

VALE **STEPHEN BLANDEN**
Cathie Plowman - Northern Caverneers



Stephen Blenden at Galignite Hole, Mole Creek.

Australian speleology is much the poorer with the recent death of ACKMA member Stephen Blenden from Tasmania. Stephen lived at Gunns Plains and his considerable cave exploration and documentation in Tasmania includes Gunns Plains, Mt Cripps, Moina, Loongana, Wilmot River, the Vale of Belvoir and especially the Mole Creek karst. He sought out karst areas and then inched his way over every part of them carefully seeking out caves and verifying previous records. He had a keen eye for detail and could readily retrace his steps in untracked bush and recall minute features in caves.

A member of the Northern Caverneers for the past 10 years, Stephen embarked on an effort to check all details of the Mole Creek karst, re-checking all recorded caves and seeking out all possible options for new caves. To date there are 451 numbered cave entrances in the Mole Creek karst and Stephen numbered 212 of

these. All trips were documented and caves meticulously surveyed. Nothing was 'put off'. If a trip or a report could not be completed he got back to the bush as soon as possible, and rose early the following day to complete documentation. Being a farm manager, his usual start was 6.00 a.m. so rising early meant 4.00 a.m.

Stephen's search for new caves was coupled with an enthusiasm for past caving efforts and his 'spare time' was spent in the Burnie library delving into old newspaper accounts of caving trips. From gravestones and historic cave graffiti to the internet site Trove, he was relentless in pursuing details of historic caving details and piecing together historical details.

His life on the land and courteous manner earned him the respect of private land owners and managers and he was able to gain access to karst on private properties

where managers have been reluctant to allow cavers in recent times. His gentle manner extended into his fostering of new cavers, assisting them to gain not just physical skills but also encouraging their interest in the many details of caves

Stephen's neighbours at Gunns Plains were fellow ACKMA members and Gunns Plains Cave managers Trish and Geoff Deer. He knew this cave intimately and self-published a photographic souvenir booklet for cave visitors. Other publications include his book *Caves of Gunns Plains* and many records, maps and trip reports in the Northern Caverneers publication *Troglodyte*. Deliberately unpublished, however, were records of caves on private land where this had been requested by the land owners.

In recent years Stephen became engrossed by the karst at the Vale of Belvoir, near Cradle Mountain, which he explored, researched and documented. He was a keen supporter of the Tasmanian Land Conservancy which has acquired the Vale to manage for conservation.

Local and interstate cavers were regularly given hospitality at Stephen's Gunns Plains' home and he would give extensive assistance to others in planning

and undertaking trips in Tasmanian karst areas. He assisted in planning the field trips for the 2011 ACKMA conference and had planned to lead some trips but was stopped in his tracks with the diagnosis of a brain tumour a couple of months prior to the conference.

While undergoing medical treatment, Stephen re-directed his caving energies into carefully checking the details of the numbered caves at Mole Creek and updating the list previously prepared by Arthur Clarke (*Speleo Spiel* 321). As Stephen wished, this updated list was published in the June 2012 issue of *Troglodyte*. ACKMA members can locate this online via the Southern Tasmania Caverneers' website.

Stephen was previously a member of the Savage River Caving Club and was also a member of the National Speleological Society (USA). He was awarded an Australian Speleological Federation Certificate of Merit in 2005. He is greatly and sadly missed by his family, friends and caving mates. While we are the poorer at his far too early death at age 54, his efforts have greatly enriched and fostered our knowledge and appreciation of Tasmania's caves and karst. We will miss his company, and blue overalls, on all the trips ahead.



Stephen with a ute load of rubbish collected by Karstcare from Harry Creek Cave, Mole Creek.