

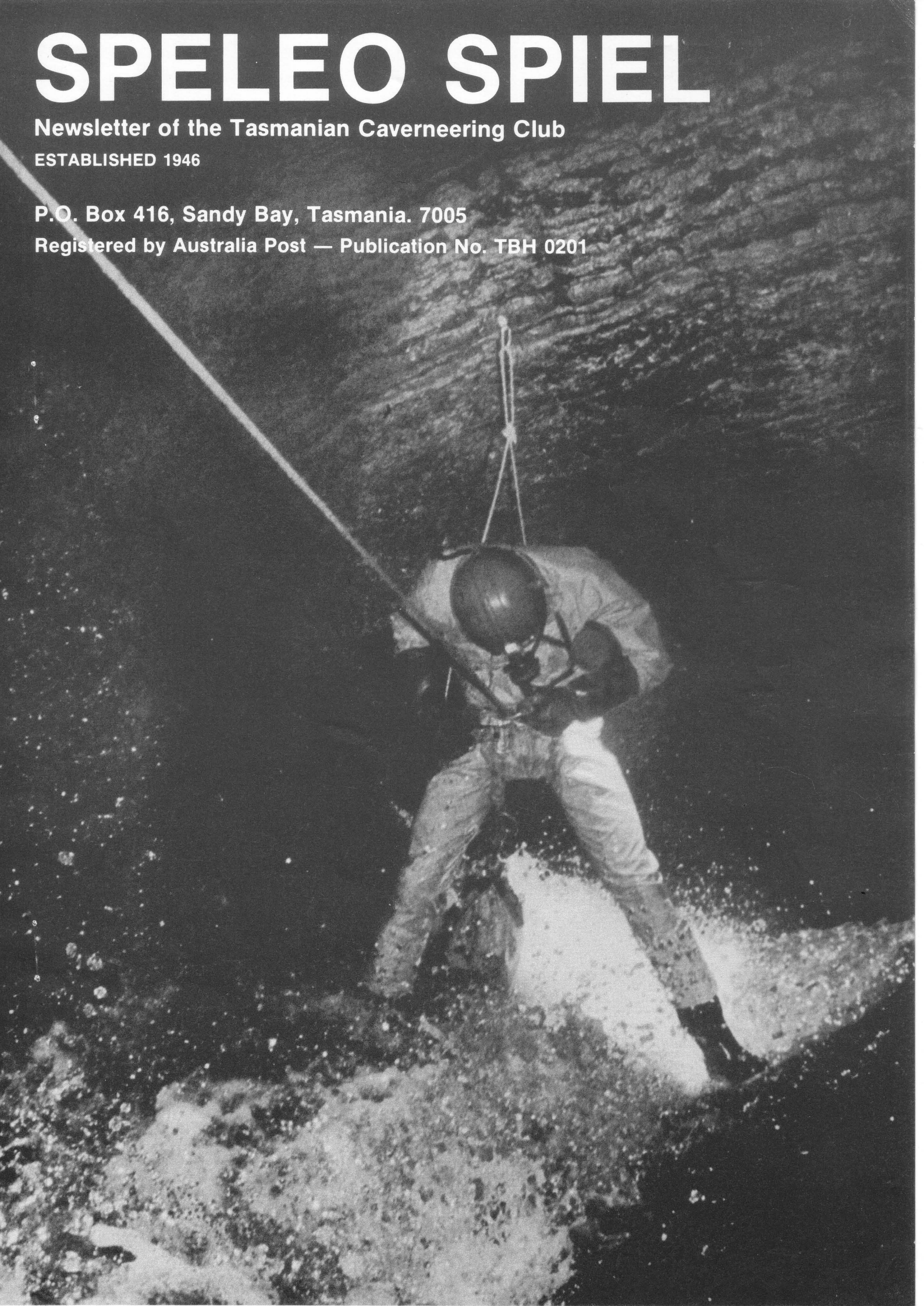
SPELEO SPIEL

Newsletter of the Tasmanian Caverneering Club

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VANISHING FALLS EXPEDITION

It is amazing where a bit of inspiration, a flippant thought and a few days slaving over a cold computer can get you. The inspiration came from an a flight Stefan and I took over the Salisbury River valley, from a 'Vanishing Falls' walking report and from a geology map of this area. On the flight we saw the sinking falls and a huge sinkhole in the side of the hill. The walking report tells of cave entrances, and the geology map shows a large area of Gorden limestone. All very tantalising. The thought - lets write to Australian Geographic - as we will never be able to afford the necessary helicopter charter ourselves. To walk to Vanishing Falls is a minimum four day walk, one way, off tracks through thick scrub. This thought put me behind the computer screen for three days between Christmas and New Year, and out came an expedition proposal, "The Vanishing Falls Speleological Expedition 1992". Thanks to Australian Geographic for their sponsorship and Parks, Wildlife and Heritage for permission to land a helicopter in the World Heritage Area, this is where three of us, Stefan Eberhard, Rolan Eberhard and myself, spent two very rewarding weeks in April.

Our expedition was planned with a scientific basis. This involved the collection of cave fauna, to supplement the knowledge in Stefan's statewide survey, and the mapping of the geomorpholgy and hydrology of the region. There was one slight problem, though, with our

research proposals, there were no caves of any extent known from the area, so to do any research we had to find some first! Vanishing Falls was a totally unexplored karst area.

The name Vanishing Falls is almost self explanatory, it is where a river, the Salisbury, plunges over a 60m drop and vanishes! This could only happen in karst. The water from the falls resurges about 2.5km downvalley, and with that knowledge, anyone who has anything to do with caves could probably not help thinking that with all that water flowing underground that there might just be a cave in there somewhere. The Salisbury is no small river either, above the falls it has a catchment of approx 42km, and is situated in Tasmania's rainy southwest. We envisaged that maybe there is a big cave in there somewhere, and that is just what we found!

