

The distribution of Australian cave fishes

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide only 84 species of fish are known to occur in hypogean waters with 13 instances of two species and three instances of three species occurring in sympatry (Proudlove 1997; G.S. Proudlove, pers. comm. 1999). Two species of blind cave fish are known from Australia, namely the Blind Gudgeon, *Milyeringa veritas* Whitely, 1945 (Perciformes: Gobiidae) and the Cave Eel, *Ophisternon candidum* (Mees, 1962) (Synbranchiformes: Synbranchidae). They are found in sympatry on the Cape Range peninsula of northwestern Australia. Both species are listed as endangered under Western Australian fauna legislation. This note presents the known occurrence of these cave fishes and includes a major range extension of *M. veritas* to Barrow Island.

Two primary sources deal with the distribution of the stygofauna (obligate subterranean aquatic species) on the Cape Range peninsula (Mees 1962; Humphreys and Adams 1991). In 1959 Mees (1962) collected widely along the west coast of the peninsula but found stygofauna only in Milyering (C-24: Australian Karst Index number), Kudamurra Well (C-25) and Tantabiddi Well (C-26) and recorded *M. veritas*, *O. candidum* and *Stygiocaris* spp. (Decapoda: Atyidae). Humphreys and Adams (1991) compiled the distributional data then available but recorded no further taxa of stygofauna. An unpublished report (Humphreys 1994) provided further distributional records and information on the habitat, feeding and associated stygofauna.

Distribution of cave fishes

The known occurrences of the two species are shown in Figure 1. Only at C-26 (Tantabiddi Well, location 4 in Figure 1) does *O. candidum* occur in the apparent absence of *M. veritas* (the site 'South of Yardie Creek' in Table 1 is of unknown status). The area shown in Figure 1 has been sampled widely for stygofauna (Pesce *et al.* 1996: Fig. 29) and all the available access points have been sampled in the northern part of the Cape Range peninsula and Barrow Island (W.F. Humphreys, unpublished). In addition, the lower Robe and Fortescue River aquifers, on the mainland opposite Barrow Island, that contain elements of the Cape Range and

Barrow Island stygofauna have been sampled widely (W.F. Humphreys, unpublished).

The number of sites from which *M. veritas* has been recorded has increased steadily over time (Table 1: bottom line) and there is still an upward trend in comparable data for *O. candidum*. However, a number of access sites have been lost in the interval from infilling (Table 1; C-361, AB5, Site D), drying (C-282, C-362) or siltation (C-23), and a number of sites are close to planned developments (C-25, AB5), are within periurban areas (C-23, C-27, C-105, C-282, C-361, C-452, C-495, WC 15, WC 44), or in an unmanaged military area (C-28, C-506, C-507). While there has been a significant extension of the range of *M. veritas* to Barrow Island, the inclusive known range of the two species on the Cape Range peninsula has not increased since 1991 (Humphreys and Adams 1991), but there has been considerable infilling of the distribution. These additional sites have markedly increased the known range of habitats and water types inhabited by the fishes.

The fishes are now known to be part of a rich stygofaunal community (Table 1; Bradbury and Williams 1997; Humphreys in press a) that contains a number of eco-geographic relicts and phyletic relicts with tethyan affinities (Humphreys 1993, 1994, in press a; Knott 1993; Danielopol *et al.* in press), including the only member of the class Remipedia (Yager and Humphreys 1996) and the order Thermosbaenacea (Poore and Humphreys 1992) in the southern hemisphere with closest affinities with fauna found in caves on either side of the North Atlantic.

The fishes are found close to the coast and up to 4.3 km inland in a predominantly anchialine system, namely there is a fresh to brackish water lens overlying a seawater wedge (Allen 1993) that is affected by marine tides (Yager and Humphreys 1996; Humphreys in press b). *Milyeringa veritas* occurs in waters ranging from fresh to seawater and has been sampled from caves at water depths up to 33 m, from anchialine pools, from wells and from bores in which the water table was up to 50 m below the ground surface. Numbers of *M. veritas* seen in caves vary from few to about 100. *Ophisternon candidum* has been seen in wells and caves, usually singly, occasionally in pairs, and on

Table 1 The known occurrence of the blind cave fish on the Cape Range peninsula and Barrow Island. a, recorded in Humphreys and Adams (1991); b, from field notes of American Museum of Natural History; Station 60, 5 April 1969; c, 1993; d, samples (WAM: P.5863.001) were collected from Neds Well in 1963 but it has not contained water since at least 1987. e, new well south of Yardie Creek (Allen 1982). Commonwealth of Australia land controlled by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) or the Royal Australian Airforce (RAAF). CRNP, Cape Range National Park. Most of the pastoral wells were located on or adjacent to traditional watering places and a number of the caves were also traditional watering places. ¹ Mees (1962); ² Humphreys and Adams (1991) ³ Humphreys (1994).

