

The HangLine

Issue #10-03

Posted August 2010



The Devil's Bath

The setting of two Canadian Records

By Bill Nadeau

Imagine a small pool of water sunk in the middle of high rocky cliff edges and cathedral pines. It is a karst phenomenon fed and drained by a number of springs and siphons that have passages branching for many kilometers and includes a mountainous escarpment. Known as the 'Devil's Bath' its maximum depth has yet to be determined simply because of its unpredictable water flow. This underwater cave system is only accessible during a short two to four week window when the rains subside, the water levels drop and the current slows to a rate that a strong cave diver can slowly pull his way along.



These cave systems are but a few of the remaining underground drainage systems on Vancouver Island. Many have been collapsed or dredged by

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.

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large logging and mining companies in their bid to profit from the natural resources this country is famous for. Our intentions were to explore and survey the caves and determine how vital they were to the ecosystem. What we discovered was an incredible yet endangered world, and nearly unknown to the rest of the planet.

Up until our expedition in July of 1998, very few cave dives had been made in the Devil's Bath system. The majority of previous

exploration had been conducted by seasoned cavers David Sawatzky and Ric Browning. Over the years, despite chilling waters with low visibility, tight restrictions and serious current flows, they were able to complete a great deal of surveying; however, their work continued to reveal more questions than answers as new passages popped up everywhere. The problem



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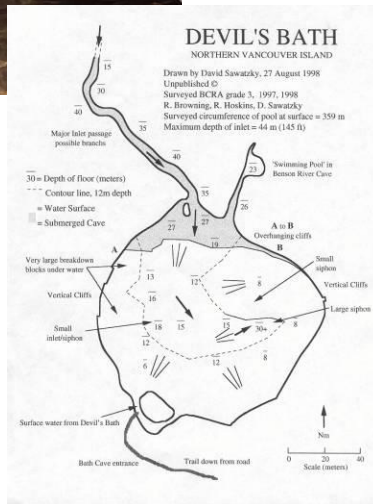


was that many of these systems seemed to continue very deep before getting shallow again. The logistics of pushing any of them further became more and more challenging. David decided to return to the cave the following year with a team that was both trained to use mix gas and had some respectable cave diving experience.

Unfortunately Browning was not able to join Sawatzky to continue the push. David recruited me and an old friend of mine who is one of the most accomplished divers I know, Ralph Hoskins. In 1997, Ralph and I had the opportunity to extend some surface support for Ric and David. It was clear that in addition to requiring specialized deep diving setups, another large problem was just gaining access to the caves themselves. What remained was a challenge that a small group of us could not pass up. Over ten days of diving and with twenty-three storage bottles of specialized mixed breathing gases and the aid of sponsorship of many supportive people, the three of us were able to record what was believed to be the deepest cave dive in Canada and the first cave dive in Canada using mixed gases.



Devil's Bath is a small pool of water no larger than the size of a hockey rink. Located on the north end of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, the Bath sits amid a rough underdeveloped landscape that is left unused except for the lumberjacks and miners. The only roads in

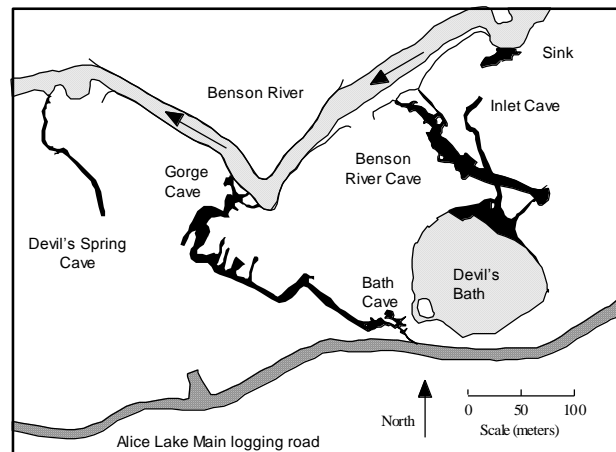


and out of the region are small winding dirt paths no wider than the wheelbase of the largest logging truck in camp. Surrounding the Bath on the three sides are steep high rocky embankments covered in thick bush and tall evergreens. Towering over the fourth side is a long escarpment that separates Devil's Bath from the Benson River, a decent sized tributary that drains many of the higher elevated lakes and

waterbeds in the mid-island mountain range.

During winter season the highlands are drenched with rain and snow. As spring and summer settle in the flooding waters carrying the run-off from the rain and

Devil's Bath Cave System

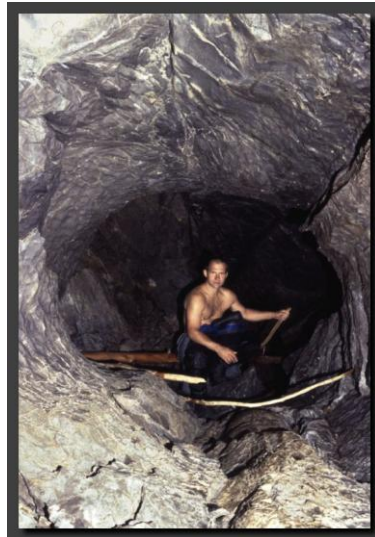


Plan Overview drawn by David Sawatzky 31 August 1998





melting snow charge furiously down the many streams like Benson River cutting a sinuous gorge into the soft limestone. Along the route these charging waters work their way into the rocks, carving a complicated maze of wet and dry karst features that extend for kilometers in all directions. The section of river that passes the Devil's Bath is no different. Over time, the forceful waters have worked an intricate labyrinth with passages leading from high points into the river and draining into the Bath, and then from the Bath to lower points in the river. The escarpment between the Bath and the River is now a honeycomb of meandering caves that possess a very dynamic and diverse personality.