This is what happened, day by day.

16th April. Flew in and explored the river from its sinking point to the resurgence.

I cant help glancing at the meter timing out flight as we buzz around the bottom section of the gorge trying to find a place to land. Nobody has landed a helicopter here before. At \$1000 dollars an hour these machines are certainly expensive taxis. Our pilot, Peter Waters, trys taking the machine down first, on the edge of Pungalanna Pool, only to find it has no edges, and then trys again unsuccessfully at a wide, but still too narrow bend in the river just past the resurgence. It looks like we will have to find somewhere further downstream, so we fly off and do find a spot, but its miles away. We have so much gear and food, the thought of having to spend all our time ferrying it up a flooded river to a base camp is somewhat depressing. Anyway, Peter thinks he might be able to get down on top of the falls, it is worth a punt, and he does. It is only Peter's fantastic skill that allows the helicopter to hover above the raging river, clear of all tress, with one skid perched on a rock the size of small kitchen table. We step out with the rotor screaming above our heads, pull our gear out, and then he is gone. The screaming of the flying machine is replaced by the roaring of the falls below us., and we are left to ourselves for two weeks in this very beautiful and pristine wilderness.

Stefan rigs a rope down one side of the falls, and revises the previously reported heights of anywhere between 70m and 90m to between 50 and 60m. But still, this does not take anything away from the falls, they are still pretty awesome, and really pumping from yesterdays all day downpour. At the bottom there is spray flying in all directions, and we'd be drenched in a few minutes if we were not wearing our waterproof trogsuits. Water levels are very high and the river is overflowing the pool it usually sinks into, and is flowing down its normally dry bed. Taking one nights food plus camping gear we follow its path through the gorge. The dolerite cliffs which the falls tumble over, are soon replaced by limestone cliffs which tower in broken sections all along the gorge from the bottom of the valley to the tops of the hills. A small mossy clearing on the edge of the river looks like a good place to camp tonight so we leave our packs

