

Fong Yen Fly Cats

Ged Campion

An account of one adventure from the international 2002 Hidden River Expedition to Guangxi Province in Southern China. As deputy expedition leader Ged joined a number of YRC members and others to explore one of the most extensive areas of limestone in the world. The main focus of the expedition was to follow a major river into the mountainous area and discover its route through to its resurgence. However other major features were also explored and a total of thirty kilometres of new cave passage discovered over a period of six weeks.

As I ventured to the edge of the drop in front of me the scale of this huge chasm became apparent, mist and water vapour rising from the depths gave it an eerie feel, a savage place but somehow enchanting. A stone to test the size of the drop fell silently for a long time then inaudibly clattered away into oblivion as if to defy any attempt to gauge the awesome dimensions. A few breeding birds rose squawking from the shadows to mark their disapproval. We would be the first explorers to disturb the sanctity of this place with our whirling drills, unreeling ropes and silly chatter. A beam of sunlight filtered through the trees dissolving the dank mist below to reveal some of the secrets that lay beyond. This place would be ours now as the noise of the 36volt Hilti drill thundered across the void.

Fong Yen was to swallow almost a kilometre of rope before it gave up. It seemed a promising exploration as news from the teams in our main objective Dashiwei, suggested things



were closing down in the big passage, the river disappearing contemptuously and tantalisingly down a fading slot, too perilous for any caver to enter.

We had descended Fong Yen 18 months previously to approximately 200 metres until we had run out of rope and time. Just imagine a huge canyon that's begging for a roof well that's what this gem of a pothole is like. It was a major objective on our minds and the way it just kept cutting down held promise for us to relocate the Hidden River. After the second day exploring its vertical walls with a full days rigging behind us we reached the point of our previous exploration, 200 metres down, and for the first time had to fire up our carbides and leave daylight behind. We were to discover however that we were not entirely alone in this huge mystical place. Quite curiously, at the bottom of the longest vertical Bruce to his amazement noticed a small creature in a rock recess by a pool. On closer inspection with our limited knowledge of Chinese mammalia we eventually understood it to be a flying squirrel, locally known as fly cat (fay mow). It was just sitting there seemingly oblivious to the seriousness of our exploration. Apart from a slightly

disjointed back leg it seemed in good health. Whilst skimming through trees high above this fly cat must have soared too close to the edge of the precipice, lost altitude and spiralled helplessly into the void. We hadn't seen it the previous day so it must have landed the night before after we had exited the cave. Stewart offered it the leftovers of his luminous Chinese sausage but full of life and furiously independent it repelled any advances of help. Roman and Pascale, our Swiss/French contingent, the more philosophical amongst us felt that nature should take its course, but Bruce, Stewart and I had ideas about reuniting it with its family in the forest above. So temporarily leaving it behind to give ourselves plenty of time to ponder on a suitable rodent catching strategy, we continued. We were just about recovered from the excitement of our unusual discovery when Roman yelled up from the bottom of the next pitch, 'another squirrel'. By now a seasoned scurridean expert, Bruce confirmed the find. This one was even more animated than its estranged companion, growling and bearing his sharp talons as it crouched within the security of its rocky recess.

But for now we had to go on to find out what other surprises Fong Yen held for us. The nature of the passage changed quite dramatically, muddier and less airy. Gloomy chambers and a cracked mud floor gave way to a quicksand floor that was only possible to cross with the aid of tree trunks judiciously placed at intervals that had been conveniently washed into the chasm during times of flood. After a few metres a more stable floor led to a low arch requiring kneeling for the first time. Beyond, the passage enlarged considerably with an incredible temperature change as hot

as a dragon's breath just as if someone had turned on an electric fan heater. We had witnessed this sort of temperature change in Oman, but never before in China. A further 20 metre pitch led disappointingly to a sump at 500 metres. Once again the Hidden River had eluded us, only silence and sediment remained. Our thoughts turned to the journey out and our awaiting mammalian friends.

