

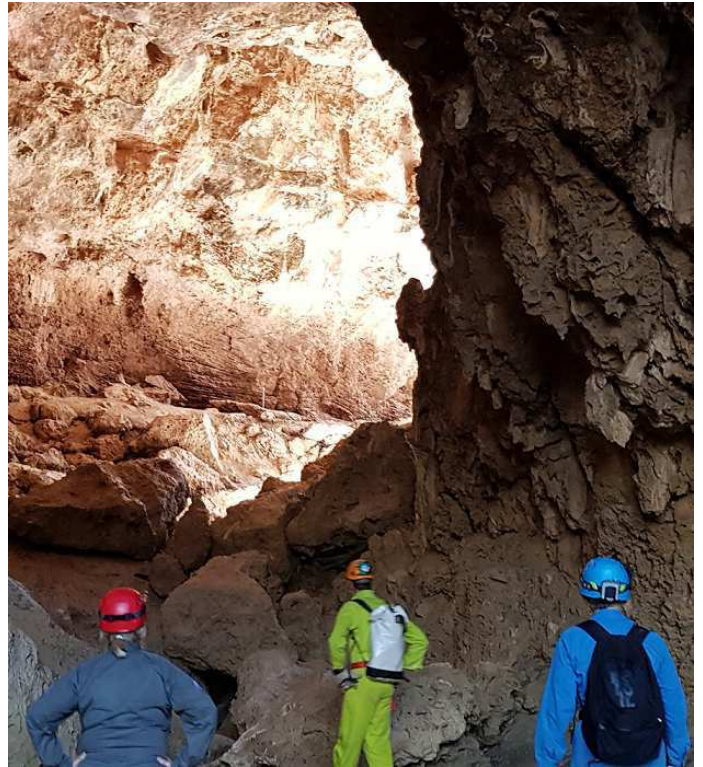
Pre-Conference Field Trip

John Brush

Canberra Speleological Society Inc

There we were, perched on the edge. It was late in the day, we were tired, a cold wind was blowing through our rudimentary shelter and SuperMark was looking worried. The look on his face said it all. Would those difficult easterners revolt at the prospect of drinking Margaret River wine? Did any self-respecting caver actually drink Spumante or Chianti? Would the far-easterners simply prefer a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc? Would those pesky South Australians prefer to stick with their local brew? How does one assess the needs of a lone Canuck? And most importantly, was it true the local cavers preferred their drinking water to come straight from the bore? Such are the difficulties faced by a conference convenor who somehow also found time to organise and participate on the field trip as well as buying all the necessary provisions, arranging transport and booking the accommodation for it.

The original plan was to camp. However, SuperMark organised motel-like units in a caravan park for everyone after one difficult participant threatened to pull out at the prospect of roughing it in the sandy wastelands of coastal WA. SuperMark has revealed elsewhere that he “enjoyed the sleeping arrangements”. I think this means he appreciated the sheer curtain that screened off the double bed in each unit, rather than having separate bedrooms as he had originally led us to believe. It certainly helped engender a sense of togetherness.



In Stockyard Tunnel (Ian Eddison)

The transport and pickup arrangements were complex, but suffice to say that at various times on the first evening, all 14 participants and guides arrived at the Leeman caravan park about 280km north of Perth. There was Tim Stokes all the way from Vancouver Island; Philip and Anne Woodward and Pete and Libby Chandler from New Zealand; Matthew Cooper and Nick Heath from Kangaroo Island; Ian and Anita Eddison from NSW; Marjorie Coggan and John Brush from the ACT; Ian Collette and Greg Thomas from the WA Speleo Group (who kindly agreed to be our cave guides); and, as noted above, SuperMark Delane. Despite the chilly wind cutting through the open-sided kitchen shelter in the caravan park, everyone soon settled back from the edge of their seats to enjoy a welcoming drink and an extensive BBQ meal.



“SuperMark” (Ian Eddison)

Early next morning we headed off for the Stockyard Gully National Park, which is named after the main cave we were to visit. Stockyard Gully Cave is an intermittently active stream passage forming a major part of an underground drainage system comprising several caves and a string of large collapse dolines on a north-westerly trend. All of the caves in the area occur in Aeolian Calcarene, a rock formed from wind-blown calcareous sands. Old sand dunes in other words. It is thought that the caves are syngenetic with cave formation taking place at the same time as the sand dunes were consolidating. The rock is very soft and friable but on the surface it often protected by a hardened crust of redeposited calcite called calcrete or duricrust.

Three sections of the Stockyard system (the Tunnel, the Bridge and Stockyard Cave) are open for public access and since my last visit nearly 40 years ago, visitor facilities such as a car park, picnic tables, formed walking tracks to/from the caves and interpretive and hazard signs have been provided.