Index #		<i>M.</i> <i>veritas</i>	<i>O.</i> <i>candidum</i>	Notes
1	C-23	ab	b	Cave. Not seen for many years, heavy siltation from former gravel pit draining through cave, feral tropical aquarium fish. Exmouth.
2	C-24	ac	ac	Former pastoral well. Type locality of <i>Milyeringa veritas</i> . CRNP
3	C-25	ac	ac	Former pastoral well. Type locality of <i>Stygiocaris stylifera</i> Holthuis, <i>S. lancifera</i> Holthuis, and <i>Metacyclops mortoni</i> Pesce, De Laurentiis and Humphreys (Copepoda: Cyclopidae). CRNP
4	C-26	—	a	Former pastoral well. Type locality of <i>Ophisternon candidum</i> . CRNP.
5	C-27	ac	ac	Cave with pump installed. RAN.
6	C-28	ac	—	Anchialine cave. Type locality of <i>Lasionectes exleyi</i> Yager and Humphreys (Remipedia), <i>Danielopolina kornickeri</i> Danielopol, Baltanás and Humphreys (Ostracoda: Halocyprida), and <i>Halicyclops longifurcatus</i> Pesce, De Laurentiis and Humphreys (Copepoda: Cyclopidae). — endangered community. RAAF bombing range.
7	C-105	c	a	Cave in former gravel pit now draining through C-23. Exmouth.
8	C-149	a	—	Former pastoral well. CRNP.
9	C-215	ac	—	Cave. Type locality of <i>Halosbaena tulki</i> Poore and Humphreys (Thermosbaenacea). CRNP
10	C-273	ac	—	Former pastoral well. Crown Land.
11	C-274	ac	b	Former pastoral well. CRNP.
12	C-282	d	—	Former pastoral well. Recorded 1963, now long dry. Type locality of the genus <i>Nedsia</i> Barnard and Williams (Amphipoda: Melitidae). RAN.
13	C-332	c	—	Anchialine pools; only natural site known for <i>Grandidierella</i> sp. nov. (Amphipoda: Aoridae).
14	C-361	a	a	Former pastoral well now filled in. Exmouth.
15	C-362	ac	—	Former pastoral well, now dry. Leasehold, Ningaloo Pastoral Station.
16	C-414	c	c	Tidal cave. Crown Land.
17	C-452	c	—	Cave. In Exmouth townsite — endangered community; only known locality for six species of terrestrial troglobites.
18	C-495	c	c	Cave. Exmouth.
19	C-506	—	—	Anchialine pools. RAAF bombing range.
20	C-507	—	—	Anchialine pools. RAAF bombing range.
	South of Yardie Creek	—	e	Well. Location unknown, no specimen.
21	WC 15	—	—	Water production bore. Water Corporation Exmouth Borefield.
22	WC 44	c	—	Water production bore. Water Corporation Exmouth Borefield.
23	AB5	—	—	Seismic uphole. Crown Land.
24	Site D	—	—	Seismic uphole. Crown Land.
25	L8	—	—	Old water bore. Type locality of <i>Nedsia sculptilis</i> Bradbury & Williams (Melitidae) and of the genus <i>Bogidomma</i> Bradbury & Williams (Bogidiellidae). A-class Reserve, active oilfield.

