

Bat cluster in Main Cave, Ashford.



A VISIT TO ASHFORD CAVES

Northern New South Wales

– Kent Henderson

In late August, during a business trip to northern New South Wales, I called into to visit Ashford Caves – which are the only significant caves in the area. To the north, just over the Queensland border, are Texas Caves, but these have been effectively inaccessible since their inundation with the construction the Glenlyon Dam/Pike Creek Reservoir in 1977 – most unfortunately.

Originally on a private property, the Ashford Caves Karst Conservation Reserve is now part of the Kwiambal National Park. The caves are located twenty-seven kilometers north of the town of Ashford, about eight kilometers west of the former Ashford coal mine and not far from the Queensland border town of Texas. Locally, the caves are simply known as 'The Limestone Caves', and this is reflected in all signage.

The caves are situated in a sixteen hectare reserve, which approximates what is a relatively-small karst area that extends about ten kilometers along Limestone Creek. The cave area is a modest limestone outcrop – the vast majority of the karst is covered by significant overburden. The limestone is Devonian to Permian in age.

The Australian Speleological Federation's *Australian Karst Index* (1985) lists four caves in the limestone outcrop – Main Cave being easily the largest. It has

six entrances and approximately 560 m of passage. The main entrance was highly modified to allow for the extensive extraction of guano, which occurred between 1916 and the 1960s.



Ashford Caves – location map.



Above: The modified main entrance to Main Cave.
Below: Interpretive signage near the car park.



Not surprisingly, as a result, there is little extant secondary deposition left in the cave, and few areas of uncompacted/undisturbed cave sediment remain. On the hill over Main Cave, a kurrajong tree marks the entrance to the small Pretty Cave, whilst a nearby Moreton Bay fig tree marks the entrance to Bone Cave. These two small caves are of some paleontological significance.

Main Cave is a significant maternity and roosting site for the large bent-wing bat (*Miniopterus schreibersii*) and the eastern horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus megaphyllus*). They breed in the cave from November to March, and also use it for hibernation over the winter months.



Significant speleothem near the main entrance.

Upon arrival at the car park, the entrance to Main Cave is very obvious about fifty meters away in the side of the limestone outcrop. Facilities consist of picnic tables, toilets, and a useful interpretation shelter. The cave is easily toured with a hand-held light, and is a 'through tour' – one effectively walks through the hill to a rear entrance. The passages are wide and require very little stooping, although a little is necessary towards the back of the cave. There are a number of side passages off the main through-route. About halfway through two reasonably substantial chambers to the right appear to house the majority of the bat population. One has a something of a bell-shaped roof, suggesting its suitability for maternity.



A secondary entrance to Main Cave – inside (top) and outside (bottom).



The management of the caves appears satisfactory – perhaps. On the internet one finds: *Kwiambal National Park and Ashford Caves Crown Reserve Draft Plan of Management (2004)*. It is unclear if this management plan was subsequently enacted – one assumes it was. The management plan appears adequate.

However, I am not sure I approve of the current regime of year-round unregulated access to Main Cave, especially during the bat maternity season. The attendant issue, giving its six entrances (at least three of which are substantial), is how one would actually close off or restrict access to the cave, even if that was desired.

As for the cave itself, it has been so heavily modified by past usage it would be hard to argue a case for

future conservation *per se*. The caves are a regional tourist attraction, and their location and 'the delights of visiting' are prominent in local tourist literature. The fact that they are a bit remote from main tourist routes, and those without a torch cannot practically enter, possibly holds down visitation somewhat – although numbers actually visiting Main Cave are impossible to quantify.

Of course, the likes of 'us' will readily find a hour or two of pleasure and interest in wandering through the Ashford Caves – as I did. I certainly recommend it if you are in the area.



A 'broken column' in Main Cave.



A view from the Main Cave central passageway through to the main 'bat chamber' to the right.



Speleothems on the ceiling of Main Cave – few are extant in the cave.



A remnant false floor and speleothems – Main Cave.



