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Sump Diving “River Caves”

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1 Cave Research Foundation

Abstract
Note: “Sump” is a term used in caving to describe a passage in a cave that is submerged under water.

Sump diving, and “lure of the sump” originated in the UK in the early 1920’s, as did the use of “rebreather’s, and the “self-contained underwater breathing apparatus”, S.C.U.B.A. The techniques developed by cavers, and “sump divers” in Europe, and then used in British cave systems like Wookey Hole set a cave diving precedence; the development of a unique style, and system for diving caves. These diving practices and techniques influenced the exploration of resurgences, springs, siphons, and river caves throughout the world. This long history of bravery, and the unparalleled determination of cave divers continues today, and will certainly continue to shape the future of exploration as we know it.

The exploration of Roppel, Mammoth, Whigpistle, and other surrounding caves in Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave area is ongoing, and from 1984 through 1999, sump diving Roppel attracted names like, Ron Simmons, Roberta Swicegood, John Schweyen, Tim Payne and Wes Skiles. Ron Simmons, Roberta Swicegood and Wes Skiles have since perished in diving related incidents. Let us honor and remember

the investments they made, along with the other divers preceding them. Eight years later, in 2007, Mark Wenner, Brian Williams, Matt Vinzant (sump dive team #1), followed by Jill Heinerth and Jerry Murphy, (sump dive team #2), joined the small league of sump divers to dive beyond the upstream sump of the Logsdon River. Once beyond the waters’ barrier, they broke into going cave passage, and 5 years later have yet to return to those leads to take them on. The finale of Wenner’s Power Point presentation will feature photos and dialogue from that 2007 exploration of Swicegood Ave.

For the past 7 years, Wenner has joined various teams, focused on the exploration of dry cave passage in Roppel, attempting to break into South Toohy Ridge. Wenner joined the Cave Research Foundation, primarily as a diver, which proved to be a short coming, and working on dry caving projects was a quick study method of coming to speed with that knowledge. The need for comprehensive dry caving experience was recognized in his 2007 efforts to push Logsdon River. The 2007 dive team recognized the high level of dry caving skills used by Mammoth Cave National Park's 10th Research Symposium: Celebrating the Diversity of Research in the Mammoth Cave Region
cavers, in support of the diving efforts in Logsdon River. This particular dive team was also pushing other river caves in TAG (Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia), the Yucatan, and Dominican Republic, etc. Over time, and in developing better dry caving skills, single rope techniques, and more experience with survey and mapping, it provided a solid foundation for working in extremes.

In 2012, Rick Olson, Rick Toomey, representing the National Park Service, and Pat Kambesis representing Cave Research Foundation contacted the sump diver team of Wenner, Williams and Vinzant. Throughout this past year, multiple reconnaissance trips have been staged to gather and provide the information necessary to push leads in the Mammoth Cave system. The starting point for this recon work, was the relatively short trip down the Doyle entrance to the downstream section and sump of the Logsdon River. Later that spring, with similar efforts came the discovery of a blue hole, or deep section in the rivers bottom, in the upstream sump area of Roaring River! This river, in 1988 had been the focus of a Kentucky Cave Shrimp Census program, and cave divers then had run dive line into various dive leads on the east and west walls of the river passage. No diving in the Mammoth Cave system had been approved since that study, and last year, July of 2012, that changed. With copious amounts of help from Rick Olson, Rick Toomey, and Pat Kambesis, Mark Wenner submitted a “dive objective” plan for taking on the leads they had found earlier in the year, on previous kayak trips up the river. They have since staged two explorations, which were both aborted due to Hurricane Ike on Labor Day, and again on October 6, 2012. Cave diving river caves is completely dependent on near perfect weather conditions.

Our goal, as a sump diving team, is to represent the Cave Research Foundation, and the National Park Service on cave projects, exploring those possibilities to their extent. Our greatest strength is, the previous examples of our work in past CRF explorations, the relationships we have

Figure 2: June 26, 2006, Mark Wenner knitting up to dive the upstream sump of Snail Shell Cave, photo by Brian Williams.

Figure 3: Oct 7, 2011, Mark Wenner and sump mentor Forrest Wilson, after running 1000’ of fresh dive line into a virgin cave in AL called “Odells” during TAG Cave In. Photo by DeWayne Hyatt
built over the years, the experience and ability to collect data, and going beyond where it is possible to go, without extensive experience and qualifications.

The following things will be discussed during this presentation:

- What differentiates a sump diver from a cave diver?
- Why do we do it, and what have we seen?
- What equipment is used to dive sumps, and basic terminologies.
- The marriage of the caver and sump diver.
- The equipment and various techniques of diving.
- Diving with tanks, versus diving with rebreathers.

Photos included from other “River Caves” Explored:

- Snail Shell Cave
- Blue Hole of Elliston
- Windy River Cave
- Jackson Cave – Cedars of Lebanon
- Espey Cave
- Hayes Spring in Eastern KY
- Guy James
- Blue Springs Cave
- The Dominican Republic
- The Yucatan
- Mammoth and Roppel Caves

Figure 4: March 7, 2008, Mark Wenner and Brian Williams doing recon on water levels and historic dive line conditions, Logsdon River upstream sump, while a snow and ice storm raged on the surface, making exit from Wellar Entrance and back to CRF Hamilton Valley close to impossible. Photo by Matt Vinzant

Who Am I?

Who am I, to dare take on something, so much grander than I.

So many endless years of power we know little about.

How can water cut stone?, and lead us to our question of what is beyond the beyond.

So strong is our desire to know, we risk ourselves; risk everything to know, and question it more, day after day, “who am I”.

The cave and its darkness know, the silence, the mystery, the path leading us there.

The calling is there for us, without a sound, unless you’re quiet long enough to hear.