here, and bound off downstream. Over boulders, following the brown tannin stained waters characteristic of Tasmanian's southwest. In places there are deep pools in the river and they have a topping of foam and we liken these to pints of Guinness. The river is sinking about 1km from the falls, down 'The Plughole', in the river bed, but the Salisbury seems to have been getting smaller as we walked along it, so it must sink in other places in its bed as well. At this point the character of the riverbed changes from being full of rocks which are either bare or with the odd clod of moss hanging on, to being full of boulders which are covered in moss, and very slippery, which are interspersed with prosperous ferns. It takes us a couple of hours to reach the resurgence point, stopping and gawking at various limestone features on the way.

At the resurgence the river is flowing out of four caves, and out of its bed in 3-5 other places. One of the caves has a slight draft.

17th April. A base camp is established, and two small caves are found
Our morning drowsiness is dissipated by Rolan's surprised voice, "The river's gone!!!" Stef and I poke our head out of our tent and so it has!. Amazing, the raging black torrent that was at our doorstep is no more, all that is left is a dry river bank, and rocks covered in foam. Someone out there has been having a big party, and we weren't invited, they have drunken all the guinness, and all that is left is the empty glasses. A short walk upstream reveals all, the river is now sinking into a pool just down from the main one. We jug up the slightly smaller looking falls and bring our gear and supplies back to camp. Rolan takes a tumble on the slippery rocks, and hurts his butt, so he beds down for the arvo, and Stef and I head for the hills.

We decide to look at the cliffs above The Plughole. We wrestle with the rainforest until we find ourselves at the bottom of the first tier of cliffs, and we can hear water sinking above us. This is investigated, and a small cave is found, I follow its wet tight muddy passages down for about 50m and notice that the passages seem to be going down, winding between two parallel walls of solid limestone (or not so solid), about 3m apart. There's not much of a draft, and Goretex jackets were never ment to go caving, so turn I around as it gets tighter. Back on the outside, Stefan has found something that looks more promising, its a large entrance, with the same parallel solid walls, but this time they form the sides of the passage, so its much bigger then the other cave. This cave goes down about 20m, and along for about 50m, then there is a small hole. I wonder where it goes, but not too much, no draft here.

18th April. The large sinkholes that we had previously sighted from the air are explored, and they yielded nothing but disappointment. Then we found what we had been looking for.

Today was the day. We were going to find the two huge sinkholes we had sighted from the air and that can be made out on the topo map, enter the shafts in the bottom of them and find our underground river. In fact we were so presumptuous to be worried that if we explore everything now, then what shall be left to do to fill in our two weeks here. But, oh dear, major bumma, we find no caves, let alone bottomless shafts in the sinkholes. What we thought was going to be our trump card, has been defeated. Sitting on a limb in the forest munching some scroggin we are very disappointed, but won't give in that easily. Plan B is to scour that slopes above the resurgence, there has got to a cave here somewhere....please.

We climb around the limestone cliffs, and enter a few small cavities and then we find it. Walking up a small valley, we know we have found something before we can even see it. We can feel a cold breeze blowing in our face, it is so distinctively cave air. Inside the entrance, the way on is not obvious, but there is cold air oozing from between boulders all over the place. We squeeze and crawl around, and the most promising lead is a rift heading into the hill. We leave it at that, tomorrow we will return armed with carbide lamps and trogsuits. We notice that the water level has dropped about 1.5m since Thursday and that two of the resurgences points that were flowing, had now turned into still pools. There must have been some flood in there when we arrived.

19th April. The underground river, 'Rio Negro', is found.

