

# NORTHBOUND IN SNOWY RIVER

By John Ganter

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**D**awn. John Lyles is looking in the back of my truck: "JG, wake up! You've been chosen for the first team!"

"I won't go, that dig sounds too scary," I replied, thinking groggily of comments I had heard the previous night.

"There's booty," Lyles said quietly. That woke me up. This was indeed an opportunity to assist in some exciting exploration and documentation. But I vowed that if I did not like the looks of the dig I would exit the cave and sit in my lawn chair.

Equipment setup was complicated - we had to take two sets of gear, including a clean pack. I got gear spread out, packed up, and ate freeze-dried eggs and warm Gatorade just before it began to rain steadily.

I gave my son Will a hug, told him I'd be back very late, and slogged down towards the entrance. Signed forms in the back of John Corcoran's RV. Went through the unlocked fence, and down into the large entrance. Here I left my Gore-Tex jacket as others joined up. Our leader was John McLean, the longtime USGS geologist and CRF caver. I met the other team members: Jim Cox, who had built the Fort Stanton gate and many others; Lewis Land, a Carlsbad geologist; and Lloyd Swartz, prime mover in the dig effort.

It was 8:45 am. We went down and through the massive cave gate. We headed down the large main trunk passage, which reaches 80

feet wide by 50 feet high in places. This has been drying out for decades; we passed wood from a boat left by an 1870s US Army expedition that initially explored part of the cave.

After about 1.25 hrs of travel, including some crawls and climbs, we reached yet another gate: the entrance to the Priority 7 dig. This was unlocked and up we went. In profile, Priority 7 is a section of passage that forms an inverted U about 80 feet high. The passage, mostly crawls and short climbs, is sheltered beneath a bedrock headwall on the right. (This headwall apparently extends up to a sinkhole on the surface.) On the left is a jumble of unconsolidated fill and breakdown. There is a lot of loose gravel, so we spread out on the small, steeply ascending climbs/crawls under the headwall. The roughness of the breakdown and dry mud/clay makes the passage rather anechoic; it was sometimes hard to hear the person ahead and behind.

Obviously, a great deal of work had gone into pushing and stabilizing this series of digs. I felt everything was reasonably stable as long as care was taken with the left wall. The diggers deserve credit for pursuing this fairly non-intuitive effort.

We reached the top of the inverted U in grim-looking breakdown and started down the other side. Here there was a rope and cable ladder that helped with a narrow slot climb. It took us about 1.75 hours to get through Priority 7 and reach the Starry Night

Passage. This was a muddy crawlway with gleaming crystals set in the black manganese ceiling. I slogged along, dragging my big pack.

The passage enlarged to walking height and I stepped forward into a gloomy canyon, with black manganese ceiling and paved with dark mud. A larger passage came in from the right. I glanced over that way. I stared.

It looked like someone had driven a Zamboni down this dark passage, paving a roadway with pure white laundry detergent. The roadway stretched out of sight in each direction. I closed my eyes and there was a glowing afterimage, like a ski run on a sunny day. Stepping closer, I could see that "Snowy River" was a dry, rough-textured pool deposit, about 8 to 12 inches deep, and six to 12 feet wide. It was amazing.

We were at The Marina. One previous trip on July 4 had surveyed southward for 2780 feet, with no end in sight. No one had set an Aqua Sock to the north.

We spread out on the dark beach and carefully changed out of our muddy gear and into clean. The final step was transferring onto a

## Photo

**Lloyd Swartz crawls through the low section just north of the Marina, headed north in the Snowy River passage.**

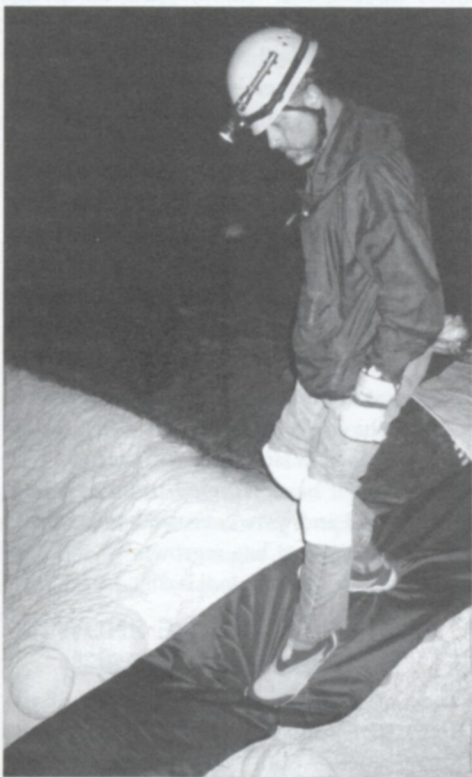
Photo by John Ganter.

shower curtain, donning Aqua Socks, and carefully stepping down into the dry bed of Snowy River while checking for any lingering mud blobs. We were now "on-trail" and confined to this gleaming pavement. The second team, due in about an hour, would carry their carefully bagged muddy gear with them so that they would have the option of converting back to "muddy mode."

