

# ALASKA & VANCOUVER ISLAND CAVING 2001

I started caving in Alaska in 1996 after securing a position on the Tongass Cave Project (TCP). Since then I have spent nearly one full year caving in the largest state in the good old US of A and on Vancouver Island. Even though the TCP is funded by the United State Forest Service. I have blown well over £12,000 of my own money as well as my wife's, and a few grateful donations from the clubs expedition fund. None of my exploits would have been possible without the support of my wife Noreen. After caving on the TCP each year, when I have finished that project I have gone on to do self funded expeditions this year being no different except for one thing. I would class this adventure as the best to date.

My planned adventure began in February when I received my yearly invite onto the TCP. It was then many dreamy nights and grand stories with my caving buddies of how great it would be to go and discover more unsurveyed caves and finally get underground this year, and away from the dreaded foot and mouth. I arrived in Ketchikan Alaska on the 31st of May and met up with a few of my old friends, and spent a lot of time drinking before we departed to Koskiusko Island (Kos). Unlike the other Islands I have been caving on in Alaska, Kos does have a small population of around 40 people who are spread all over the island. The only way to access the island is by boat or float plane. There are roads on Kos but these are logging roads that are in very bad shape, and a 4x4 or quad bike is the only way to travel them.

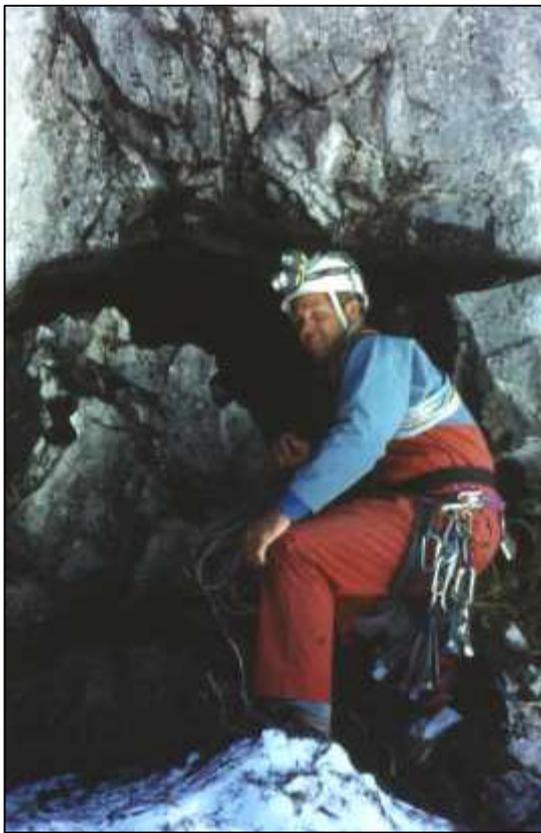


Figure 1 - Clav in .....

After a one hour flight by float plane we arrive in Edna Bay Kos, the hub of the Island. This contains the post office, local store and satellite uplink phone and refuelling station, all of which are contained in a small floating shack, (not exactly Wal Mart). The participants for the TCP so far are Bruce White, Bruce Brewer, Professor Dan Montieth, Diane Raab, Gino Albert, Matt Covington and his good lady Elizabeth, and our illustrious leader Barbara Morgan, we were to be joined later by Dr David Love.

We then spent the day setting up 2 large booney barns, these are large steel and canvas tents that look like small plane hangers. These were to be used as the cookhouse and drying room.

The 3rd of June and a 7.00am start. The day was not turning out too good. Bruce B smashed up one of the 4x4 wheels in style on a large boulder sticking out of the road, no problem 6 cavers and a jack would soon have the problem fixed. Not when the forest service had given us the wrong tools for the job. Later that afternoon and a long drive around the Island, myself and Dan (whom I have spent a great deal of time with underground) managed to don our caving suits and get into the cold depths of an Alaskan cave, be it only a very small one.

