



# CHILLAGOE CAVING CLUB

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## MARCH 2015

### NEWSLETTER

[WWW.CHILLAGOECAVINGCLUB.ORG.AU](http://WWW.CHILLAGOECAVINGCLUB.ORG.AU)

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#### **Beetle Hunt**

(P.Bannink)

In Januray 2014 Winfried and I photographed a small Carabid beetle in the deep recesses of Ripple Cave (WC2) thinking it was nothing special. The photo however generated much excitement at the Queensland Museum where Dr Geoff Monteith and Dr Federica Turco have been seeking specimens of this group of beetles.

Beetles from the genus *Mustropomus* are dark brown or black ground dwelling predatory beetles found in cool rainforests along the east coast of Australia. As a form of defence the beetles are able to blast or 'crepitate' a volatile cocktail of toxic gas from the tip of their abdomen, like the famous Bombardier Beetle.



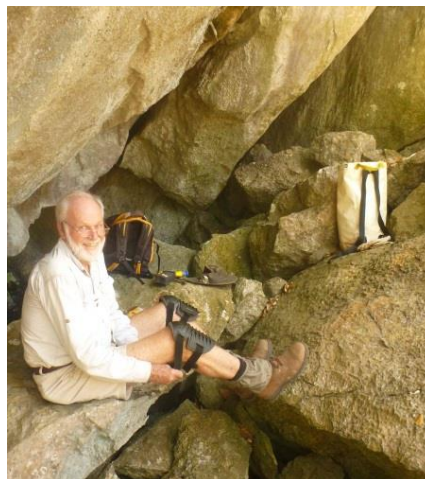
© P. Bannink

*Mustropomus* sp. – in Ripple Cave

Two species are currently described in Australia, *M. regularis* found in high altitude rainforests of the Wet Tropics in Queensland and *M. subcostatus* from rainforests in NSW and in several caves at Mount Etna (near Rockhampton).

The biologists think that the Mt Etna cave population may be a new species and are examining the beetle's DNA, to determine if there are clear genetic differences between cave and non-cave specimens. The recent sighting of this beetle genus in caves near Cooktown has again raised the possibility that yet another isolated population inhabits caves in far north Queensland.

In early November I got a request to assist Dr Geoff Monteith in an attempt to collect live beetle specimens from the Wallace Creek Caves. Only two caves had the potential to harbour the beetle, JNJ Cave in the 'Western Area' and the upper section of Ripple Cave in the 'Eastern Area'.



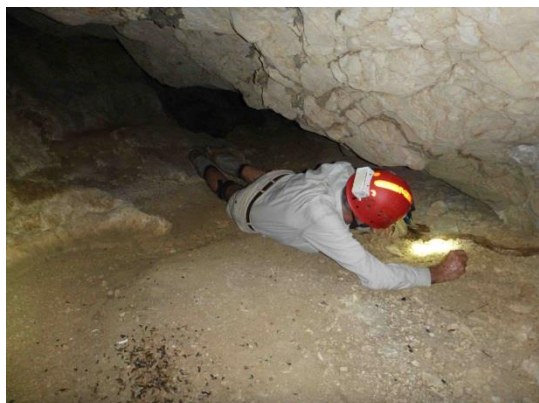
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Geoff kitting up before entering JNJ Cave

Geoff kindly did all the logistical planning and driving from Mareeba and we made it out of JNJ Cave by 10.30am. It was already steaming by the time we walked to the entrance. I had explored this cave briefly in July and was keen to see the rest, as the survey showed quite a network of interesting passages.

We entered the cave just as the midday heat started to intensify. A five metre climb up a small phreatic passage leads to the main upper chamber which is about 20m long and only high enough to crawl along. While Geoff set about collecting, I undertook a count of the resident bat colony. When the bats had dispersed deeper into the cave, I followed up the leads on the survey plan.

The first was a very low squeeze into a small rift (4 long and 1m wide). A crawl back with a very large mygalomorph spider made the return journey interesting. The second major lead involved a careful 6m climb down to series of lower rifts. One branch ended in small (tiny) drafting squeeze which did not look very enticing after a second large spider made an appearance.



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Geoff collecting in JNJ Cave

I returned to Geoff to help collect insects however there were no beetles (as previously reported in 1994) and on the whole there was not much about at all, not even in the bat guano. We made an early exit after climbing down into a larger 'Tree Root' chamber, this section was also devoid of insects. On the whole this is a very small cave and we were happy to leave the small sinuous passages to the bats.

In the late afternoon Geoff drove about 12km on bush tracks to the hilltop ridgeline which provided access to the Eastern Area, and Ripple Cave. The sunset and evening were sublime with the hills being much cooler and breezier than the plains. A

walk to the ridge top gave fantastic views of the surrounding distant ranges. We left camp by 7:30am to undertake the 3km hillside walk before it got too hot. Hot fires had scorched the ridgelines leaving no shade at all, so the pace was quite slow. We made the top of the hills by 9:00 and got down into the cave by 9:30.



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Looking south towards Mount Emily at sunset

The main objective was to search for the beetle in the upper section of the cave and it did not take long to climb the 'cascade' and get into the main phreatic 'stream' passage.

While Geoff again searched for beetles, I began looking for further leads. The upper section has one main side branch which leads to an 8m high aven with shear walls. Half way to the aven, an upper passage junction was noted. Climbing up to this another small sinuous phreatic passage was located running just about parallel to the main side rift.



© P. Bannink

Tea time at Ripple Cave Entrance (WC2)



Crawling to the right, the phreatic passage descended through areas of rubble in the direction of the main cave passage below. To the left, the small tunnel widened to a narrow rift and on to another high aven with light penetrating from high up to the RHS. There were no other leads except an exposed climb to the right which joined the upper section of the aven.



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High roof of new side passage in Ripple Cave

After a thorough search for beetles, Peter returned to Geoff who had found some old beetle fragments. The search for beetle larvae continued and Peter continued to explore the main 'stream' passage for further leads, but none were found. After about 2.5 hours we called it quits and returned to the main entrance for lunch.

Geoff did some further collecting in the rainforest during lunch, and we got underway by 1:30pm for the long walk back. The trip was a partial success, beetle fragments for the biologists and a further extension to Ripple Cave for the cavers.

For further reading on these unique beetles please link to the article highlighted below. Navigate to <http://blog.qm.qld.gov.au/2011/06/>. Any cavers sighting these small beetles in caves in North Queensland, please contact the Queensland Museum.

### **Tribute to Br. Nicholas Sullivan**

A small article has been written in the NSS caving magazine commemorating the life of Brother Nicholas Sullivan, who was a professor at

Manhattan College in America. During the 1980's he led teams of cave scientists on numerous (6 to 8 week) expeditions to Chillagoe. He passed away in September last year.

## **Up and Coming Events**

### **March**

- 14<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> April – Club Son Doong Cave Expedition to Vietnam.
- 21/22<sup>nd</sup> - Club Caving Weekend at Chillagoe.

### **April**

- 29<sup>th</sup> March – 14<sup>th</sup> April. Club SRT Expedition to Nelson, New Zealand. Five major vertical caves including Stormy Pot/Nettelbed Cave through trip.
- 11/12<sup>th</sup> - Club Caving Weekend at Chillagoe.
- 13-18<sup>th</sup> – Student 'Cave Camp' - occasional use of the clubhouse (**Note: Not a club caving event**).

### **May**

- 2<sup>nd</sup> May – Club **AGM**

Peter Bannink & Van Christensen (Secretary).



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Large Mygalomorph spider in JNJ Cave



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A stunning little isopod in JNJ Cave