As we returned to our quarry, we consoled ourselves with the fact that we had at least been inoculated against rabies but that didn't help as we anxiously avoided being bitten by these whirling, growling, spitting fur balls as we cornered them. Mr. Chen our Nanning TV caver and cameraman, in true David Attenborough style excitedly recorded the whole episode. After a number of failed attempts to bag our quarry the technique of basically grabbing the creature by the tail and holding it at arms length and dropping it into an open tackle sack was the simplest and most effective method. After all they were tired and hungry and became suitably compliant. Each squirrel had its own bag in case they were of the same sex or of course the opposite! Prusiking back up the 700 metre of rope far from being the normal lonely experience was quite entertaining with the two rodents wriggling around on my back but after twenty minutes or so more familiar with their temporary home, they were fully resigned to their evacuation.

It was very late when we arrived on the surface and the Chinese support team dutifully waiting, anxious to inspect our quarry as they had been listening into the radio conversations from below. Convinced that we were going native and wanting more than just the delicacies that the hotel could

offer us, gesticulated a number of methods of preparing the squirrels for supper. However, we dispelled any such ideas and set about the business of finding a place to free our furry friends at a suitable distance from the hole. At the foot of a large tree, although at first a little reluctant to leave the security of the tackle sacks, they eventually dropped out one by one to the forest floor a little dishevelled, but once re-orientated they scurried away finding refuge in the tree. Once again, Mr Chen was carefully choreographing the filming

of this conservation showpiece.

After fully researching our interesting finds we were to discover that our Flycats were in fact Giant Flying Squirrels (Rodentia; sciuridae, genus *Petaurista alborufus*). These flying magicians are nocturnal and arboreal, usually located 15-30 metres in the trees. They spend daylight hours in hollow trees or branches and become active after dusk. They travel through the treetops in a squirrel-like manner, but when a branch or a tree is too distant to reach by an ordinary leap, they go to a higher branch and leap



Their head and body length ranges 305-585mm, tail length, 345-635mm, and their weight is about 1-2 kilograms. The soft fur is fairly long on the back. The upper parts are yellowish grey, bright brown, chestnut, or black. Their underparts are yellowish buffy, brownish or white. The tail is generally the colour of the back. These squirrels have short broad heads; complex molars; and a tail that is bushy, cylindrical, and as long or longer than the head and body.

toward the objective, extending the membrane as they spread the arms forward and out, and the legs backward and out. At first the glide is downward at an angle, but as they approach the objective, they ascend for the last metre or so before alighting. Some apparently can glide up to 450 metres!

These squirrels seem to have a basic knowledge of aeronautics, since at times they may ride on ascending currents of air coming up from deep clefts or caves. In flight they are actually capable of banking and on some occasions they have been observed to make several banks in the course of a single glide. The diet of these rodents consists of fruit, nuts, young twigs, tender shoots, leaves, and sometimes insects and larvae. In springtime (March-April) in Southern

China, they have been seen to be so engorged with young leaf and flower buds that they probably could not glide with such alacrity; they are noticeably heavier at this time of the year. And this may have been why our squirrels had misplaced their leaps!