The 4th of June. Bruce B Dan and myself went to a known cave which was found with the help of some new technology, a military laser system called LIDAR.. The forest service have started to use this system to help them survey logging units. The laser is flown over the area and shoots down to the ground, reading the ground through the forest canopy, the information is printed out in the form of a map, and any small or large sink hole's shows up on the map, it still has some teething problems, but any assistance in finding caves in this dense under growth was welcome (I think? Or was it!). The cave had already been named for us by the LIDAR geeks. "Bitter Sweet", it was a stunning cave and although only small, it was decorated with many forms of speleothems including the strange moon milk found in many Alaska caves. I was the lead in the survey party and in my enthusiasm to find a cave measureless to man I pushed on as hard as I could down some tight passage until the inevitable happened I got stuck and the others were waiting for me back through a constriction. Many

strange things go through your mind as well as the cheeks on your bottom, when you're stuck in a cave in the middle of nowhere. After much thrutching, cursing and kicking I was free to tell my fireside stories.

The next few days were spent walking the LIDAR survey units, amazing karst was found, massive yellow and red cedar and Sitka spruce reached into the sky like majestic giants, some nearly 30 foot round at the base. Moss covered the fallen giants on the ground and ferns grew everywhere. I'm sure if you stopped and listened they could tell you stories a thousand years old, it was like the setting for a Jurassic Park movie. We found a few small caves but nothing too large, this is when we started to question the LIDAR geeks idea of a cave, we sprouted a new saying "they don't know their ass from a hole in the ground".

Not far from where we were camping was a fresh water resurgence called Car Wash Creek. It was used by ourselves and the islanders to get their fresh water which flowed on in the driest of times we were told, which is a laugh in itself as the Island gets 20 foot plus of rain a year. The water flowed out of a boulder choke and there was no known way into this cave YET! All the caves on this side of the Kos had been dye tested and they all resurge at this point, the gauntlet had been thrown down! Myself, Gino, and Mat start to dig on a dry river bed some 50 foot away from the outlet. this I came to the conclusion this was the over flow for high water and we could hear a river beyond a large boulder choke and land slide. After a few short hours we had made great progress and had now picked up a great draught but the land above was too unstable and we were asking for trouble, we called it a day but went in search of another way in. As I was walking past a small karst feature when I heard a rumbling sound I shot down a small hole like a rabbit being pursued, I could hear the river even clearer and what a great draft. after some 3 hours digging we

came to a large boulder too big to move. "SHIT!" I know lets put a bolt in it attach a hanger and rope and all 3 pull on it, 2 in the cave 1 outside and tie it off, it worked. As I squeezed under the boulder that was tied off to a dubious branch outside I break into river passage, great hollers of joy were heard by Mat and Gino. We explored the cave down to the sump at one end and then went upstream soon to hit another sump. I found a small hole in the wall and could hear running water on the other side but it was far too small for me to get through, call in the secret weapon, Mat, so thin that when he walks past a blade of grass he is not seen for a few seconds. After much thrutching and kicking he called it a day another cave fails to go big, but we are more than happy with our cave which we called s'EEK gaaw (local Tlingit Indian dialect which means Black Bear Drum).