Total sites now (in 1962¹, 1991², 1994³) — *Milyeringa veritas* 25 (2, 11, 18) — *Ophisternon candidum* 11 (2, 6, 11)

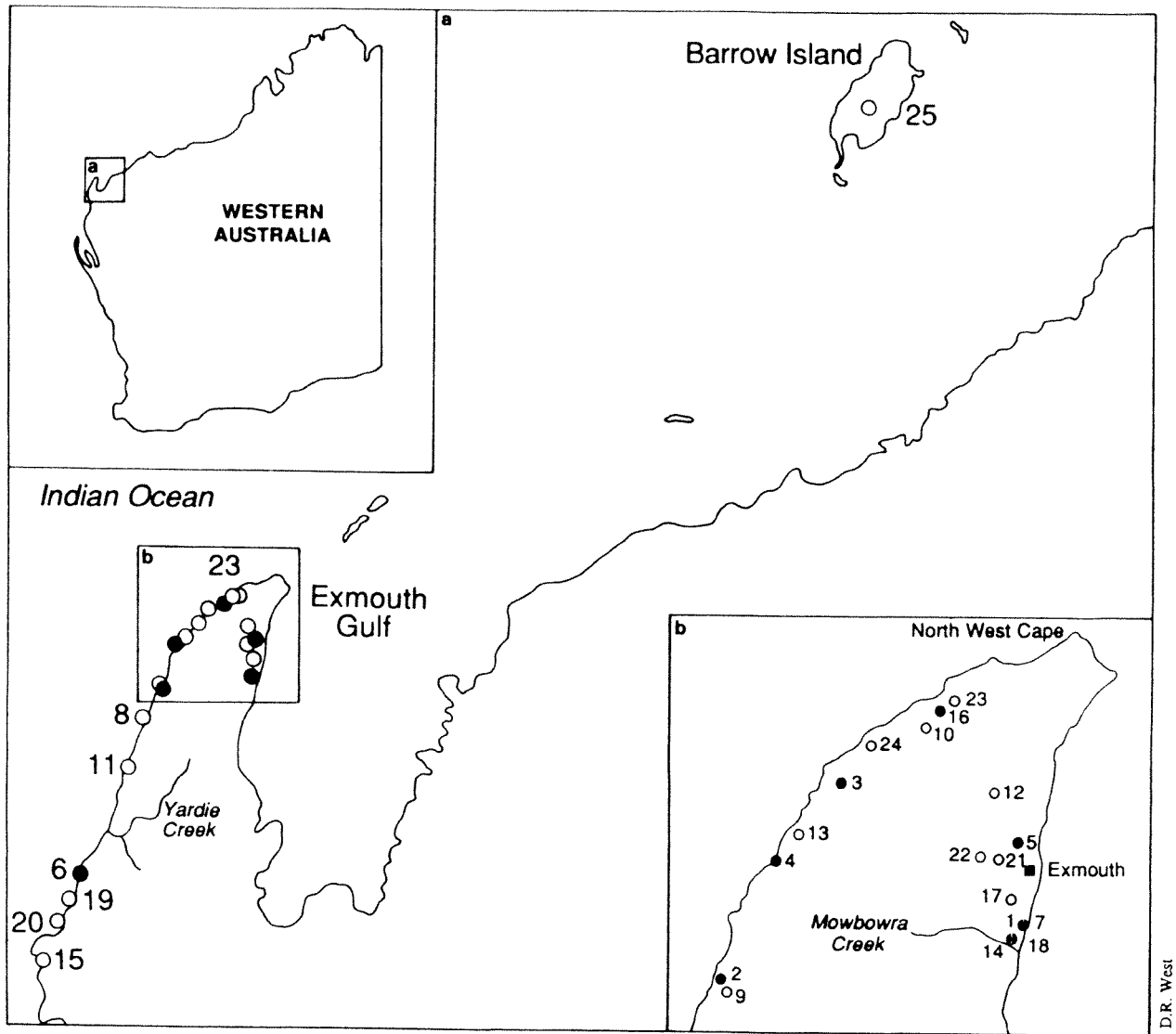


Figure 1 The distribution of blind cave fishes in Australia. Filled circles denote *Ophisternon candidum*. *Milyeringa veritas* is present at all locations denoted by open or filled circles except location 4 (Tantabiddi Well).

only one occasion with three together. Many of the cave fish sites are also type localities (Table 1) for other cave restricted species, some of which are prey of the fish (Humphreys and Feinberg 1995).

The population of *M. veritas* — nor *Stygiocaris styliifera* Holthuis — is not genetically uniform and there is evidence of restricted gene flow on the peninsula (Humphreys and Adams 1991). Hence, the presence of the fauna within Cape Range National Park does not in itself provide an adequate representation of the genetic diversity of the fish, nor does it adequately represent their habitat diversity.