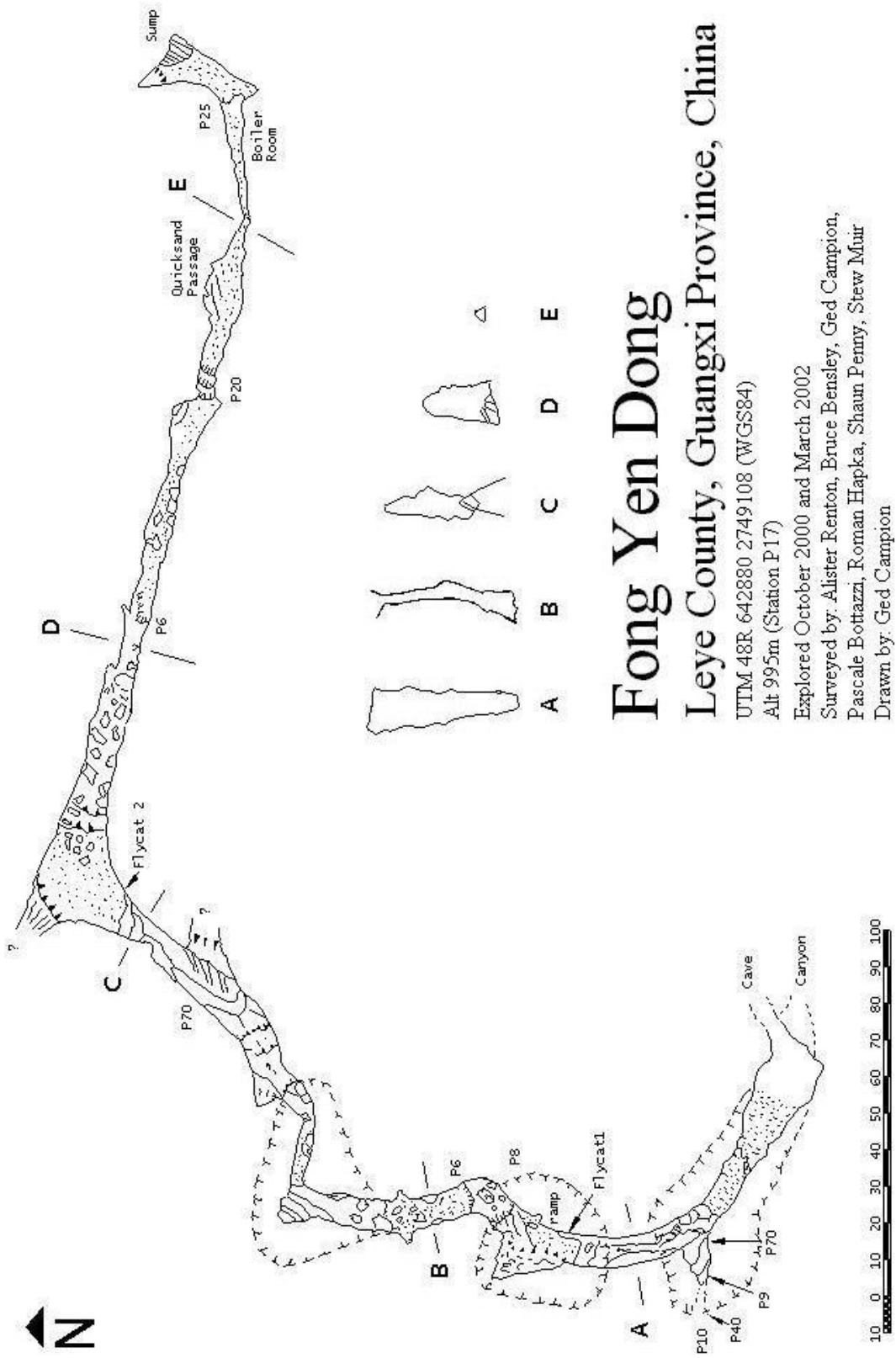
Another theory as to why we encountered two in the duration of a single trip was that our caving activity the previous evening with an array of lights may have disorientated them so much that they had missed their perches and fallen therefore we had possibly played a significant part in their misfortune. It seemed justifiable therefore that we should have made such bold attempts to rescue them from the murky depths.

Giant flying squirrels have been hunted intensively by local Chinese and have in the past served as

important food items at certain times of the year. However, the loss of forest habitat and killing by people led Wang Zheng and Kobayashi (1989) to classify them as endangered. The existence of a number of small bones 200 metres in the chasm confirmed that other fallen fly cats had not been so lucky in the past.

YRC members exploring Fong Yen were:
Ged Campion,
Alister Renton, and
Bruce Bensley.