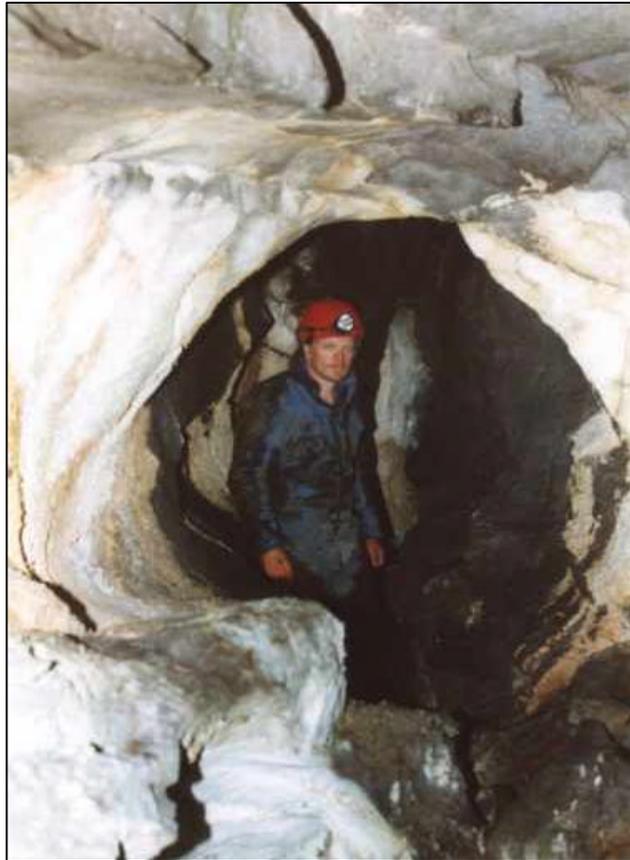


Figure 2 Dan in .....

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June after doing much unit walking and surveying small caves we went to an area that Dan had walked a few days before and told us of big pits he had found. We had been having some bad weather over the last week and it could be a good sporting trip for us. We broke off into 3 teams, Dan

and myself go to a cave in some second growth. I had forgot just how hard it was

getting through that stuff, you have a job seeing more than 6 inches in front of you the canopy is that thick. We spent the next few days surveying a great cave that ~ named 'Axed But Still Goin' it was only around 160 foot deep but had some great vertical passage and some very challenging tight bits. Dr Dave Love (Dr Love. there's a good chat up line) another of my old caving buddies, joined us and spent time picking through the glacial clay infill that remained in parts of the cave. finding small rodents teeth. One of the other team's caves stopped after only around 60 foot vertical, but Gino and Bruce W were having a ball it turned out their cave had 2 separate pitches both over 300 foot deep which joined at the bottom via a small

linking hole.

It was time for a trip to a cave Dan discovered last year called 'Old School' to see if we could add to it's length. Dan, Dave, Gino and myself headed to the cave, a beautiful open shaft taking a river at one end. The river runs off a muskeg, which is a swamp like feature and the water coming of it is of high acidity. The first pitch is around 80 feet deep and would look well in a Yorkshire setting. We had no survey for the cave so we were not sure how much rope was needed, we soon found out we did not have enough so just had a good sporting trip which made for great fun. I found a great pool I could sit in, dam the river up till near my, shoulders, and then let it go on the caver below, needless to say we all go bloody cold but had a great laugh. On the Way back through the muskeg we came across a small entrance that broke into a vadose canyon, we marked the spot to save it for a later day.

Every 4 days or so we had been going to Barbara's parents house. They live a short distance from where we camped, at the house we had the luxury of using their sauna which they had built themselves from locally cut wood. We even got fed well, with fresh caught fish and bear, yes bear! It was the first time most of us had the pleasure of spaghetti bolognese made with bear meat, and very nice it was too.

Our return trip to Old School with more rope did not give us any new passage despite our hardest efforts, the cave ended in a very large chamber with no visible way on, this did not bother us in the least we had the other cave we had found to go at.

Dan Gino, Dave and myself entered our new found cave. I took the lead, yet again. First with the gear on first down. The cave was a tight vadose canyon we worked our way through in the top of the canyon the bottom being much too small. We soon found out that the survey in this cave was going to be interesting to say the least, there were small passages leading off in many directions looping under and over themselves and coming back into the canyon this gave us the idea for the name 'Mazed and confused'. After a tight squeeze in the roof and a right hand bend, the canyon opened up to a vertical drop that was 8 meters deep and seemed to end, We thought we would call it a day and return another time to finish off the survey.

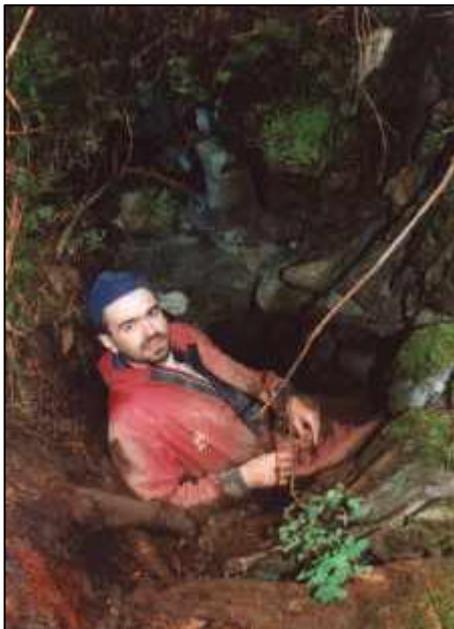


Figure 3 The author in .....

