

## WILD MARE CAVE – TORCA LA VACA 20 – 29TH APRIL 2012 COLIN HAYWARD & JIM LISTER

(From Colin Hayward's blog: <http://www.sterling-adventures.co.uk/blog/2012/04/24/the-rain-in-spain/> ;  
<http://www.sterling-adventures.co.uk/blog/2012/04/25/using-the-back-entrance/>;  
<http://www.sterling-adventures.co.uk/blog/2012/04/28/a-wild-mare-kicks-out/> )

After last years trip over to Spain which resulted in us diving a previously unexplored sump to find a chamber and several possible leads Jim and I felt that it would be a good idea to do a follow up trip. We may be correct, time will tell, the force 7 gale on the ferry crossing and the continuous rain for the two weeks prior to our visit do not bode well.

Our **first day** has been spent recovering from the ferry crossing, buying food and looking around to remember where we went last year. River levels are obviously up, in some places by as much as a couple of meters. The site we want to dive is called Cave of the Wild Mare which is thought to be the resurgence for the Torca la Vaca system which we dived in last time out. We are not sure if it will be passable. The weather forecast does not provide good reading at the moment but these things can change.

Or not; drips through the roof announced the overnight rain but neither that or the previous evenings 1 Euro bottle of wine prevented us from sorting the kit and loading the van at the start of our **second day**. After driving through small rivers on the roads we first tried walking to the cave entrance from above thus avoiding a questionable river crossing. We failed in the dense forest and drove down the hill to try our luck with the wet route. To our surprise the river was passable and we soon found the entrance which looked a little damp. Undeterred we climbed up the small waterfall before the entrance and got into the cave. The description tells of dry crawling and some canals to the sump of the wild eels but with the high water levels the whole passage was fast flowing water. Despite the difficulty of crawling against the current we eventually reached the back end of the cave where the roof neared the water about 15 m before the normal start of the sump. We turned at this point and made a rapid, assisted, exit. Diving in the Sump of the Wild Eels may be possible. Extra line will be needed as the canal passage before the sump is almost up to the roof and it would not take much more water to turn it into a sump proper. We will have to see tomorrow when the weather is going to improve...

Or not; no overnight rain resulted in a good nights sleep until Jim heard a werewolf climbing the stairs. With better weather forecast for our **third day** we went about getting dive kit into the cave and trying to find the Sump of the Wild Eels. Crossing the river was much easier as the water had dropped by about 30 cm. This was also true in the cave and we were able to go beyond the point reached yesterday. We found a convenient place to kit up and Jim headed off into a duck that was almost sumped. Once that had been lined we found the breakdown chamber before the sump proper. Tying onto a rope that had been left in place for when climbing Jim then dived into the sump but ran out of line in a cross rift about 6 m before the end. Whilst Jim collected a full reel from the kitting up spot I had a dive in the murky, mud floored sump. The vis on the return was better than expected indicating that there is a good flow. After I surfaced Jim went through and finished the job, surfacing in the chamber that marks the limit of exploration. The small "uninspiring" sump found in the back left corner of the chamber by the original explorers looked very active and had covered the floor to a depth of about 0.5 m with fast flowing water. Jim then made an exit to where I was waiting at the start of the first sump, pausing on the way to tidy the line and find the original line running down the opposite side of the sump. Time pressure then ended the day, or was it the call of a 2 Euro bottle of wine? The next job will be to dive to the terminal chamber and have a go at the undived sump. No doubt the weather will improve as forecast...

Or maybe; despite no overnight rain the ground was still wet on the start of the **fourth day** but the river levels were down and the water was clearing. We quickly got to the start of the Sump of the Wild Eels and passed it to the terminal chamber. Whilst I secured the dive line to a suitable rock Jim kitted up for the attempt on the undived sump. After he headed off I sat down and waited. After a

while I heard Jim shouting. I was later to find out that he had surfaced in a rift and we had proved a vocal connection. After another wait Jim reappeared and I kitted up and followed him in to a second rift. I then dived the line through a bedding where he had excavated some boulders and to the end of the line. After a quick foray off the end of the line in a canal trench I saw a way on under a low arch. I returned for Jim and he went under the arch and layed out more line in a good sized round tube. After following this around a couple of bends the passage stopped in a blind chamber that was big enough to turn round in. Although there are other options in this area of the cave, which is made up of bedding planes, rifts and breakdown, we both think that the main flow has been lost. On the way out we split up and searched each wall of sump of the wild eels. Jim found a promising looking side passage guarded by a cute looking eel. We exited to hear reports of sunshine so we finished off the bottle of 2 Euro wine and had pizza as comfort food. We now know that the weather is improving...