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CONTENTS VOLUME 19

Part 1

- K.P. Aplin**
Three new blindsnakes (Squamata: Typhlopidae) from northwestern Australia 1
- B. Baehr and M. Baehr**
New species and new records of Hersiliidae from Australia (Arachnida: Araneae: Hersiliidae). Sixth supplement to the revision of the Australian Hersiliidae 13
- J.A. Long, P. Vichers-Rich, K. Hirsch, E. Bray and C. Tuniz**
The Cervantes egg: an early Malagasy tourist to Australia 39
- J.A. Long and A.R.I. Cruickshank**
Further records of plesiosaurian reptiles of Jurassic and Cretaceous age from Western Australia 47
- N.R. Strahan, R.A. How and J. Dell**
Reproduction and diet in four species of burrowing snakes (*Simoselaps* spp.) from southwestern Western Australia 57
- J. Fromont**
Revision of the marine sponge genus *Caulospongia* Saville Kent, 1871 (Demospongia: Hadromerida). Part 1. Morphological and skeletal characters 65
- M.S. Harvey**
Unusual new water mites (Acari: Hydracarina) from Australia, Part 1 91
- H. Smit**
A new genus of the water mite family Piersigiidae from Australia (Acari: Hydrachnidia) 107
- M.S. Harvey**
A review of the Australasian species of *Anapistula* Gertsch (Araneae: Symphytognathidae) 111
- J.A. Long and R.E. Molnar**
A new Jurassic theropod dinosaur from Western Australia 121

Part 2

- R.A. How, B. Durrant, L.A. Smith and N. Saleh**
Emoia (Reptilia: Scincidae) from the Banda Arc islands of eastern Indonesia: variation in morphology and description of a new species 131
- D.B. Hirst**
Irileka, a new heteropodine genus (Araneae: Heteropodidae) from Western Australia 141
- B. Condé**
First record of campodeids (Diplura: Campodeidae) from caves in Australia 145
- Y. Hanamura**
Gastrosaccini mysids from Australia, with a description of a new species of *Haplostylus* and a key to species of the genus (Crustacea: Mysidacea) 153
- R.H. Stranger and R.L. Palma**
Lice (Insecta: Phthiraptera) from some Australian birds 169
- P. Horner and A. Fisher**
Ctenotus rimacola sp. nov. (Scincidae), a new species of lizard with two allopatric subspecies, from the Ord-Victoria region of northwestern Australia 187

G. B. Trotter Arms of the South Australian volunteers in the Permanent Force artillery at Albany, Western Australia 1893–1901	201
C.A. Surman Seabird breeding schedules at the Pelsaert Group of islands, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia between 1993 and 1998	209
G.B. Trotter The Volunteer Defence Corps prototype socket bayonet	217
J.K. Griffiths and J. Fromont A catalogue of recent Cnidaria type specimens in the Western Australian Museum of Natural Science, Perth	223
L. Nicholson A new breeding record for the Lesser Crested Tern <i>Sterna bengalensis</i> in the Lowendal Islands, northwestern Australia	241

Part 3

P. De Laurentiis, G.L. Pesce and W.F. Humphreys Copepods from ground waters of Western Australia, IV. Cyclopids from basin and craton aquifers (Crustacea: Copepoda: Cyclopidae)	243
R.E. Johnstone and N. Kolichis First description of the nest and eggs of the Black Grasswren <i>Amytornis housei</i> (Milligan) with notes on breeding	259
R.S. Craig A new Pliocene terebratulid brachiopod from the Roe Calcarenite, Eucla Basin of southern Australia	267
K.P. Aplin and S.C. Donnellan An extended description of the Pilbara Death Adder, <i>Acanthophis wellsi</i> Hoser (Serpentes: Elapidae), with notes on the Desert Death Adder, <i>A. pyrrhus</i> Boulenger, and identification of a possible hybrid zone	277
I. Bartsch <i>Copidognathus</i> (Halacaridae: Acari) from Western Australia: five species of the <i>oculatus</i> group	299
K.E.C. Brennan Discovery of the spider <i>Ambicodamus marae</i> (Araneae: Nicodamidae) in the northern jarrah forest of Western Australia	323
L.M. Roth New cockroach species, redescriptions, and records, mostly from Australia, and a description of <i>Metanocticola christmasensis</i> gen. nov., sp. nov., from Christmas Island (Blattaria)	327