After spending a day of drawing up the surveys of the caves that we had found, Dan, Dave, and Bruce B and myself returned to 'Mazed and Confused'. Bruce who is a professional photographer hauled in bags of camera equipment, this guy is amazing he could go through the muddiest hole you could find and still come out looking like a mannequin from Burtons window. I rigged a rope up and dropped down the tight vadose canyon. After around 4 meters the passage started to open up, this is not what I expected it to do, and its not what the caves in Alaska usually do, the tight ones usually pinch off I broke out into a large chamber with a water fall dropping into it, "crap". I had only brought the one bloody rope and I could see another drop. I got off rope and headed over to it, big stones in hand to see how big the pitch was. I threw one over "Oh my god!!!" I threw another in disbelief, a 4 second drop without hitting the sides. My light would not even light up the other side of the passage, let alone the bottom of the pitch. Dan soon arrived behind me and though I was having a fit I'm sure if he had any medication on him he would have tried to administer it Within a few seconds Dan is having the same fit as me. Unable to go on we fly back up the pitch telling Dave and Bruce of our by now 10 second 1000 foot drop. After I did some modelling shots for Bruce on rope in

the tight bits Dave and he headed off for a look, they also got a 4 second drop. The sad part of this trip was we knew we would have to leave the cave, up to the last surveyed point, the top of the big drop, tomorrow were breaking camp to finish the expedition. We do have a tradition at the end of an expedition and it seems it has come around again, on the last day we always find a big cave that we are unable to finish and it is left for the next time, giving us a year to dream again of passages measureless to man. That night in

camp we came up with a name for our big drop “Dave said Dan said Simon Said 10 second drop”.

It turned out by the end of the expedition we had found and mapped 25 new caves, adding to the increasing number of caves in Alaska. Granted they are not the biggest caves in the world but they do count among the most unique, and with the amount of unexplored karst left to look at in Alaska, it will be many lifetimes before its full potential is recognised. We have only been caving on the small outlying islands and there is much talk about massive cave entrances which pilots have flown over in the interior, looks like I will have many more years left to cave in the largest state in America.

### **Vancouver Island**

After Kos, Dan, Dave and Gino and myself went out and consumed copious amounts of alcohol in Ketchikan. Before they waved me farewell, as I caught my ferry down to Vancouver Island. I was met by Clay Hunting and Ray Smith and off we drove to Clay’s for a few days chill out and prep the gear for the next adventure. Our trip involved a helicopter flight up Canuma Ridge, a massive near vertical limestone face that was sitting on a large basalt mountain. The people on our trip were going to be limited to 4 due to the space in the helicopter, they were Clay, Jim Jacek, Angus Shand, and of course me.



**Figure 4** Waiting for the helicopter

On the 30th of June after an early start on a beautiful day we flew up the hill 2 at a time with the gear. Oh and I forgot to mention Tyler, Clays 3 legged Blue Heeler who goes everywhere with him. We set up our tents and Clay filled me in on the information they have on Canuma. In September 2000 Clay, Jim, and Ray did a trip and found a large entrance on a vertical face about halfway down the ridge, there was a strong cold draft issuing from it, but I was told of the

danger getting to the face due to a very exposed climb down and a traverse to get into the entrance. The idea of this trip was to try and find a top entrance, and we only had a few days to do it in. We started to walk the area looking for entrances on the top of the ridge, and also on the basalt and limestone contact. We knew our job was going to be hard, as some 200 years ago there had been a forest fire on top of the ridge, and with the deforestation all the soil had been washed off the rock and into every fissure. The ridge had large areas of deeply fluted limestone, the first day we only came up with a vertical pit some 30 meters deep.

