Recent developments at Cotter Cave, ACT

Text and photos by John Brush
Canberra Speleological Society Inc

Representations by the Canberra Speleological Society Inc (CSS) to the Australian Capital Territory Government (CSS) over many years to improve management of Cotter Cave have finally borne fruit with construction of a new entrance barrier and a commitment from the ACT Parks Service to increase its management presence in the area.

The entrance to Cotter Cave as it was in 2005. The steel gating structure dates from the 1970s

Cotter Cave, also known as Paddys River Cave, has little more than 100 metres of passage, but it is easily the longest cave in the ACT. It is also quite spacious with the main passage averaging about 6 m in width and 4-8 m in height.

Over the years, the cave has been variously used as a bat roosting site, a show cave, a school excursion site, a venue for satanic (?) rituals, a rubbish dump, a canvas for wannabe graffiti artists and a 'mine' for mineral collectors. In short, Cotter Cave has been well used and, in recent years, increasingly abused.

The cave occurs in a small outcrop of Silurian marble in the lower reaches of the Paddys River valley. It is within easy walking distance of popular picnic areas along Cotter River about 20 minutes' drive to the west of Canberra. It is also possible to drive to within 70 m of the entrance on an open 2WD forest road. About 15 years ago, the ACT Parks Service constructed steps and a path from the road to the entrance and erected a large viewing platform nearby. In short, the cave is not hard to get to and it is easy to find - both facts which add to the management challenges. An additional challenge is that the cave is a roosting site for the Bent-Winged Bat (Miniopterus schreibersii), a listed vulnerable species in NSW and the ACT.

The significance of the Cotter Cave area was formally recognised in 2011 when the ACT Government placed the cave and its surrounds on the ACT Heritage Register following a recommendation by the ACT Heritage Council, an independent statutory body that advises the government on heritage matters.

It is not known when the cave was first discovered. Certainly it would have been known about by the mid-1890s when small-scale mining for copper and silver commenced in a skarn deposit on the fringes of the marble body about 200 metres away.

In the 1930s, Stan Margules, a local resident, constructed wooden stairs down the 5 m entrance drop and conducted regular but low-key tours of the cave for more than 20 years.

Over the years, the wooden stairs were replaced on at least one occasion and several attempts were made to fence off or gate the entrance to control access for public safety reasons and to protect the cave.

CSS first became interested in Cotter Cave and two small adjacent caves in the 1950s. In the mid-1970s, members mapped the three caves and, after a major bushfire passed through the area in January 2003, they documented several more small caves.

In February 2005, CSS worked with ACT Parks to remove the remains of the wooden stairs that had been damaged by the 2003 bushfire.

The remains of the fire-damaged entry stairs just prior to their removal in February 2005

At that time, ACT Parks and CSS agreed that complete removal of the stairs in conjunction with installation of a new entrance barrier would enhance visitor safety and reduce unauthorised access. Ideas for a new structure were subsequently exchanged. However, the communication lines later broke down as key Parks staff moved on and CSS focussed on other karst areas.

On CSS's next visit to the cave in mid-2007, members were appalled by the new structure that had been constructed over the entrance. It was highly visible from afar and appeared to be neither very vandal-resistant nor 'bat-friendly'. Although the barrier had a strong frame, the bulk of the structure was made from thin (25 mm diameter) vertical steel rods. Vertical bars can hinder entry and egress of bats and the only horizontal gap was near the top of the new structure – a gap which was also not ideal for the bats.

The new (2007) entrance was not 'bat-friendly' or vandalism resistant. Subsequent modifications were of limited success in overcoming these basic design flaws.

It soon became apparent the new structure was not very resistant to vandalism and, with the additional concerns about public safety and bat access, CSS called for the structure to be modified or (preferably) replaced. Over the next decade, several modifications were made but these were of limited success in overcoming the original design flaws.

As the integrity of the entrance barrier was often compromised by vandalism, graffiti attacks inside the cave were common and, of course, the effects were cumulative. In addition, empty drink bottles and cans were frequently dropped into the cave. On occasion, the evidence left behind suggests there were campfires, fireworks displays and amorous encounters.

CSS made many trips to remove rubbish from the cave. It also conducted graffiti-cleaning trials in 2016 and 2017 but members decided it would be futile to initiate a major cleaning project until a more secure entrance barrier had been installed.

Spray-painted graffiti occurs throughout the cave obliterating, in places, pencilled inscriptions from the first half of the 20th Century

Staff at ACT Parks have been sympathetic to our representations about the need for a new entrance structure but were unable to address the matter adequately for budgetary reasons. In 2017, they suggested CSS apply for a grant from the ACT Government and then hand over the money for ACT Parks to undertake the work. This was not an ideal solution, but one that CSS was prepared to pursue for the sake of the cave. Unfortunately, the application fell over at the first hurdle as the level of CSS's Public Liability cover through the Australian Speleological Federation was deemed inadequate. While $10 million cover was fine for the Society to obtain a permit to visit the cave or, should it so desire, to stage a major pop concert on ACT Government land, it was not nearly enough to apply for a $20,000 government grant for a cave gate.

In 2018, the need for action became more urgent. The entrance barrier was breached on several occasions and, in April, the gate was completely removed and thrown into the cave. Vandalism within the cave also became more serious with portable power tools being used to cut off stalagmites and slabs of flowstone. Additionally, new spray-painted graffiti appeared throughout the cave. CSS ramped up its representations and also lobbied politicians. Once again there were sympathetic responses but there was not much action apart from temporary repairs to the entrance structure.

The contractor commenced on-site work on 21 January 2019. ACT Parks decided to keep the framework of the existing structure so that the round bars would be simply cut off and replaced with larger square-section tube, which included features to increase resistance to damage. The round bars were replaced on a panel-by-panel basis so that the cave was not left unprotected overnight. Staff of ACT Parks closely supervised the work and were equipped to deal with any stray sparks resulting from the cutting and welding work.

Fabrication was substantially completed by late February and at the time of writing (mid-March), all that remained was to add some metal guards better to protect critical parts of the gate and the locking mechanism.

ACT Parks has agreed to take a more pro-active approach in managing the cave. It plans to install a security camera and will increase the number of ranger patrols in the area. It has also purchased a portable welder so that it can deal promptly with any damage to the gate.

For CSS, the new gate represents a significant milestone in the lengthy campaign to improve management of the cave. If the new structure proves to be more resistant to illegal entry, it will open the way for CSS to initiate a major graffiti removal project in partnership with ACT Parks.

Above: The first day of work in January 2019 to replace vertical rods with horizontal square-section tube

Below: The new entrance barrier at Cotter Cave (March 2019)