

SCRUBBY CREEK and PURCHASE of the PROPERTY by the RIMSTONE COOPERATIVE LTD.

Miles Pierce and Andy Spate

Geological context: Andy Spate

The Buchan limestones largely occur on prominent ridge flanked by the twin lateral streams of the Buchan (western) and Murrindal (eastern) Rivers. High on the ridge is an area known as 'The Potholes' - a series of essentially vertical caves largely terminating well above the base levels provided by the Buchan and Murrindal Rivers. A decade or so ago, an unusual, high-level active streamway was discovered leading east from The Potholes - the Elk River Stream that Nicholas showed at Waitomo. This runs towards Dalleys Sinkhole - an extensive river cave at the level of the Murrindal River - presumably the Elk River discharges thereabouts. But it is still (I think) well above the river level.

I would have been tempted in the past to infer that much of The Potholes water would have run toward Scrubby Creek Cave which lays a few tens of metres above the Buchan River base level but the discovery of the Elk River indicates otherwise. North and uphill from the dry valley above Scrubby Creek lay the 'fossil' Dicksons Caves. There is little else in way of caves/potholes etc between Dicksons and the Scrubby Creek resurgence - mostly bare grazed country. Dicksons Caves lie outside the Scrubby Creek acquisition and may - or may not - be an abandoned high level part of the Scrubby system.

Scrubby Creek Cave: Miles Pierce

Scubby Creek is a minor tributary into the Buchan River at Murrindal, approximately six km north of Buchan in Victoria's East Gippsland Region. The short creek runs along the contact of the Buchan caves limestone with the older Snowy River volcanics, with its upstream extent is normally dry. Scrubby Creek Cave (3M49) is a perennial outflow cave that resurges from a small limestone bluff and descends to enter the nearby lower section of the Scrubby Creek watercourse. The dry weather outflow may include seepage water that otherwise would drain down the upper reaches of the surface creek. During other than high-flow wet weather conditions, the resurgence water is typically supersaturated, resulting in extensive tufa terraces on the surface descent to the creek.

The resurgence and the distinctive tufa terraces were first recorded in 1907 by A E Kitson and in the 1930's the inveterate early Buchan caves explorer, Frank Moon, unsuccessfully attempted to free dive the outflow. It was not until some thirty years later that members of the Sub Aqua Speleological Society (a predecessor of the Victorian Speleological Association (VSA)) after also unsuccessfully trying to dive the resurgence, excavated a small entrance higher up in the limestone bluff and gained access into the cave. Over a number of successive trips, SASS members succeeded in passing

'the sump' and pushed the cave to a final third rock fall, about 1.1km from the entrance. Whilst the latter rock fall remains the upstream termination, VSA members have over succeeding years added several other extensions so that the total know length of passage is now around 1.5km.



A 50m long low passage, 'the sump' is encountered early on and although the true 'roof sniff' section is confined to a relatively few metres at times of lower flow, the fully sumped-off area is wide and any attempt to free dive it in panic is likely to end in disaster. VSA have instituted a system requiring a leader with proven experience in negotiating the sump to be a part of any party intending to go through 'the sump'. Upstream of 'the sump' the stream passage opens up and generally follows the dip of the Buchan limestone until the first rock fall is met. Shortly afterwards, the cave passage makes a right-angle turn where a large gour dam across the streamway has created a 150 m long passage section with deep silt and mud over which the the water flows. Known as 'Troggs Wallow', it was particularly difficult and hazardous to negotiate in the early days and is still an exhausting challenge. The second rock fall marks the end of the wallow, after which quite large passage opens into 'Christmas Hall', the site of an epic

exploration camp led by Elery Hamilton-Smith in 1962. Another 100m on, the impenetrable third rock fall is encountered with the perennial stream emerging from its toe.

Just beyond the first rock fall, a side passage, first entered in 1971 and named 'The Loo', runs southward for about 65m followed by a 100m long dangerous water filled section with an air space under no-flow conditions as low as a few centimetres in places – 'Siren Sump'. A non-negotiable section then links to a nearby swallet cave, appropriately named Storm Water Tunnel (3M43). This swallet terminates a local surface catchment area to the east and is intermittently active during sustained wet weather and storms with its inflow then mixing with, and usually greatly augmenting, the perennial flow that exits from the Scrubby Creek Cave resurgence.



*A view across the property.
Photo: Miles Pierce*

Scrubby Creek Cave is one of the longer stream caves in the Buchan – Murrindal area and is of State significance, which is further augmented by its associated tufa terraces. The cave generally follows the limestone bedding along its dip and then along the strike with this structural influence clearly evident. There are good sections of speleothems and the generally supersaturated perennial stream flow means that the 'calcite rafts' floating on the slow moving water surface are an attractive feature for the lead members of a visiting caving party.

VSA has enjoyed a long term good relationship with the landowner's family and in 2011 cavers were given 'the inside running' to purchase the freehold grazing allotment that contains most of Scrubby Creek Cave, the tufa terraces and the boarding part of Scrubby Creek itself. The property also contains other related and unrelated caves and karst features with some potential for further cave discoveries.

ACKMA Fellow and VSA Life Member, Nicholas White, acting in his capacity as a director of Rimstone Cooperative Ltd. spearheaded a plan to acquire the land with the aim of securing its important karst values and maintaining responsible access. Rimstone Cooperative is a Community Advancement Society that has owned and operated Homeleigh at Buchan for the accommodation of its members and the caving community for 38 years and includes in its aims supporting speleology. By means of donations from many Victorian cavers and persons interested in cave and karst conservation from outside the state, and supplemented by a number of individual loans, Rimstone entered into a contract to acquire the 42 hectare (105 acre) freehold allotment, and took possession of it during last year. Whilst the property title has been obtained, substantive loan sums remain to be discharged.

Rimstone's ongoing plans are to manage the property as a cave and karst conservancy whilst continuing to allow grazing on an agistment basis. It is intended that VSA will continue to manage the Scrubby Creek cave leadership scheme. Steps will be taken to exclude stock from the tufa terraces and a program set up to manage weed eradication. Later, a 'karst walk' may be established that could include the attractive naturally vegetated Scrubby Creek water course that forms the western boundary of the allotment and runs down to the Buchan River.