Back at the cave, we head in and disperse, the draft is coming from a number of directions. The passage I follow soon gets too small, so I go back to where I left the others, and find Rolan. He tells that Stefan has disappeared down a squeeze, and has been away awhile. It must be good. We follow, but don't find Stefan, he has disappeared down another small hole. Rolan too disappears, climbing up rather than down and I follow him and we squeeze and crawl, and then walk as the cave opens up. We are following a stream bed now, things are looking promising. The stream bed ends at a four way intersection, and the obvious way on where the draft is blowing from, is a low wide elliptical passage. Suddenly a 'How did you get there?' echoes from the passage behind us. It's Stefan, and he is a bit peeved that we are now in front of him. The three of us crabwalk sideways somewhat maniacally along the passage into the breeze, we can just tell that it's going somewhere good. The roof gets higher and we are almost running, splashing through shallow pools of water, we all want to get there first, wherever this passage is taking us. I stop, 'Listen, I can hear something, flowing water, it must be a river' Just a few paces forward and all is revealed, we have found it, the Salisbury River underground.

Its black, black waters are before us in a deep slowly flowing canal, about 10m wide, they have carved this sheer sided passage through the limestone. As we peer down one side from our passage, it seems very dark, our carbide lights hardly seem to touch the walls, or the roof, 15m above the water. It's hard to see as we are surrounded by clouds of mist, floating up in wisps from our warm bodies, and in clouds around our heads from our warm breath. In front of us the river flows straight, away into the darkness, and to the right, it disappears round a corner. The air is full of fine spray, and it seems to be coming from round the corner. Rolan thinks he can hear a waterfall or rapid, but it's hard to be sure. As we stand enraptured by what we have found, we look around and absorb our surroundings and our lights catch patches of whiteness. On closer inspection we find that this is foam, the same stuff that we found floating on top of the river when it was flowing on the surface. These patches of foam, are everywhere, on the walls, and the roof and in the passage we just came down. Foam everywhere, this realisation sends a chill down my spine, it is a very sobering thought indeed to realise that just a few days before, after a day of very heavy rain, this whole passage was flooded to the roof, and that the passage we came down is a flood overflow, which was also full of water. We will have to be very careful in this cave, but luckily we can keep a pretty good check on the levels by the out flow at the resurgence points.

The water is 10m below us down a sheer sided drop comprised of very rotten, muddy and wet rock. We need a rope to get down this. A bit of scrambling around looking for passages that might run parallel to the river proves unsuccessful. The only way on is down there, via the water, and it looks deep and very cold. We will come back tomorrow with a rope.

On the way out we take time to stop and admire this cave we have just discovered. The cave is formed in very rotten rock, which is a sandwich of fossils layered in between layers of limestone and thin layers of soft rock. It's terrible stuff to cave on, as it all just breaks. To look at though, it is just fascinating, it is so full of perfectly preserved fossils. Some of the layers of rock seem to be comprised wholly of snail shells, many of which are in perfect condition, poking out from the cave walls, the surrounding rock having long since dissolved away. Other layers look like they are made of branched corals, little trees growing on the walls. In places there are larger corals, big round things on the walls. Some of these corals have been partially dissected by the water, and you can clearly see the structure of the calcareous skeleton of each individual polyp. It is fascinating. This amazing array of fossils provides the inspiration for a name to this section of passage - "Wonderful Life". This is the name of a book by S.J. Gould, which tells of the amazing diversity of life found in Precambrian fossils that have been found in shale beds in Canada. A time, it seems, when nature was experimenting with a whole variety of strange and wonderful creatures, whose morphologies represented a plethora of evolutionary survival strategies, many of which were unsuccessful, leaving no living modern day ancestors. The diversity of fossils here leave us wondering what undersea life must have been like in the

Ordovician, the time period from which the limestone which forms this cave are from. We wonder what these creatures must have looked like and what existed in this time that does not live on the earth today.

Outside, Stefan shows us a fine specimen of a troglobitic harvest man that he captured in the cave. He lets it climb all over his hand and we admire its cave adapted features; Its bright orange coloration, showing a loss of pigment when compared to outside harvestmen, its long legs, for feeling its way around its dark environment, its eyes serve no function in the dark and its large palps which facilitate its predatory habit. A fine beast, but its spark of life is drowned in a vial of alcohol, sacrificed for science.