Or it could be; the **sixth day** started out as another diving trip into Wild Mare, the aim being to look at the side passage that Jim found on the fourth day, the one with the cute eel. With much lower water levels we made good time on the way in, the plan being to dive to the far end of the sump along our line and return the short distance along the original line to where Jim had clipped on the line reel. This would help us protect the viz on that side of the sump and improve our chances. After we had both dived to the far end of the sump I dived back to collect the reel, form a junction and swim off into the promising side passage. Presumably Jim thinks I look scary enough underwater to see off the eels. He may be right because I saw no eels but cannot say if any saw me. Once the junction had been formed a silt screw was used to make a belay next to the junction; the silt layer being more than 40 cm thick at this point. Unfortunately the cave has been playing tricks on us and the promising side passage turned out to be an alcove with more alcoves each side of it. After searching about 10 m of the far end of the passage wall at floor level on the left hand side facing out (downstream) the search was abandoned owing to the clouds of silt that had blown up from the floor. Surfacing back at the end of the line with Jim we discussed the problem. The main flow has clearly been lost and with high water levels limiting viz and at the same time giving us no clue at to where the flow comes from we decided to have a go from the other end – Torca la Vaca. We removed our kit from Wild Mare, had dinner (with no wine) and went out again to rig the ropes in Torca. Our plan now is to get back into Eely Mud Eye Chamber and look at the sump we found on our last visit but didn't have time to dive. Having done that we are now enjoying some glasses of 1 euro wine and some bacon flavoured crisps – we know how to live it up we do.

**Day 7.** After our failure to find the link between Cave of the Wild Mare and Torca la Vaca using the easy way in through Wild Mare we have decided to go in the back way through the Torca. This will get us to the downstream sump we didn't have time to dive last time out but it is a lot harder work. Yesterday evening we went in and rigged the cave. Today we moved two sets of dive kit in and down to the kitting up area. It was a leisurely trip taking just over five hours and included several picture and video breaks. Once we had finished moving the kit Jim placed two bolts from which we hung ladders. The first is reached by traversing along from the kitting up area and should allow us to get into the water without climbing down a sharp rift and damaging our equipment. The second is positioned in the upstream end of the Buttermere canal section and will be used to get over a closing in the passage cross section and down the other side to the upstream sump that we think feeds the canal and may connect with sumps further into the cave. We both feel that we have just about earned our 1 euro wine tonight.

Our second day in Torca la Vaca (**day 8**) started well with a simple light weight trip in to Buttermere where we kitted up at the base of the pitch and climbed the ladder down into the canal. We floated downstream to find the dive line from last year and swam through to Eely Mud Eye chamber. The water level was slightly up on so the whole place looked a little different. We looked around for a few minutes trying to find a way of crossing the chamber without getting out of the water. We failed but the search will go on during future visits; why would we want to cave when there is the chance of a gently swim? At the far side of the chamber Jim tied on to a boulder and

went to explore the passage that we thought was a sump. Swimming for about 5 m in a very wide bedding Jim surfaced in a very muddy rift closing down at one end and ending in a boulder choke at the other with an arch straight ahead. Both of us de-kitted to investigate a passage going off from the small area beyond the arch. It turned out to be a very muddy inlet which was pushed upstream through a duck to crawling sized passage going off. This was left as it was clearly off route. Back in the main rift we climbed the boulder choke to find a link to another rift containing breakdown and several possible ways on. Each was looked at and the last one took us up through more stacked boulders to a larger rift several meters high with water at the bottom. The rift was divided by a flake which we walked along the top of and then dropped down it's left side onto a massive wedged boulder (that proved to be the key to route finding in the interlinking rifts) held in place by a few cobbles located at all the important places. Overlooking the key boulder is a lovely round tube formed on a rift fault. Climbing down below the boulder we regained the water and investigated various ways on. The first went blind but the second took us around a corner and the unexpected sight of the dive line at the far end of the Sump of the Wild Eels. We had made the connection! Jubilation and a handshake followed. On the way back we tried several different routes through our new discovery but always end up back at the key boulder. We think there may be an underwater route through but then maybe we are being lazy and optimistic. After a timely exit we are now back at base planning tomorrow's trip. Clearly we need to survey the find to try and fix the two caves together and there is the possibility of the first through trip. The 1 Euro wine is flowing well tonight and we have decide to call our find the AGM Bypass because of a meeting we have missed whilst out here.

