

Trip Report: Waikato River Night Dive, 26th March 2010

Andy Connor

It never ceases to amaze me at how easily people become creatures of habit, doing things the familiar way because it's easy. Diving shouldn't be like that, there is so much variety that it should be impossible to ever get bored of diving – you do get out of it what you put in. That doesn't mean that you have to always dive different spots, but more that how you see those sights should always be fresh. It's one of the reasons that I dive with a camera, looking through the lens changes your perspective and helps you see things that you would otherwise miss. Another great option is to dive those sites at night, where the light of your torch illuminates a narrow slice through the darkness, forcing you to look closely rather than have your attention dart off in different directions.



We came up with the idea of doing a night drift dive down the Waikato River back in October 2009, but the long summer evenings aren't that conducive to easy night diving so the idea has been simmering away for some time, and the idea became a reality the night before the Tech Dive NZ "Big Day Out". Jamie, James and I met in Taupo early on Friday evening to discuss our plans and arrange the logistics of being able to get back upriver after the dive. Our biggest concern was missing the exit, but as we dropped a car at the exit at Reid's Farm this worry disappeared – boy, the owners of all the camper vans and motor homes parked up for the evening were sure to be in for a shock in a couple of hours time!



We headed up to Cherry Island, where the carpark was invitingly open despite being passed the closing time. Rather than risk it, we left the car parked on the road and shifted the dive gear down to the waterside as the sun dipped below the horizon. The darkness literally rolled over the cliffs that bound the river and filled up the gorge as we slipped into the water. Drifting slowly down on the surface, I looked back in time to see the carpark being locked up; making me very glad that we'd left the car on the road. I'd love to know what the attendant was thinking, as he saw three lights disappearing down the river...

Passing the bungy we dropped below the surface with our lights piercing the gloomy water, and as the river narrowed slightly we were off in a rush, skimming a few inches above the gravel bottom. I was certainly struck at how different the dive is at night, with the trout being more curious at what had entered their domain. Interestingly, the river was also alive with juvenile koura that I have never seen during the day. But the river didn't leave us much time to ponder on this as it gathered speed for the first of the fast sections. Sunken trees appeared out of the gloom, twisted branches looking like the claws of some hideous monster. Each tree needed a quick flick of the fins to twist around them and not

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A black silhouette of a person riding a bicycle, positioned to the right of the text 'New Zealand'.

get caught, the same with the larger rocks and underwater cliffs that we encountered as we rushed by. Before long we reached the first of the sections that we easily recognised, a shallow fast section just a metre deep. Glancing at my computer, we were about eight minutes in to the dive, we'd certainly reached this section faster than any other time we'd dived the river, testament to the higher flow rate. Other features that we recognised appeared out of the gloom, whizzed by and disappeared into the gloom behind us.

Time flew by as we concentrated on our dive, on keeping together and avoiding the underwater obstacles. At about 20 minutes into the dive, we passed the last landmark that indicated the end of the fast sections. Shifting over to the left bank of the river, we surfaced exactly where we'd planned, a hundred metres or so upstream of the hot springs. Drifting down the river, listening to the wild life and gazing at the stars was a beautiful moment and time to reflect on what a great dive we'd just had. Definitely a fantastic experience, but not one for the faint hearted!