Back up the gorge, I investigate what sounds like a sinking stream when heard from the river bank. It turns out to be just the sound of a waterfall which is instead flowing out of a small and easily enterable cave. There is a good draft coming out of it, but it is trogsuit territory so I wander on. On the side of a small limestone knob nearby I find another cave. The entrance is a rift, has a draft and needs a rope. Further wandering up a dry valley above the spring reveals a swallet, a small creek drops down a 5m shaft, which also looks very wet, more trogsuit territory. Buzzing with the thrill of discovery, I head home. We will have to come back here too.

Tomorrow we will move camp to just outside the resurgence. We spend the night scheming and plotting about our next trip and how we are going to tackle the cave. The deep underground river we found has left us with a real dilemma. We didn't really come prepared for caving in all this water, we all have standard wet caving gear, trogsuits and thermals, but this will only keep you warm if you keep yourself out of the water most of the time. Only Stefan has a good wetsuit, a 7mm dive suit, but no wetsuit booties or gloves. I brought a pair of 3mm wetsuit longjohns, but these won't keep me warm in the 8 degree water, Ok for short periods of immersion though. Rolan has no wetsuit, his strategy is to stay dry, by means of flotation, possibly by using his thermarest and wine cask bladders. We will see.

20th April. Our camp is moved to near the resurgence.

Its raining, just light intermittent showers, and we move camp. The water level at the resurgence has dropped even more, possibly another 1-1.5m, and another of the resurgence streams has stopped flowing. We do not know what the weather is going to do, and keeping in mind the flooding potential of this cave, we decide to leave it for today and investigate a different area of the hills, but find nothing more. We do not realise that the water level today is the lowest it will be during our entire stay here.

21st April. First trip down the black river.

Raining again, and the river level is up a bit, but not very much, it must take the water about a day to start flowing through the system during periods of normal rain. We take the opportunity to push the cave further before the river rises further.

Rolan and I survey over 400m of passage on the way in whilst Stefan goes ahead to rig the pitch down to the water and to collect bugs. He finds a thriving community of cave adapted amphipods, isopods, *Anaspides*, snails and planarians in the pools in the overflow passage, and takes a representative sample of the animals. We regroup at Rio Negro, Stefan abseils down the 7m pitch onto a ledge just above water level, then plunges into the black waters. As he is the only one with an adequate wetsuit, he is the exploration probe to see what lies ahead, and more importantly, how long the swim is. He swims off, lighting up distant passage that our lights could not reach before. When we can see him no more, we can hear his movements echoed up the passage, then there is silence and he is gone. We wait. I hunch over my carbide generator for warmth and blow patterns in the stream that shrouds my body to pass the time. It is an hour later that a little figure comes floating back down the river.

Good news, the swim is only 200m, and beyond that you wade through varying depth rapids, through swift flowing black waters, three meters wide wall to wall. This is "Black Water Fever"! Stefan estimates that he has explored about 300m of passage, and

it is still going, his end point is marked by the fourth rockfall. Can't wait to get in there. Many crickets are stuffed into glass vials for collection on the way out.

22nd April. Rain, high water levels, we headed into the hills.

More rain, and the river is raging, so we leave it be. Back to the hills. Stefan and I head to the King Billy Knob area, and find a huge sinkhole, which does not go anywhere. Then we find another one, but this time the stream sinks into a cave. Its a 10m pitch to the bottom, the entrance opening up into a bell shaped rift, which narrows away from the entrance. I squirm around various possible leads, but they are tight, so I do not follow them. Stefan's bug spotting eyes have found a pseudoscorpion, a rare, exciting find to a cave biologist. Then, just half a metre away, he finds a cave beetle, and then a metre away from that, he find a cave harvestman. Three predators in such close vicinity is a rare find indeed. We call the cave 'Predator Pot'. The same day Rolan explores an unusual detached pillar on a river bend.

23rd April. Waiting, waiting.