The proliferation of hazard signs in national parks seems to be a WA speciality and at Stockyard Gully, visitors are warned at various points of cliff, water, quicksand and feral bee risks. However, my favourite sign, seen in the Nambung National Park at the end of the field trip, was a limestone risk area – “dangerous limestone outcrop ahead”.

In the car park the party split into two groups with one led by Greg going straight to Stockyard Gully while the other one went to Aiennyu Cave with Ian C. After lunch, the groups swapped over.

The walking track to the first cave in the system (Stockyard Tunnel) drops into a gully and then follows it to the stream sink entrance.



From there it is about 300 metres along the main passage to the outflow. On the day of our visit, the cave was dry and it was easy walking on a sandy floor. According to Greg, clearing and farming activities on private land immediately to the east of the national park has resulted in so much sediment washing into the cave that the floor is now several metres higher than it used to be. This seemed a little hard to believe until I later compared photos with some I took in January 1979 (**Editor**—see front cover). Near the downstream entrance, it looks like the floor level is three to four metres above where it was about 40 years ago.

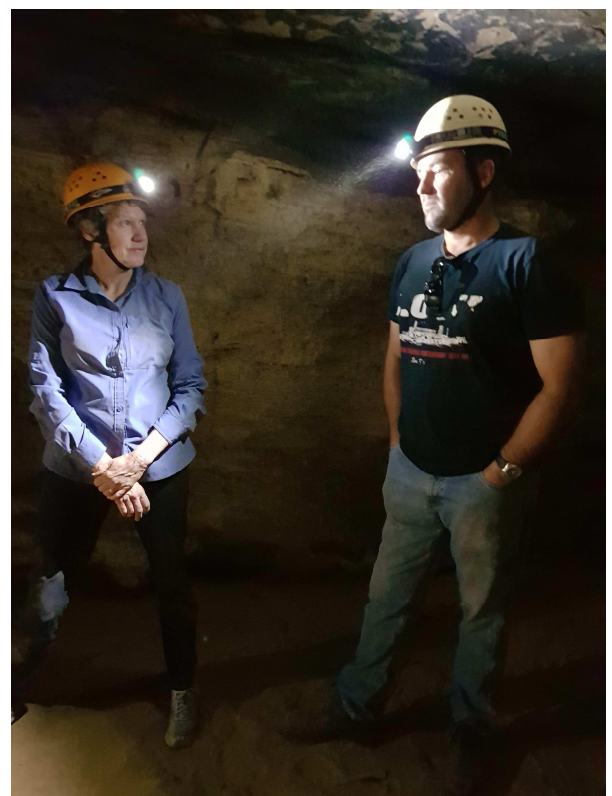
Stockyard Bridge, the next part of the system lies a further 300 metres along the gully. It is a spacious, airy feature about 50 metres long. Walking and scrambling through it provides the easiest means of accessing the nearby Stockyard Cave.

Stockyard Cave is about one kilometre long and is generally spacious (at least 10 metres wide and several metres high). At first it is easy walking on a sandy floor but further in there is more rock scrambling and also some crawling towards the inner end. The main passage ends in a large domed room that has a flood mark on the walls – everything below the mark has a thin coating of mud, apart from the rocks that have fallen out of the roof since the flood. Sobering. On the way back to the entrance we picked up quite a lot of litter in the cave. Some of it may have washed in, but most appeared to have been left behind by messy visitors.

Top left—Walking track to Stockyard Tunnel (John Brush)

Below Left—The entrance to Coorow Cave (John Brush)

Below right—Anne Woodward and the owner of the sheep station where Coorow Cave is located (Ian Eddison)

