in Australia, with a depth of 219 m. It consists of 110 m, 50 m, and 25 m pitches directly above each other. For a further description see Goede (1967) and Taylor (1980). The cave has only been descended on one other occasion (Taylor, 1980), using S.R.T. In 1979-80 the track was re-cut by NUCC, and many entrances were located. Only one further cave was descended, Big Tree Pot, exploration ceasing about 100 m down at the top of a 60 m pitch. This cave almost certainly connects with Exit. The potential for deep shafts is very good since only a small area has been looked at. Many deep, vertical caves penetrating to Exit Cave presumably remain undiscovered. The re-cutting of the access track makes possible a day trip to Mini-Martin, one of Australia's best SRT caves.

In contrast to the depth of the Exit Hill caves, the Cracroft is dominated by horizontal systems. Located on the South Cracroft River in the south-west, the longest cave in the area is Judd's Cavern (C-1), with 1721 m of passage. It was first entered by Henry Judd and Ben Griggs around 1881, and was subsequently relocated and mapped by TCC and ASF parties between 1971 and 1975 (Goede, 1977). An expedition in the summer of 1980 (Gillieson and Taylor, 1980), relocated and surveyed a number of known but unmapped caves, as well as discovering several large new ones. The total surveyed passage length in the area is now 3726 m. It is now clear that Judd's Cavern acts as the main drainage cave in the area. The potential for new cave discoveries is high. Goede (1977) found a positive underground link between Lake Burgess and Judd's Cavern, a distance of some 4 km. A large proportion of the limestone remains unexplored.

South West Tasmania has perhaps the greatest potential in Australia for further cave discoveries. Recent exploration of both Exit Hill and the Cracroft yet again confirms

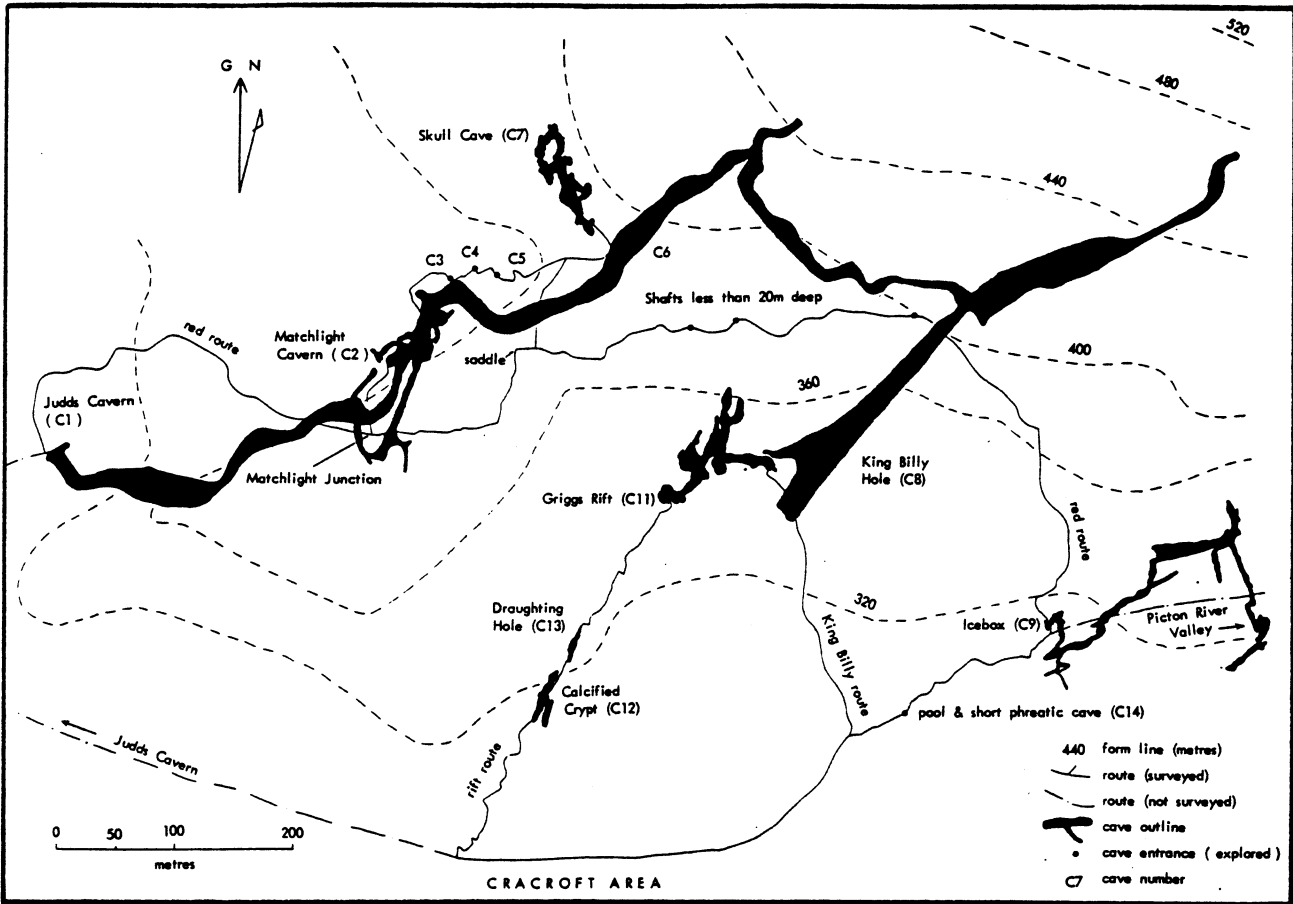


Figure 1. Judd's Cavern (C-1)