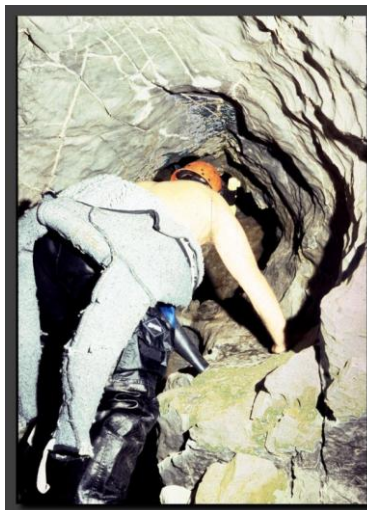


The team was kept small on purpose with each member playing a key role. David led the expedition having done the majority of surveying in the Devil's Bath system. Both he and Ralph have conducted hundreds of cave dives together surveying some very tight and challenging systems in Eastern Canada. Their primary responsibilities were to lead the surveying efforts. My primary role was to photograph the survey as it unfolded. Having

dived with Ralph for many years and David over the past two seasons, I was familiar with their styles and had an idea about how I might catch them on film.

It was decided that one of the major objectives was to survey a system known as the Devil's Spring. This system was last pushed to a depth a little over 65MFW (213FFW) but air supply and narcosis made any further penetration too risky. Our goal was to return to the system with mixed gases and carry on the push. Some of the particulars that needed to be considered included the transportation of gear to the sites, arranging enough mixed gases for eight to ten days of diving in a very remote location and trying to pick a window when the current and water levels were low enough.

After three days of open water training to work out any bugs, we headed up north to Port McNeil. Our operations were based out of a small but well equipped dive shop called SunFun Divers. The owners, Steve and Trudi LeCasse, were instrumental in the success of this expedition. After rearranging the shop, we settled in and began blending gases; then it was off to the Bath. To begin, the drive from the nearest town was about 30 kilometers (48 miles) over rough unforgiving forest roads. The windy dusty service roads are built by the forestry companies to haul logs and rocks out of the area. This in itself posed a hazard as the roads maintained limited visibility and ditches with sheer banks. The giant rock and log





haulers move at incredible speeds to keep their momentum when climbing steep inclinations.

Once the long nerve wracking drive was finished, we were still a good distance from the water's edge. The entrance to each cave system involved a minimum 500 meter (547 yards) hike through thick bush and usually down steep cliff faces, not an easy chore when carrying over 150 kilograms (330 pounds) of diver gear per person (we elected to make three separate trips each to move the all of the gear).

The first stage of the expedition was in the Devil's Spring, a system that began in Benson River roughly 500 meters (547 yards) downstream from the Bath. Previous pushes led Sawatzky to believe that it might lead up to and connect with the Bath somewhere under the mammoth escarpment that separates the Bath from the river. Once geared up, we swam upstream to the portion of the bank where the spring emerged. The entrance was a tight restriction barely large enough for a single diver and back mounted twin-tanks. The flow was incredible with a 20 centimeter (8 inch) boil at the entrance caused by what we guessed was an eight

knot current. Watching David climb his way through was bewildering to say the least. Once inside, the three of us followed the previously laid line to ensure all was still intact. The average current flow in the system was a strong knot and speeding up through each restriction. This was a good dive to get ourselves familiar with the layout of the cave and determine where we would make our decompression stops for the following days of deep diving. At 13MFW (43FFW) the current was so strong it pulled me and a 1.5 meter (5 feet) boulder up a steep incline! These forces posed a serious threat to controlling our decompression stops. Should anyone miss a planned stop, the effects could result in serious injury or death. We elected to give the system a couple of days to settle down.

The second stage of the expedition involved exploring the Bath and one of the springs that fed it. We also found the current in this system barely manageable. After replacing the old survey line that was laid the year before, we exited the system. Exploration of the Bath itself revealed a number of siphons along the bottom that seemed to eerily drop out of sight at 30MFW (99FFW). We explored carefully, not knowing exactly how strong the drain would become in the silted bottom of the Bath. With cut trees over 35MFW (117FFW) long drawn into the bowels of the Bath, it was clear why it was named after the Devil.

The third stage of the expedition took us into the Bath Cave, a dry cave located on one of the embankments leading down into the Bath pool. After hauling our side-mount systems into the tight crevices, we entered a pool approximately 100 meters (328 feet) from the cave entrance. We were actually