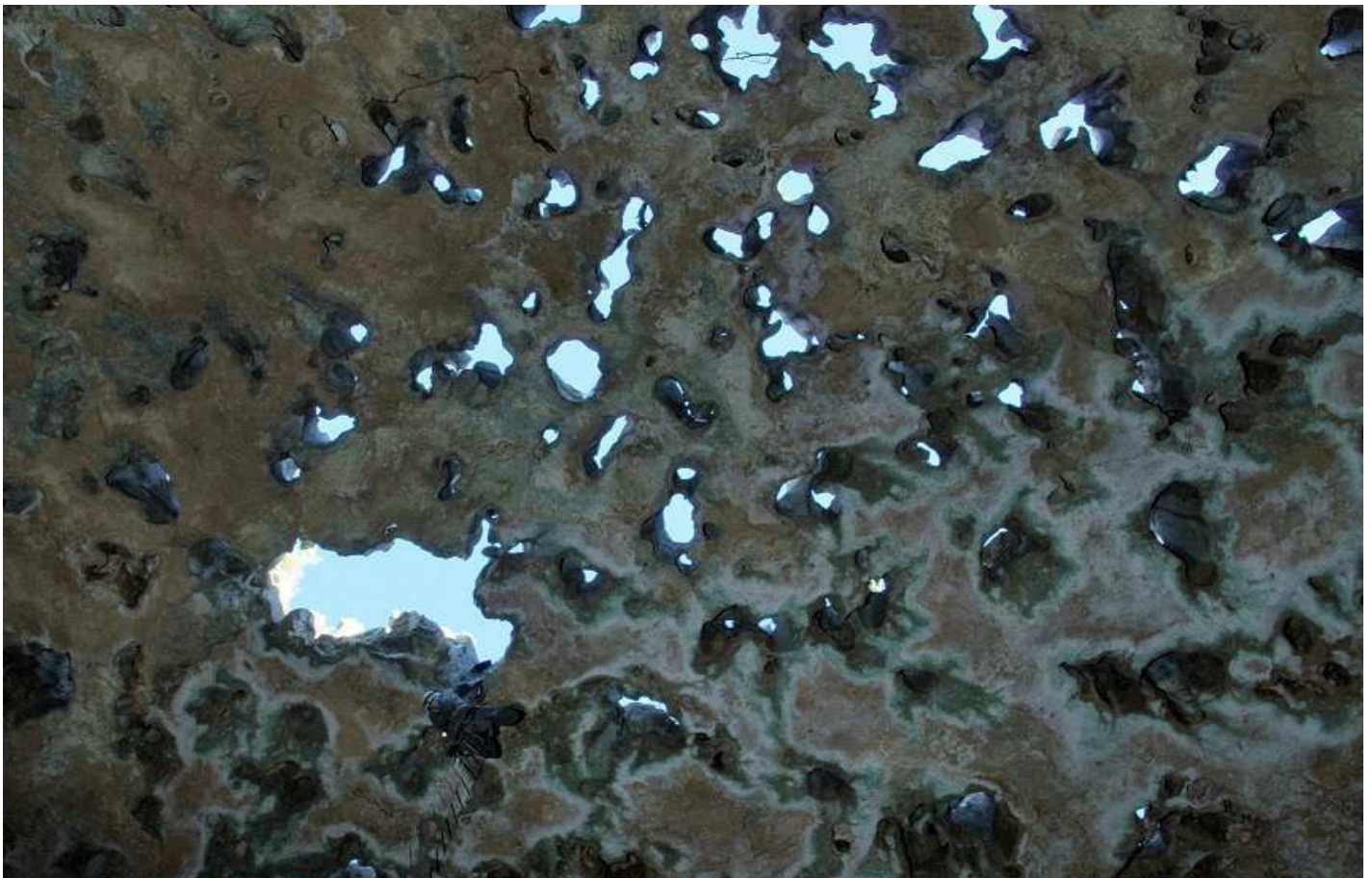




Ian Eddison and Ian Collette on the perforated calcrete pavement above Aiennyu Cave (John Brush)

Aiennyu Cave is about a kilometre northwest of Stockyard Cave and is another part of the Stockyard system, although it has not (yet) been physically connected to Stockyard Cave. The cave is essentially a single chamber about 80 metres long, 30 metres wide and 20 to 30 metres deep. The roof is a thin layer of calcrete that has been perforated by more than 100 solution tubes.

In other words, the cave has more than 100 entrances, the largest of which is about two metres in diameter. It is a disturbing sight when viewed from the floor 20 metres below. One day it will undoubtedly fall in. When it does, it is likely that what is left will be similar to the nearby collapse doline at Beekeepers Cave. With expert guidance from Ian C, six or seven people abseiled into the cave and made it out again safely



Ian Eddison (at bottom near left) climbing out of the many Aiennyu Cave entrances (John Brush)

Next morning we all packed up and headed about 100 kilometres inland to look at two caves in a sequence of Precambrian sediments where the original dolomite has been partially replaced by chert, a microcrystalline form silica or quartz.

Our first stop was at a property several kilometres outside the small town of Coorow ("Curroo"). The helpful landowner showed us the entrance to Coorow Cave in a depression in the middle of a sandy paddock. The small entrance opened out into silt-floored passage several metres wide and two to three metres high. In total, the cave has about 500 metres of maze-like joint-controlled passages, some of which are quite low. At the time of our visit, there were several pools of standing water, adding to the excitement for Greg and John. The cave contains a few bones and some old guano deposits. There is almost no speleothem development but it does have some interesting passage features. In many places there are thin sheets of silica projecting from the walls that must have formed as joint infillings in the dolomite before the cave passages developed. The sheets are delicate and quite impressive, but have obviously been badly damaged by visitors over the years.