Fong Yen Dong

Leye County, Guangxi Province, China

UTM 48R 642880 2749108 (WGS84)

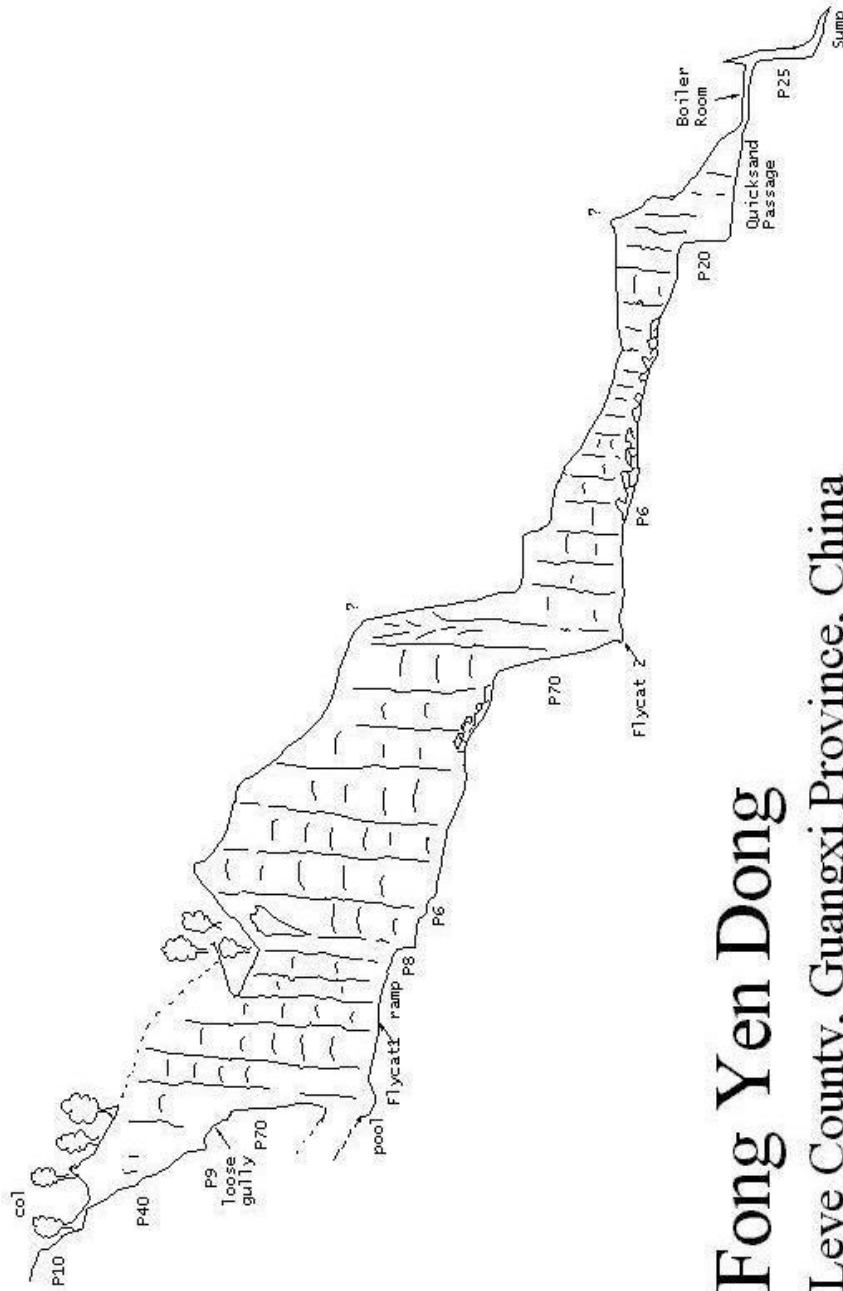
Alt 99.5m (Station P17)

Explored October 2000 and March 2002

Surveyed by: Alister Renton, Bruce Bensley, Ged Campion,

Pascale Bottazzi, Roman Hapka, Shaun Penny, Stew Muir

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