

The HangLine

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Merry Widow Mountain

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Canadian caves present some of the most challenging systems in the world. Carved from dolomite and limestone aggregates, these systems are tight and dark with fast currents. Many are accessible only during certain times of the year when the basin draining into the ground has dried up and the water flow has slowed to a mere knot or two. Even then a diver has to pull himself along with nearly everything he's got. Take for example some of the cave systems on Canada's west coast.

In a small elevated escarpment region in northern Vancouver Island, there exists the Canadian version of a billabong. Fed by the melting ice and snow that caps the mountain over 1400 meters above sea level, Benson River and Raging River race head to head northeast towards the ocean. Their erosive powers

carve large paths in the rock forming small reservoirs of water, submerged rivers, and underwater caves. Only lumberjacks and the occasional hiking enthusiast frequent this part of the country. It is a distinctive and undiscovered world where two rivers

form of a parallel track of rushing water that produces a series of baths known to very few as the lost pools of Merry Widow Mountain.

By definition, a 'billabong' is a pond or a stagnant pool of water usually connected to or fed by a river. It may have been formed by receding rain water, left to collect in a depression in the ground, or it may be the amputated bends of a meandering river where white waters once flowed violently around hair pin

After nearly 14 years since the record setting cave dives at Devils Bath and the discovery at Merry Widow Mountain, the push to explore more caves on Vancouver Island continues with the discovery of yet more systems. However before we start to publish our discoveries I thought a little review of the past was in order.

PART 1 OF 2



In arid climates, it is an overgrown puddle where ground water has managed to survive scorching heat, providing a place of re-hydration and rejuvenation for travelers. The





term's origin is Australian, yet it is a fitting expression for any small body of water that seems to have been abandoned by the dynamic cycle of the hydrosphere.

The surface of the water is flat and calm and the only sound around, comes from the pounding rivers in the distance. With no human activity for miles, the 'Lost Pools' definitely appear abandoned, by both man and nature. The Pools are 'lost' in that many of them dry up, disappear or relocate from one rainy season to the next. In one pool called the Devil's Bath (see 10-03 Issue of the *HangLine*), the water flows in through a wide crack in the steep bank sixty feet below the surface. This underwater cave has been trail-blazed through hundreds of meters of solid rock by the tumbling waters spinning off of the Benson River. In the bottom of the bath is a drain, a siphon sucking water back into the complicated network of water flow.

On the surface of Devil's Bath there are only a dozen or so floating logs that appear to have tumbled off the lip of the escarpment from a logging road high above. But beneath the surface is a tangle of branches reaching out from the bases of hundreds of submerged trees. It is an underwater forest that has now given birth to a bizarre and almost eerie ecosystem. Diving through these massive stacked trees, you get the sense that you are in a surreal place. The muddle of water-soaked wood is piled in chaotic fashion allowing sharp beams of sunlight to penetrate at randomly selected angles.



Below the emerald green surface of the bath, small trout which have migrated from the river through the water filled tunnels, feed on the algae now carpeting the bark of the trees. Above the surface, tiny Venus 'Fly-Trap' like plants root themselves in the decaying wood, waiting for unsuspecting insects to buzz by.

Further up the mountain there is a large 100 meter hole in the ground, looking almost like the overgrown remains of a meteor blast. Here there are two more small pools of water where hundreds of frogs have made a home. Not far from there is a place called Paradise Lost and the entrance to yet another massive underwater river and cave system. During the dry season, you can see large logs wedged precariously 60 feet high in the cave ceiling. In the bottom of another pond which lies deep inside the dry portion of a cave, there is a passage that winds for hundreds of meters through tight restrictions and sharp turns. It finally ends in a large room with a vaulted ceiling where more logs jam the surface. How such large pieces of wood could be forced



Century old logs abandoned in a Canadian Billabong





through those convoluted and sometimes narrow conduits is a complete mystery to me.

Where Merry Widow and Snowsaddle Mountains meet, two rivers appear and disappear in and out of the mountain before joining up forces with Raging River. Vanishing River, which flows from a small but endless pool of water disappears straight into the mountain and does not emerge for over a kilometer where it pours out of the rock as Reappearing River, forming another unique pool on a ledge in the side of the mountain.

If nothing else, the Lost Pools are peculiar. They are springs that function as portals to a wild labyrinth of flooded tunnels and white water rapids. Both above and below the surface, there is a stark contrast of peace and anarchy and perhaps that is

why these Pools are so interesting. Each time I explore these caves, I find new anticipation as to what will be discovered next on the mountain. One thing that is not lost however, is the diversity life or the spectacular character of this unique environment.

Caves and caverns are continually being discovered around the world. Their unique environment may not be for everyone, but they are quickly becoming a popular destination for many extended range divers. Like every other aspect of diving, divers must be sure to complete the appropriate training from an experienced and skilled Instructor before entering a cave. The three primary causes of cave diving fatalities have been: failing to follow a continuous guide line, failing to follow proper gas management rules and entering a cave without the proper training.

~Safe Diving



David Sawatzky in the dry portion of a flooded cave system. When this cave floods, logs like the one suspended above him are washed out.