It was now noon. We figured out survey roles: John McLean would read foresights, keep the book, and sketch a running profile; I would do the plan sketch and cross sections; Lewis Land would read backsights; Jim Cox would set stations and read tape; and Lloyd Swartz was radioman.

Lloyd set up the roughly 3x3 foot antenna and was quickly in contact with the surface team. I had never been on a trip with a cave radio, and it was a strange experience to have a scratchy but understandable voice connection with the outside world after several hours underground.

Northbound. The first couple of shots were through a low area where we had to carefully avoid touching the black ceiling. Lewis did not have much experience with the Suunto, so I set my ferrous eyeglasses aside and did the first 6 or so awkward readings. I assured



**Lewis Land carefully descends the "Boat Ramp" into Snowy River. The plastic helps keep the River clean of dirt.**

Photo by John Ganter.

Lewis that anyone who could read a Brunton could pick up a Suunto with ease, and he was soon running instruments.

The passage enlarged to 15 feet wide by 20+ high and blasted north. We followed the white carpet, pulling tape and strolling along in our Aqua Socks. To the west we glimpsed high alcoves that seemed to be part of a parallel passageway. We couldn't go there, but we could "lase" there — another first (for me) was a Disto laser distance meter that projected a spot and calculated distance to it.

The passage turned slightly to the east, and a large void appeared to this side. It seemed to be another major passage leading off into the mud. Much staring and giggling from our "tourist trail."

Dimensions were now up to 25 feet wide by 30 or 40 feet high. Unfortunately, we only had a 50-foot tape! The passage was relatively straightforward to sketch, and I was beginning to sorely miss the 100-footer in my truck. What about the Disto? After some discussion we switched over. I would hold the sketchpad up at the station, the dot would flicker around for a few seconds, and - beep - range to the hundredth of a foot.

Lloyd strolled past with the antenna over his shoulder, grinning widely. Setting up a couple of hundred feet ahead, he became a human beacon counting endlessly ("99, 98, 97...") so that the surface crew could home in to the spot directly above him. Contact established. Concern on the surface. We were headed towards a canyon! Fort Stanton passages have a terrible history of shutting down as soon as they pass under a canyon. We were within 50 feet of a major canyon, and the surface team cautioned that it was entirely possible we would soon reach an obstruction.

Lloyd looked up from the radio. He gazed about 250 feet down the passage, to where Jim was lining up and flagging survey stations. Lloyd giggled for several seconds. Then he



**Along Snowy River, a collapse dome and a possible lead are found at station SRN24.**

Photo by John Ganter.

calmly offered to meet them on the other side of the canyon. I grinned and sketched as we rolled off a couple more 90-foot shots.

Contact again. The surface team was ecstatic. We had passed under a major drainage, and it sounded to them like we were not even crawling very much! They were providing GPS control of our key survey points, and enjoying a form of "vicarious caving." The irony was that they were having a rough time climbing up and down rugged canyons, fighting their way through juniper and other brush. Meanwhile, we were strolling along a glowing pathway in our bedroom slippers.

The passage went around a bend, turning sharply to the east. What did this mean? It was bigger than ever, booming canyon 50 feet high in places. We had now placed about 40 stations. Suddenly, a curious thing happened to Snowy River. It got breakdown in it. A sort of fall line dubbed Snowy Rapids had been reached where the floor began to drop slightly but perceptibly. The single continuous pool was now a streamway connecting pools. We also noticed that the coating was now noticeably less white.

A couple of shots onward and we were standing in a grand pool that would have been 4 feet deep if filled with water. This passage had rocks in it! Our feet were getting sore. We continued, stepping carefully over breakdown and crawling under a huge block that had fallen across the streamway. Finally we reached 60 stations. It was now about 10 p.m., and we decided to head out for a reasonable



**Kat Rix poses among the breakdown "islands" in the Snowy Rapids just upstream of SRN39.**

Photo by John Ganter.

hoped they were having as productive a day as we.

Another 30 minutes and we were changed and headed up the Starry Night Passage. We hauled all the packs up the cable ladder drop with the rope, which worked well. We also passed packs through some of the squeezes and climbs. We found that it

takes much less time and energy if the person ahead pulls and lifts. In about 2.5 hours we breathed sighs of relief in being out of Priority 7. Then the crawls, climbs, and long walk up the main trunk following the trails and flags. At 2:15 a.m. we emerged to clear skies, having completed a very memorable 17.5-hour trip.

Yet another new experience awaited me... a 3 a.m. spaghetti dinner provided by the Corcorans! We sat in chairs at a table, eating spaghetti and hot garlic bread, and grinning in disbelief at the extraordinary walk we had taken along Snowy River North.

Epilogue: Our survey netted 3276 feet. The next day, Kat Rix's team extended Snowy River North another 1327 feet for a total of 4603 feet. And it goes... ■