Libby Chandler in a tight section of Coorow Cave (John Brush)

The landowner came into the cave with us and wondered about the scope for developing it into a tourist attraction, commenting that when his family bought the property, the cave was listed as one of its assets. It is an interesting cave but its potential for development as a show cave would seem to be limited.

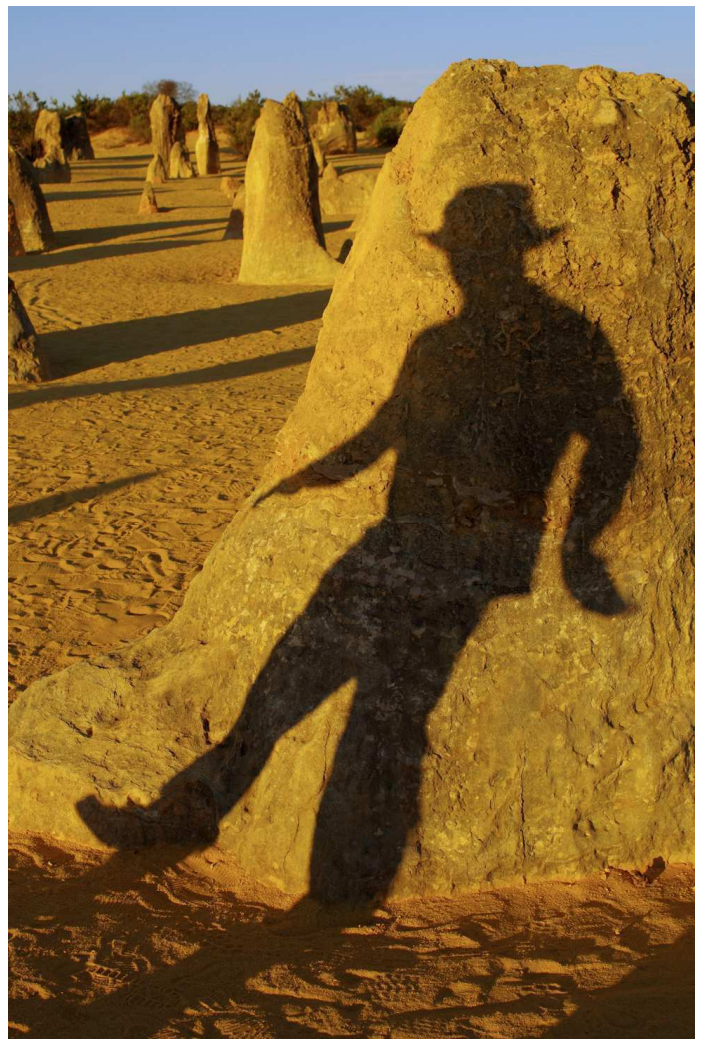
After a quick bite to eat in Coorow, the party headed about 50 kilometres south to Jingemia Cave. This is a pit about 60 metres across and 25 metres deep. It has vertical walls on three sides and on the remaining side, there is a steep scree slope leading to the bottom of the pit, where there are a couple of short passages. The cliffs and cave walls are all in chert and there is not much sign of any remnant dolomite. In the early days of the 20th century guano was mined in the cave and at the time, it was reported that the guano was about 12 metres deep. A few relics of the mining operation remain at the bottom of the cave.

The Jingemia area has been developed as a low-key attraction for visitors. There are interpretive signs and a formed walking track leads to and around the pit from a car park. Jingemia Cave is an impressive and surprising feature to find in gently rolling country and it is well worth making a detour to see it.



Remnants of guano mining in Jingemia Cave (John Brush)

From Jingemia, most people headed back to Perth but Marjorie and I, along with Pete and Libby Chandler, decided to overnight at Cervantes so that we could visit the Nambung National Park and see the Pinnacles at sunset.



The ghost of Peter Chandler at Nambung National Park (John Brush)

Without a doubt, the pre-conference trip was a most enjoyable experience. It was a great bunch of people and we saw several spectacular, interesting and unusual caves. A big thank you to Ian Collette and Greg Thomas for showing us the caves and to SuperMark for organising the trip.

Pre-conference and conference activities—an additional pictorial roundup



Above

Jingemia Cave (John Brush)

Below

Katie Coleborn (Ian Eddison)



Cathie Plowman (Ian Eddison)



Peter Bell (Ian Eddison)