

THE DOG, the RING and the CAVE

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One afternoon in late summer 2012, Caz was walking her dog Archie along the banks of the Buchan River. This was her regular walk, however today Archie's curiosity would get him into trouble. He crossed the river and suddenly a smell attracted him and he ran off. Caz spotted him disappearing along the base of the limestone escarpment known as 'The Bluff'. As he regularly chased rabbits and sought out other smells along this route, she simply called for him to come back and at first wasn't too worried, thinking that he'd be back out shortly. However, time moved on and she became more and more concerned when he did not reappear.

After 30 minutes, she called her friend Caroline (my wife) in tears as she couldn't find him anywhere. Caroline joined her and they repeatedly walked the base of the escarpment calling for Archie and listening for any sound of him. They even called in the services of the local farmer whose land adjoins the Bluff and he checked known rabbit holes further along the cliff face on his property. However, there was no sign. By this stage they believed that Archie had either entered a rabbit hole or in the worst case, gone 'inside' the Bluff.

As 2 hours passed with still no sign of Archie, their thoughts went to believing that he may have been bitten by a snake or encountered a wombat. Caz was due to work at the local pub that afternoon, however called to tell them that she would not make it. It was a well-known fact within the town that Archie was Caz's 'baby', and knowing how devastated she would be, the landlord (her friend and also the local plumber) called regularly for updates and other friends came and went offering support.

Having sat waiting (with regular walks along the base calling his name), a faint, muffled bark was heard which sounded as if it came from the inside of the Bluff (about 10 metres up). However, when it was not repeated, they could not decide if it was from within the Bluff or an echo of a dog barking in town. The frustration at the unknown was the worst part.

However suddenly, after 3 hours, Caz and Caroline heard a clear, repeated barking from within the Bluff – this was definitely Archie. They crossed the river and while calling, narrowed in on the area. Hidden behind a blackberry bush was a small opening through which Archie could clearly be heard. The opening was about 40cms in diameter and Caroline could just see the tip of Archie's nose – getting to him was not going to be easy. By lying on her back, putting her head and shoulder into the hole and reaching her arm into the cave, Caroline could just reach Archie's nose through a narrow phreatic tube about 10cm across and he could lick the tip of her fingers, but the hole was too small

and there was no way Caroline could grab enough of Archie to lift him out.

Archie had definitely not entered the cave that way and he gave much credence to the local theories that the Bluff is honeycomb like on the inside, as Archie had likely been moving through tunnels in there for 3 hours trying to find his way back out!

Despite the discomfort, Caroline remained in position while Caz called for help as Archie would only remain calm when he was being touched. What Caroline didn't tell Caz at that time (as she was upset enough) was that she had also just felt her wedding ring slip off her finger as she had to hyperextend her hand each time she wanted to touch Archie.

As it was now night time and the children were in bed, I was waiting at home receiving regular phone updates when Caz arrived – she wanted to swap places as she was too upset to help and, as a caver, she thought that I would be of more help in the rescue attempt! When I reached the Bluff, I discovered that it was a whole village effort – the local plumber and policeman and various friends were all there discussing what to do. Caroline showed me the hole and I saw her predicament as there was no way Archie could be retrieved from the hole as it was, so we had to make the decision to dig.

I have to admit that rescue looked unlikely; the area was essentially all solid rock except for one small area of clay underneath the small opening where Archie could be seen. Anyway, with nothing to lose I started digging and removing any loose soil and rocks I could. With the help of the local plumber and some of his tools we extended the tunnel by another metre straight down but it still seemed unlikely that we would join to where the dog was. Then, all of a sudden the crow bar broke through, and the dog squirmed out of the small hole. Archie must have dropped down from his original position and was ready to exit as soon as we made an opening. He would have been very close to being pierced by the crowbar, which broke through suddenly and carried a considerable distance into the void behind. I remember being very glad that I had not "skewered" Caz's dog! Archie, despite being MIA for 3 hours and trapped for a further 2, showed no ill effects from his ordeal and just sat up happily in the front seat as Caroline returned home with him to an ecstatic Caz. Archie was one VERY lucky dog!!

However, the story does not end there as I still had one very upset wife whose wedding ring was now missing – a ring of huge sentimental value as it is made from parts of her mother's and grandmother's wedding rings.

Caroline knew exactly where she had lost it, but the unknown was where it had landed! Thoughts were

expressed that maybe Archie had swallowed it? Although Caroline didn't think that this was likely as she hadn't heard any noises at the time to indicate him swallowing anything, Caz still volunteered to check Archie's toilet offerings! Caroline, however, returned to the cave the next day as she was convinced it was in there 'somewhere'!

Having dug Archie out, the main tunnel now extended diagonally down for approximately 3 metres, but only the top metre or so was 'human-sized', with the small fissure where Archie was trapped half way up to the right. There was a possibility that the ring had fallen through Archie's hole into the now larger adjoining chamber, however, overall the chances of finding the ring seemed quite remote because if the dog hadn't swallowed it, it had probably kicked it deep underground in its struggle to get free.

The next day a small team from the Buchan Caves tackled the problem with an industrial strength vacuum cleaner. After removing about ½ a cubic meter of dirt, but still never actually being able to see clearly down the hole, we gave up. We had looked for 2 hours; most of the loose soil had been removed and then scanned with a

metal detector. The ring was lost. I told my wife the bad news.

Fortunately, she decided to have one last look just to satisfy herself. She carefully lowered herself as far down the tunnel as she could and slowly scanned the entire area with a torch. She saw a glint of gold so she found some fencing wire and gradually removed more dirt around the area. Unbelievably, it was the ring which was then retrieved with much trepidation as if it had slipped off the hooked wire, there was no saying how far it could have rolled into the cave interior.

Anyway, thus ends happily the story of the dog (and the wedding ring) in the cave.



*Left. Archie strikes a pose on the beach
Above. The Bluff at Buchan
Photos: Phil McGuinn*