The second day it was time to try further over the ridge, and after a short time we heard a small river running off a snow field, onto the basalt contact. Clay found a small entrance and we were soon rigging it. The entrance was a vadose canyon that soon dropped into a large chamber, things were looking good. Clay was first down, with me in close pursuit, it was a large chamber full of break down due to frost shatter, we could hear a river below us but no way on. This turned out to be common over the next few days, finding entrances. and one which Clay said was one of the largest entrances on Vancouver Island. We did find one which was most promising and we dug it for a days but soon hit a constriction that needed blasting, but beyond it was a big pitch, when you threw a stone down it just rattled on for a long long time, and the draught coming from it was so cold that you could only dig for a short time before you had to change diggers to warm up. We left the ridge by helicopter, but now we know where to start to push the top end, and Clay and Jim are going back later on in the year to blast open the entrance. My Next trip Was with Margaret and Rob Countess, into the Wymer Ridge area to a cave known as Marsh Wallow Cave, the life

of this cave hangs in the balance as they are logging and blasting a road quite close to the entrance. I was more than impressed by this cave, a stunning entrance in old growth forest, phreatic tubes going off in all directions and a draught that was strong and chilled you to the bone. We surveyed a short piece of tube which had been found previously and then off to find new passage. I was very enthusiastic pushing my way into every hole and lead possible, and my god this cave had a lot to offer in the way of sport, tight vertical bits, boulder chokes, water fall pitches, and also its dangers of very exposed traverses. Just as I was starting to have fun the cave demon attacks, all my bloody lights start to die and I have 3, it turned out I had dud batteries. I only just made it out with lights after 3 changes of batteries, but it was a great trip.

I also had a chance to hike further into Wymer with Ray a few days later and bag a few caves. I was told that it is Quatsino Limestone from the upper Triassic period around 225 million years old. It had moved along on tectonic plates from lower down the American coast line and had been slammed in to Canada it had more than one ice age to contend with and was still in an active earthquake area.

I was soon to be amazed at the size of some of the entrances large phreatic tubes, open pits, the most impressive of all being Ursa Major, a massive vertical entrance with a vertical water fall, the largest cave entrance I have yet seen. I also had the pleasure of visiting Fallen Giant, Labyrinth, Cathedral, and Yorkshire pot. The hill is like Swiss cheese and there is much left for me to visit next time and every time a trip is had by the cavers they always add more length to the caves in the area.

Barrbies Back door was my next trip with Clay, this cave was discovered by Silvi his good lady, whilst they were out for a stroll on Huckleberry Ridge. The caves last survey point made it 400 meters long, it has an active stream way and a lovely freezing cold duck half through the cave, which can not be done if the river is too high. The cave is also one bloody cold cave! We soon reached the last survey point and we split up and went our own way pushing all the leads, which was quite a lot, low phreatic tubes going off in all directions, and all draughting in different directions just to confuse us. We met up again and we reckoned that we had found over 300 meters of passage between us, and the passages were still ongoing. For my last trip I went to a cave known as Bone Yard, this is an old sea cave that is now about 6 meters above high tide level. Not so far in human remains were found, it was at one time used by the native peoples as a burial site. The cave had a fat mat filter not too far in, Clay's dog followed us in up to this point but he thought better of trying to get through the squeeze, so he lay down wailing for our return. As we emerged from the low bedding plane we were presented with a stunningly decorated cave brilliant white stals, flow stone and very long fine soda straws, to name but a few of the features, and there were that many we had to be very careful not to break any. We pushed to the far end of the cave and came to 2 possible digs. The digs were in a small phreatic tube which split in two. I had a small dig in the right hand side, managing to get in an extra body length, and then had a poke around in the left dig, I came to the conclusion that it would be better to dig there as the draught was very strong and a good echo could be heard through the constriction. On our way out of the cave, we found good old faithful Tyler waiting for us. Vancouver Island does offer cavers some stunning cave systems from the most novice caves to the most extreme, and the cavers are more than enthusiastic to take you to them, they like to consume as much beer as we do after caving.

Simon Dillon  
Derbyshire Caving Club  
August 2001

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