Rolan and I explore and survey the rift cave I found the other day, 'Alley Pot'. It has the same unusual character of the other small caves in this area, with parallel sided walls which just go down. Rolan proposes that these are stress unloading joints. Sounds good. The walls go down and get closer and closer together, until it all becomes too narrow, even though we can still feel

a strongish upwards draft. Meanwhile, Stefan has been exploring on the surface, and has found another swallet, up hill from the Waterfall Spring cave.

24th April. Next push trip Into Rio Negro.

Its dropped, the water level that is, yippee, and the sun is even shining on the forest high above on the ridge tops. The waters still highish, but this looks like a good opportunity, so Rolan, wearing Stefan's wetsuit, and me in mine, go for it.

Now, we are standing on the ledge that Stefan launched off from the other day. We are not above the river as he was, but standing in it and it is above our knees. I have left my trogsuit at the top of the pitch, and will swim in my wetsuit and thermals. It is the initial moment of immersion that I have been dreading, it is always the coldest, and yes...arr..oww....it takes your breath away. Swimming along upstream, we fight a current in places, pulling ourselves along on small ledges that jut out from the walls of the canal. You grab a ledge, get a bit of leverage and then it breaks off. Two hundred metres seems a long way in this very cold 8degree black water. I am feeling a bit numb by the time I clamber out on the first rockfall at the end of the canal.

Some chocolate is stuffed into our bodies in an effort to generate warmth, but still I shiver uncontrollably. Rolan tells me that, actually, he is quite toasty. Half his luck, but he is kind enough to offer me the wetsuit top though, but I pull on my Goretex anorak instead, I should warm up if I get moving. So we do, back into the blackness, and after 10m our feet touch down and we wade, the water up to our armpits, but getting shallower. It is unbelievable how black this stuff is, when the water is up to your knees, you can't even see your feet. Thus, we wade up fast flowing rapids, feeling our way along the bottom with our feet and using the walls for support. The walls tower strait above us on either side, in some places small creeks enter from above or through cracks in the walls, and in other places we imagine that there might be a passage leading off to the side, but the with the crumbly rock, there is no chance of climbing up to investigate. Where the river narrows, we cannot see the ceiling, and all along the walls, there is remnant of foam from the recent flood, in someplace 10, maybe 15m above us, and where the roof is lower, the foam is there too.

One, two, three rockpiles, and now as we approach the fourth, we are in virgin territory. This is where Stefan turned around on his trip. At the fourth rockpile, we climb down between rocks into a pool filled with foam. It looks and feels like a washing machine filled with suds, Rolan likens it to a cappuccino.

On through rapids, deep pools, in places we can skirt around the river on ledges, and clamber over rockpiles. Rio negro widens and narrows, widens and narrows, and eventually we stop at

a point where the whole river flows through a small passage, two metres wide with a low roof leaving only 20cm of head room between the ceiling and the water. The draft is just roaring through. Now, it occurs to us, that it probably wouldn't take a very big increase in water volume for this section of river to sump, so that even though Rolan swims through and goes for another 100m, he returns because we don't know what the water is doing and I don't really feel like getting freezing again. We do a quick carbide change then survey out, over 600m of passage. At the canal, I leave Rolan to survey this section by himself, and swim off, I can't really hang around in the water surveying without a decent wetsuit.

Later Rolan tells of his attempt to survey, the canal. He anchored the tape with lumps of muddy rock and then swum off reeling the tape out as he went, until it was near the end. Initially he found places where he could stand to reel the tape in, but the places to stand ran out, so he had to do it whilst floating in the water. In one place he was clinging to what he thought was a large solid ledge, but not so, the whole thing broke off, sending him half a meter under water. Back on the surface he pulled the tape free, and started reeling it in, but it sank and got caught on the bottom, several times. He would free it, and it would then float past him down stream, and one time it wrapped itself around body and limbs. After this, Rolan abandoned the survey, and decided that to survey this section solo, it had to be done going upstream, so that the tape does not get carried past you in the current, hopefully avoiding all the above hassles.

