

BACK TO NARACOORTE

- Kent Henderson

Diprotodon model at Naracoorte Caves



In early March I found myself in Naracoorte for the best part of a week on business, and I took the opportunity (of course!) to catch up with ACKMA's Australian Vice-President and Naracoorte Caves Manager, Steve Bourne, and to check out what's been happening at the caves since my last visit (a couple of years ago..?).

The answer is – lots! Initially, my mind wandered back to the Naracoorte ten or so years ago, when a cream brick building over Alexandra Cave amounted to the aboveground infrastructure. One would not know it existed today (although it still does – as the *Bent Wing Café* – now totally renovated and externally rendered). What strikes one more than anything is the pathways, landscaping and now fully mature native vegetation and gardens that surround the café, office and Wonambi Fossil Centre precinct. Absolutely magnificent! New features since my last visit are a life-sized model of a *Diprotodon* – located next to the car park adjacent to the café and Wonambi, plus an interesting construction at the entrance to the Victoria Fossil Cave car park.



The new entrance marker at Victoria Fossil Cave

Underground? Heaps more has happened! After two successive Green Corps programs over two years, its volunteers have removed over 100 cubic metres of rock waste from Victoria Fossil Cave. This was 'created' years ago when the original pathways were excavated in the cave, whereupon the refuse rock was stacked up on both sides of the cuttings, looking awful and concealing much. This has now been pretty much completely removed from the main track through the cave – revealing lots previously hidden. This includes quite wonderful flowstones, and a long fallen ceiling slab – which in itself offers an excellent interpretation opportunity not previously available. There is still considerable rock refuse in some side passages in the cave, but nothing a further Green Corps program cannot fix! (next year perhaps...)



The fallen ceiling slab revealed by Green Corp volunteers in Victoria Fossil Cave

Several other changes have been made. In both Victoria Fossil and Alexandra Caves new recycled plastic handrails have been installed in places. I was not completely convinced (and frankly, neither is Steve) that these are the 'answer to a maiden's prayer'. On the plus side there are clearly no corrosion issues, but on the minus side the handrails tend to be a bit 'floppy' in places.

Some new staircases have also been placed in Victoria Fossil. These consist of plastic steps (which are 'grated') that can easily be removed for cleaning. Excellent, effective and pleasing to the eye. The attendant slightly "floppy" handrails I've already commented upon.

A third Green Corp program is currently running at Naracoorte, doing excellent re-vegetation work, and well as restoration in Alexandra Cave (see Steve Bourne's article elsewhere in this Journal), and I had the opportunity to see them working in Alexandra, and to meet many of the participants. I was immediately impressed with their dedication and the totally infectious enthusiasm of these marvellous young people!

New recycled plastic steps in Victoria Fossil Cave



Steve has many more plans for belowground improvements. A major one is significant changes in the flooring layout of the Fossil Chamber adjacent to the fossil beds. Aboveground more is planned also. A mooted major addition is a full fossil museum that would probably be an annex of the South Australian Museum, and house the entire fossil collection of the State! Stunning stuff!! Let's hope it comes off!!

During my visit Steve was extremely busy (not quite as a headless chook, but close!) putting the final organising touches to *Palaeontology Week 2004* (26 March – 3 April). It was, as expected, a stunning success, with over 1000 school children attending! Again, a report is elsewhere in this Journal.



About half of the 100 m³ refuse rock removed from Victoria Fossil Cave

Jack & Pat Bourne with their 'visitor' at Bourne's Bird Museum



Steve Bourne is the "unknown" back section of Blanche Cave



One night during my stay, Steve took me into the largely unknown rear chamber of Blanche Cave (not open to the public) – which he himself had not been in for over four years (the last time it was entered). I didn't even know it existed, and I suspect it will be 'news' to many others also. It is wonderful! The chamber was somewhat 'trashed' historically, and it has significant soot-written graffiti on the ceiling in several places. What is amazing is the significant regrowth of straws that has occurred in, say, the last 80-100 years since its initial degrading. Most straws are already well over an inch or two long! The growth has doubtlessly been augmented more recently by the removal of most pine trees (some years back now) that use to thirstily blight the aboveground landscape, and consequently dry up the caves.

During my visit I drove out past *Bool Lagoon* (inconveniently shut as it was a 'fire ban' day...sigh...) to *Bourne's Bird Museum*. The name might ring a bell? No, it is not named after our esteemed Vice President, but rather after his parents – Jack and Pat Bourne! I got to meet them, hear several unsavoury stories about their son (not really – only kidding Steve!), and tour their small museum. It contains a tremendous collection of stuffed birds – Jack is an expert taxidermist! Well worth a visit next time you are in the area.

Re-growth straws – back section of Blanche Cave



Soot-created graffiti – back section of Blanche Cave



A big issue during my visit was that of the local Elderslie Limestone Quarry, which is located near Naracoorte Racecourse, about eight kilometres from the caves, near Naracoorte township. A magnificent geological feature in the quarry – effectively an ‘island’ within it – recently had its top bulldozed off. It was previously a great illustration of the geological history of the area. Needless to say, a great many were most unimpressed with his act of wanton vandalism. An article from the *Naracoorte Herald*, detailing the saga, is adjacent. Also recently

discovered, running from the quarry, is a new cave that has now been surveyed. It is as big as Blanche Cave, and not that dissimilar in many ways. It contains, among much else, extensive and magnificent floors covered in calcite flakes. I am advised that this cave, currently unnamed, has future show cave potential. Current tenure is with the local council, and strenuous efforts will be made to ensure its protection.

Floor covered in calcite flakes – ‘Elderslie Quarry Cave’. Photo – Steve Bourne



For those who have not been to Naracoorte for a while, I suggest you get back there – it is well worth yet another look! Of course, many will doubtlessly be attending *Limestone Coast 2004* (as more-awake readers may have noted, the Booking Form for it was inserted in the last journal...), and will thus have that opportunity.

Many thanks Steve, Liz Reed, and other Naracoorte staff (particularly the wonderfully efficient Jenny Paech), for so kindly looking after me during my visit.

Below – Green Corps volunteers in Alexandra Cave