**Day 9** Today's plan was complex. We went in the dry route with refilled cylinders, survey kit and a ladder. Our aim being to leave the SRT kits on the rope at the base of the Torca la Vaca pitch, have a look at the upstream sump in Buttermere and then go downstream into Eely Mud Eye chamber where we would start surveying out towards the connection with Wild Mare. How we had to move bits of equipment about in Buttermere to achieve this was enough to give us both headaches. All went well to start off with and Jim got into the water on the other side of the mud back in upstream Buttermere. He followed a large sumped passage for about 15 m going off to the left looking upstream. This surfaced in a rift. On the right hand side of the rift was a cascade over boulders. Above this was a large cobble floored stream passage ending in a clear blue sump turning off to the right. Jim then returned and we headed off downstream into Eely Mud Eye where we started surveying (hoping that we would make a better job than we did last time) we also managed to find a quick route through the chamber without getting out of the water. From Eely we dived through to the start of AGM Bypass and continued our survey work in the rift at the start of the climb up into the higher level of the boulder collapse area. Route finding and time pressure then caught up with us and we abandoned surveying to find the simplest route through the boulders for our dive kit. After moving a boulder or two we created a breakthrough window that allowed us to lower gear back down to water level and avoid an exposed climb down with kit. From there we were able to take a direct (underwater route) to the terminal chamber of Wild Mare. The dive out through Sump of the Wild Eels was very pleasant if a little gloomy as we were travelling in the silt cloud that we had created by our days activities. Near the start of the sump a side passage was spotted – it gave itself away by the flow of clear water. Upon surfacing Jim had a look for interesting undercuts but returned rapidly to report that “we are not alone”, apparently the eel he had met was far less cute and considerably larger than the previous one. We then completed the through trip from Torca la Vaca to Cave of the Wild Mare. Later on we popped in to see Juan and hand over our survey data and discuss the upstream sump in Buttermere that Jim had dived. In all likelihood the passage Jim surfaced in was the Whitworth series. This is very welcome to us because the main aim of finding the link between Wild Mare and Torca la Vaca is to provide an easy route in to the sumps further into Torca la Vaca. A long days caving is now being capped off with 1 Euro wine – which tastes fabulous!

**Day 10** After our complex through trip/exploration trip/survey trip yesterday we had equipment to move out of Cave of the Wild Mare and more surveying to do. We went in through Wild Mare. The

weather has returned to continuous rain so we were surprised to find that the waterfall at the mouth of the cave had completely dried up and that water levels in the cave were down on yesterday. We kitted up and dived through Sump of the Wild Eels to the AGM Bypass where I left my dive kit and helped Jim move his through to the start of the dive to Eely Mud Eye Chamber. Jim dived off upstream to Buttermere where he collected the two ladders we had used the previous day to get over the mud bridge and back into the water for the dive through the Whitworth series. A cord was left in place so that a ladder or rope could be pulled up from the water in future. I stayed behind and continued the survey work through to the breakthrough window. Whilst doing this I noted that the number of drips coming from the roof was increasing and in some places the drips were turning into waterfalls. With impeccable timing Jim returned with the ladders just as I had completed the survey work that I could do on my own. Jim commented that the water levels were rising and the cave was flooding. We then completed the surveying, weighted the tackle bags for neutral buoyancy and headed out. Sump of the Wild Eels was heavily silted but didn't have much flow. After we surfaced we saw an inlet on the left (facing out) just before the boulder pile that was flowing very heavily. Clear water from the inlet was mixing with the silty water from the sump and it looked like half or more of the water in Wild Mare was being fed from that inlet. Crawling out with extra gear was fun in the high water and we were both glad to reach the entrance, even though it was still raining. Water levels in the river, which had been the lowest we had seen them all holiday, were up and the waterfall was flowing across it's full width.

All that is left for tomorrow is to go into Torca la Vaca in dry gear to de-rig the ropes and collect our SRT kits from the bottom. That should be a short trip giving us the rest of the day to wash everything and sort out the last details of the survey with Juan.

**Day 11** On this trip Jim has seen quite a few eels, Jim even saw several more eels today. He has encountered a mixture of sizes and levels of cuteness. I have so far not seen a single eel, not one, maybe I should stop peeing in my wetsuit, or maybe not!