25th April. Ho Hum, raining again. Stefan does a solo push trip into the cave.

Stefan speaks: ' 10am and raining, but time to get in there (Rolan and Vera are having a rest day). The water level has dropped a bit from yesterday, even though there were intermittent showers all day. One hour to the dropoff, taking it slow and easy 'cos its going to be a long trip. Seven metre pitch into Rio Negro - I survey the swim with tape and compass. By the time I finish this section I'm cold , despite the wetsuit, now with plenty of holes in it from the entrance crawls. I start upstream and marvel at the tide marks 15m, above present level; awesome! Each rockfalls seems to act like a giant sieve, backing up the water & slowly letting it through, If there is enough water coming in, it will back up at the next rock fall and so on. I reach the end of Vera's and Rolan's survey and mark the water level and wait for an hour to monitor it. I spend the time catching specimens, plenty of interesting stuff around here, including spiders, Symphyla and springtails. The water level is unchanged, so I go through the low roof stuff that could trap you if the water rose. It opens out, swimming and surveying, alone across a big black pool. The rock is black, the water is dark and mist obscures everything. I arrive at a rockfall and spend three and a half hours trying to find the way on, the draft is everywhere, crawl, squeeze, grovel, its damn frustrating. Finally, I admit defeat, relieved that the cave has at last finished and that we can all go home, but nagging me is that I know there has to be a way on - something inexplicable pulls me towards one small hole for another look and there it is, hidden up in the roof, the way on. More grovelling, and I am

confronted with a 10m crevasse, I could leave it for someone with a rope, but it is possible to bridge down the shaft on rotten slippery rock. No mistakes can be made here, it is the 'Devil's Drop'. More grovelling, its big and misty and I can't see which way to go because it is so dark and misty. No one hears my curses. I know I'm on the other side of the rockfall, and the river is near. Finally I find it, whitewater, rapids and maelstrom. Ahead the river is squirting out of the roof, the way on is barred by a waterfall. What a wild, wild place. Noisy, crashing, reverberating, heavy water, rumbling through rock tubes. I'm pleased to be here, the first but not the last, because the cave is still going. Good to crack the rockfall and find out what is on the other side. I do a pace and compass survey back, much of this section of cave evidently fills to the roof with water. The trip back is quick, aided by the current. The others will be having tea now, I think. I slip in the stream and bash my knee. The canal swim is freezing and frightening, good thing there is no monsters in here!. The washing machine pool is something else; foam city. Eleven hour trip, 726m surveyed. Cave length now 1800m.

26thApril. Rain rain go away come again when we have gone away.

Yep, the river levels are up again. Nothing much exciting happens today.

It is wet, everything is wet, ourselves, our clothes. In the mornings we wring out our clothes before we put them on. There is even mould growing in our tent. Nothing dries down here in the rainforest, the sun rarely touches the valley floor.

27thApril. Waiting still, rain stops, river levels drop, but they are still too high.

Last night a tragedy occurred. The locals that live in the old dead tree, the *Antecinus* (native hopping mice), have stolen Stefan's vial containing his prize specimens, the pseudoscorpion and the beetle. Out of twenty vials they could have chosen from they had to pick this one. They moved two others, but did not take them. They must be after the alcohol on the vials!?!.

28thApril. It is the end.

The water level has dropped and it hasn't rained for two nights and one day now. Rolan and I go inside the cave, and leave behind the outside world, and a raging Norwesterley. We wonder when the storm will break.

We make our way to where we got to last trip. Out from here, the swim through the low section is only 50m so its not too cold, and soon we are at the rockpile. Stefan's cairned route is easy to follow, leaving us with no idea of the difficulties he went through to try to find the way. The route goes up and over the rockpile. At the top of the climb down we rig a rope to use as a handline. Before we descend we hunt for animals, as this part of the cave looks like good animal habitat, as there is much poc marked silt bank. First we find a couple of beetles,

and then a pseudoscorpion, Stefan will be pleased. What's that? A small white spider!, and just keep that vial open 'cos here is another spider, a tinsy winsy one that lives in a small sheet web. Its amazing what you can find when you get your eyes into bug spotting mode.