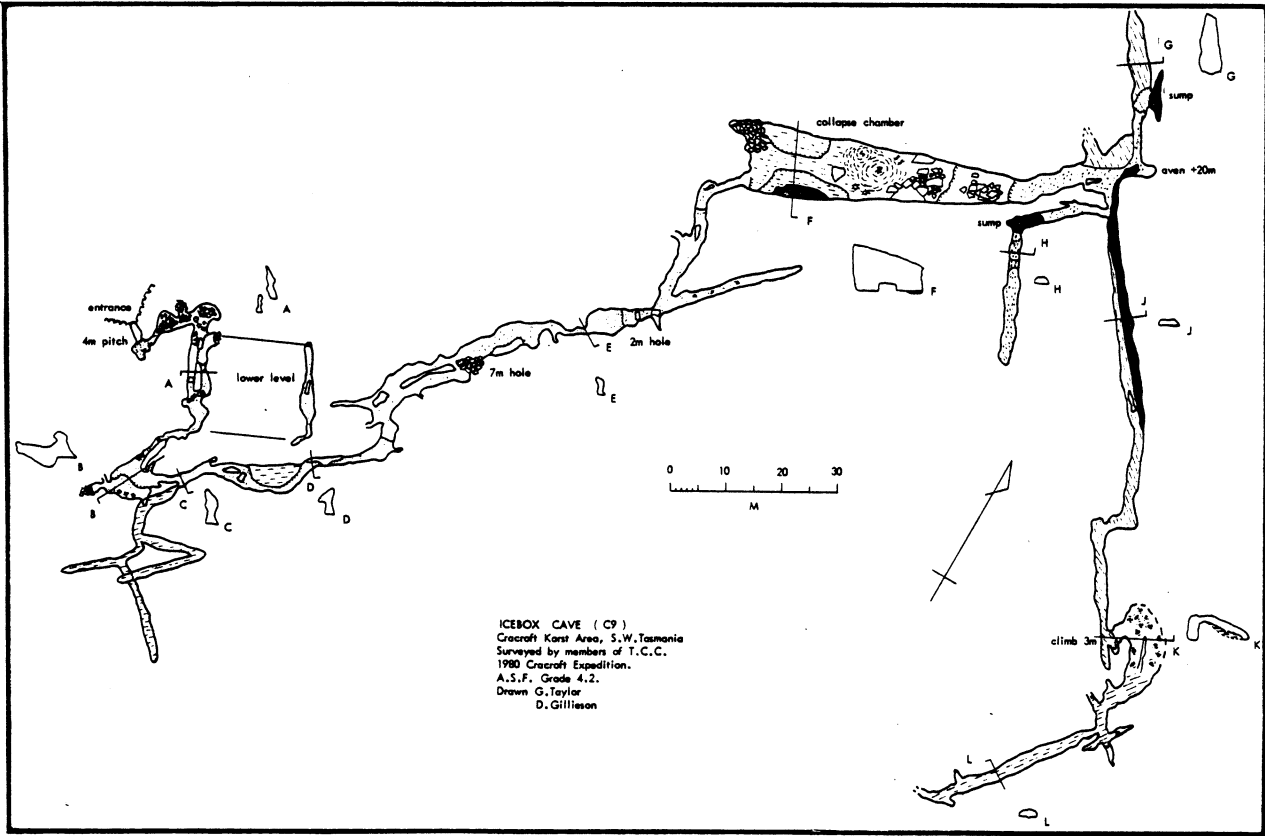


Figure 2. Icebox Cave (C-9)

that, given sufficient effort, much remains to be discovered in the South West. Exit Hill and the Cracroft simply serve to illustrate the potential. The area of limestone in the South West is vast. Precipitous Bluff contains over 2 km of cave passage and yet has received almost no attention from speleologists. Mount Anne represents the greatest depth potential in Australia, whilst the caves of the Gordon–Franklin Rivers have scarcely been looked at. We know almost nothing about the extent of cavern development at Mount Ronald Cross, the Vale of Rasselas, the northern shoreline of Lake Gordon, the Orange River, the Nichols Range and Vanishing Falls, to detail just a few areas.

Unfortunately, the greatest attraction of caving in the South West is under threat. That is, being able to go caving in a wilderness setting: the wilderness caving experience. Exit Hill is threatened by nearby mining and forestry activities. The encroachment of the Picton River Forestry road into the South West, and its associated logging, lessens the wilderness value of the Cracroft. More direct threats have been levelled at Precipitous Bluff and the Gordon–Franklin caves in recent years.

South West Tasmania is a gem to the speleologist, providing an enormous potential for new cave discoveries, as well as providing a true wilderness caving experience.

Let us all act to preserve that wilderness.

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