Part 4

- A.C. Gill and R.D. Mooi**
Feia nota, a new species of gobiid fish from Western Australia 365
- S.M. Daymond**
Gondwanodus irwinensis gen. et sp. nov., a new elasmobranch from the Early Permian
(Late Sakmarian) Fossil Cliff Member of the Holmwood Shale, Perth Basin, Western Australia 371
- Yu Wen and E.L. Yochelson**
Some Late Cambrian Molluscs from Liaoning Province, China 379
- L.M. Marsh, J. Fromont and M. Salotti**
A catalogue of Recent echinoderm type specimens in the Western Australian Museum, Perth 391
- R.S. Craig**
Late Cretaceous brachiopods of the Perth and Carnarvon Basins, Western Australia 413
- I. Bartsch**
Two new freshwater mites of the genus *Limnohalacarus* (Halacaridae: Acari) from Australia 443
- R.S. Craig**
The brachiopod fauna of the Pilo-Pleistocene Ascot Formation, Perth Basin, Western Australia 451
- Y. Hanamura**
Occurrence of *Acetes sibogae* Hansen (Crustacea: Decapoda: Sergestidae) in
Western Australia, with notes on the northern Australian population 465
- W.F. Humphreys**
The distribution of Australian cave fishes 469

INDEX TO AUTHORS

Aplin, K.P.	1, 277
Baehr, B.	13
Baehr, M.	13
Bartsch, I.	299, 443
Bray, E.	39
Brennan, K.E.C.	323
Condé, B.	145
Craig, R.S.	267, 413, 451
Cruickshank, A.R.I.	47
Daymond, S.M.	371
De Laurentiis, P.	243
Dell, J.	57
Donnellan, S.C.	277
Durrant, B.	131
Fisher, A.	187
Fromont, J.	65, 223, 391
Gill, A.C.	365
Griffiths, J.K.	223
Hanamura, Y.	153, 465
Harvey, M.S.	91, 111
Hirsch, K.	39
Hirst, D.B.	141
Horner, P.	187
How, R.A.	57, 131
Humphreys, W.F.	243, 469
Johnstone, R.E.	259
Kolichis, N.	259
Long, J.A.	39, 47, 121
Marsh, L.M.	391
Molnar, R.E.	121
Mooi, R.D.	365
Nicholson, L.	241
Palma, R.L.	169
Pesce, G.L.	243
Roth, L.M.	327
Saleh, N.	131
Salotti, M.	391
Smit, H.	107
Smith, L.A.	131
Strahan, N.R.	57
Stranger, R.H.	169
Surman, C.A.	209
Trotter, G.B.	201, 217
Tuniz, C.	39
Vickers-Rich, P.	39
Wen, Yu	379
Yochelson, E.L.	379

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Records of the Western Australian Museum

Volume 19 Part 4 1999

CONTENTS

- A.C. Gill and R.D. Mooi**
Feia nota, a new species of gobiid fish from Western Australia 365
- S.M. Daymond**
Gondwanodus irwinensis gen. et sp. nov., a new elasmobranch from the Early Permian (Late Sakmarian) Fossil Cliff Member of the Holmwood Shale, Perth Basin, Western Australia 371
- Yu Wen and E.L. Yochelson**
Some Late Cambrian Molluscs from Liaoning Province, China 379
- L.M. Marsh, J. Fromont and M. Salotti**
A catalogue of Recent echinoderm type specimens in the Western Australian Museum, Perth 391
- R.S. Craig**
Late Cretaceous brachiopods of the Perth and Carnarvon Basins, Western Australia 413
- I. Bartsch**
Two new freshwater mites of the genus *Limnohalacarus* (Halacaridae: Acari) from Australia 443
- R.S. Craig**
The brachiopod fauna of the Plio-Pleistocene Ascot Formation, Perth Basin, Western Australia 451
- SHORT COMMUNICATIONS
- Y. Hanamura**
Occurrence of *Acetes sibogae* Hansen (Crustacea: Decapoda: Sergestidae) in Western Australia, with notes on the northern Australian population 465
- W.F. Humphreys**
The distribution of Australian cave fishes 469