Down Devil's Drop, past a waterfall crashing through a false floor, through the low wide chamber and wow! We reach the waterfalls. Its just as awesome as Stefan had described and we peer at them through flickering lights, mist and spray. Stef thought that you could climb up the side of the small right hand one with the help of another person. No problems, Rolan uses my knee to get into the chimney beside the fall, and helps me up after him. Beside us, the left hand waterfall is crashing by, a roaring white mass of water, and we still can't see where it is coming from. Carefully, carefully, we traverse through the waters above the right hand fall, clinging gently to the friable rock. This takes up to the top of some large collapse boulders, and into a curtain of mist. Before us, most of the Salisbury river is flowing over an arete, and above this, on either side of the arete, two small falls are coming out of holes in the roof. Just below us the water splits into the two falls.

What confronts us is just exhilarating, our eyes gaze into the white, falling water, our heads are filled with thunder and there is a strong wind. The waterfall must be around 20m from top to ground. Mist, spray, whitewater just everywhere. Our Blackwater Fever has changed to Whitewater Fever. We can go no further, the cave is finished as far as we are concerned. I break a piece of rock off from a boulder that must have fallen out of the ceiling once and fling in into the raging waters, nobody will be bolting their way up the side of this one. The rock is so rotten that it won't hold bolts. We can go home now, but first we wander down a side passage, but it just gets small, and doesn't seem to go anywhere. So we head back, wondering whether or not it is raining outside yet.

Back through the low section, Rolan heads up a sandy slope, up into the darkness. Stals! we haven't seem much decoration in any of the Salisbury River caves before this. There is lots of them, and they are all wonky and covered in moonmilk. The passage goes left. Rolan notices some millipedes on a black substrate, they are white with chunky legs, and don't seem to occur anywhere else except on this black stuff, cricket guano, maybe?. He stoops to collect a few.

Curious to see where this elliptical tube goes, I venture forth and a spot of whiteness catches my eye. It is light? I cover the flame of my carbide lamp, and the light doesn't go away so it must be an entrance! Charge! Amidst a flurry of cave crickets we clamber towards the hole, we both want to get there first, and out into the greenness. Trees, leaves, ferns, moss, logs, warm dry air, and no rain. It takes us a few minutes to work out where we are, and are amazed to find ourselves right next to the river bank. Right next to a bit of limestone that Rolan was measuring joint directions on just yesterday.

Stefan must be out here somewhere, he said he was going up the gorge. A few cooecs do not bring any answer, so he can't be close. We use the rope in our packs to write "Hi!" on a large flat rock in the middle of the gorge. Tee Hee. He'll come by here later this afternoon, and that will get him wondering. Actually later that night we find out that Stefan did see the rope, but he could not work out what it said, he only recognised the 'H'. H for what? Help? So Stef spent a few hours wondering about whether we were in trouble, before he decided that, no, it must have said 'Hi'.

Rolan and I go back into the cave and survey down to Rio Negro, which we measure to be only 30m below the floor of the gorge at this point. Here I leave Rolan, the temptation of a dry, warm walk home is too great. Rolan keeps going downstream, the way we came in, collecting his camera and flashes, which he left on a rockpile half way in, and derigging the rope. Adios, Rio Negro. What a trip!

On his way out, Rolan explores another 250m of passage downstream from our original entry point to the river. Part of this is a flood over passage, similar to the one that we entered the underground river from. However, with no compass, or companion, it remains unsurveyed.

28th April. Time to go home.

The chopper is coming to pick us up tomorrow. We pack and leave camp, back to the top of the falls. We wait.

29th April. Home at last.

Right on schedule, the whirring of blades comes down, scoops us up and we are away.

The End (If there is ever an end).