



FISH RIVER

Canyon v4a5IV ★★ ★

Location

Just south of Haast Pass, Makarora Valley, SH6.

Character

High volume, deep and narrow, with lots of swimming and wading, a handful of technical pitches and numerous water hazards.

Map



Approach by Car

Park at the large gravel pit on the east of the highway, about 100m south of the Fish River bridge.

Approach on Foot

Climb the TR spur of Fish River to about the 600m contour line, then sidle steep slopes up valley.

Either continue above two slips as marked on the map, then descend to the river, or head steeply down to the river immediately after the first marked slip.

Rock

Schist, Solid

Water

Very high flow canyon. Prolonged immersion, with lots of deep cold pools where swimming is mandatory. Only a viable route at the end of summer after a long, dry period.

Dangerous water hazards in many places through out the canyon.

Catchment

19km²

Anchors

Natural anchors (chockstones and jammed logs), with a single bolt.

On Scotts first descent, he and Dave Vass only used natural anchors, whilst Alain's team placed a bolt. More bolts are likely required, especially to avoid water features in 'normal' flows. The high flash flood danger means you won't be able to rely on any bolts being present: come prepared to make your own anchors.

Gear

1x40m minimum.

Route Description

This canyon has only been descended a few times.

Some have called it "Wilson Creek on Steroids"; it is as deep and narrow as Wilson Creek, but with 3-4x the amount of water.

Even very experienced teams have had some close calls in here with siphons in 'normal February flows'.

There is a lot of swimming and some jumping involved. Several jumps are into pools where you cannot see the exit.

Advanced whitewater swimming and climbing skills may be needed. The leaders shouldn't be carrying packs so they can position to assist others who follow. Communication and planning when jumping blind drops is important:

"We got a little carried away with the beauty of the canyon, and on one drop, we jumped when we probably should have absieled and protected the pool better. It was a blind exit, and Alain went first. The pool had a sieve at the exit, and somehow Alain was able to avoid the suck, and get himself onto a rock. The rest of the team had no idea and jumped one by one into the water. Each nearly got sieved; Alain rescued each one of us that day. Without him there would have almost certainly been a fatality"

- Jethro Robinson

There are few tricky downclimbs with serious consequences for a slip or fall, and at least one abseil that goes straight through the flow.

This is a canyon to take very seriously, but all who have been were very impressed at the beauty and power of the canyon.

Time

Vehicle park to start of canyon	1.5-2hr
Canyon descent	3hr
Return to vehicle	10min
Total	5hr10min

Flash Flood Danger

Extreme.

Escapes

There are options for escape early in the canyon, but once you enter the gorge proper, there are no easy exits until right near the end.

Notes

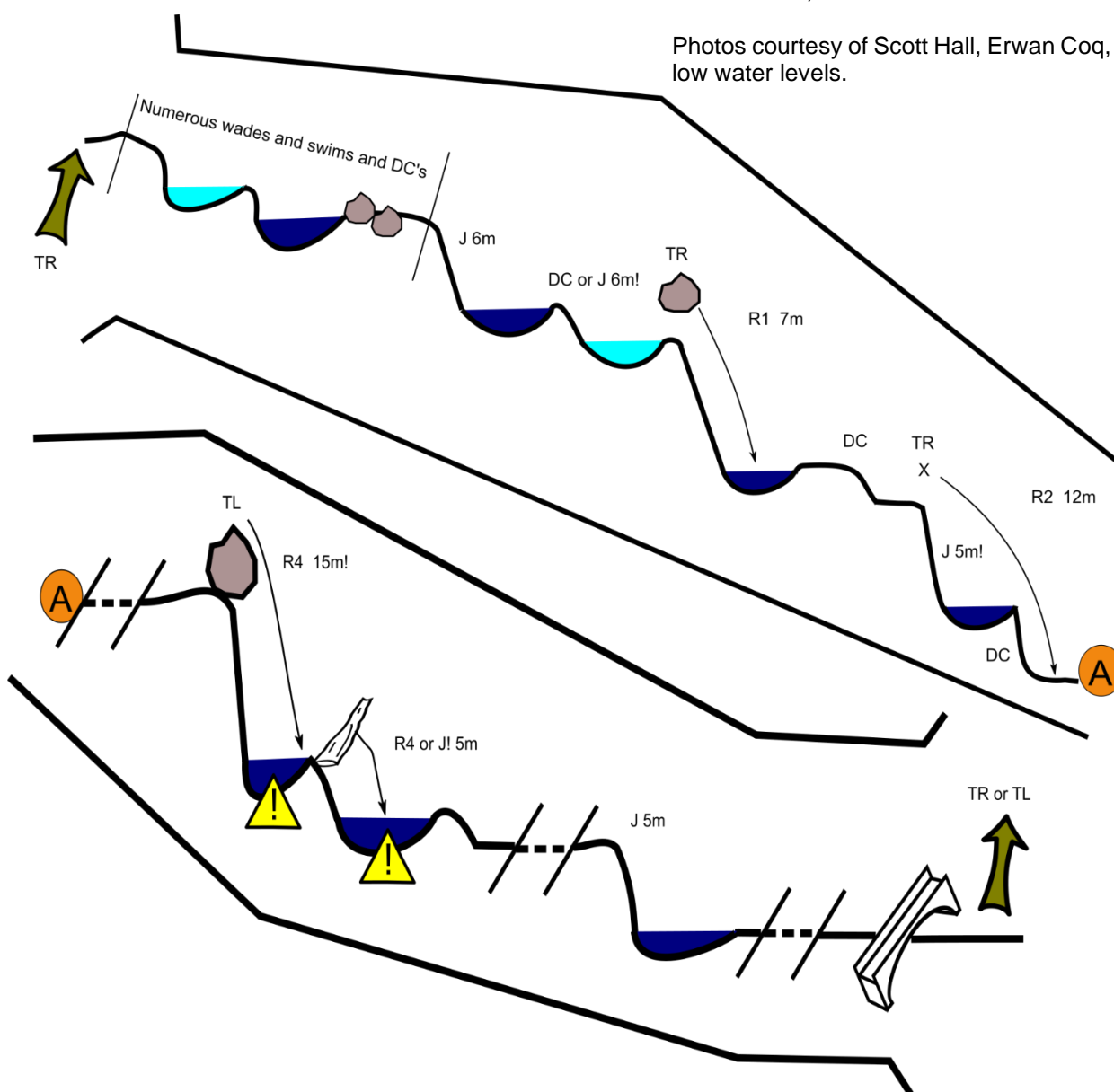
This topo was constructed from notes gratefully received from Scott Hall, Alain Rohr, Erwan Coq and Justin Wimmer.

Each party had a slightly different take on the features; it is pretty certain that things move around in this canyon any time it rains, so take the description with a grain of salt. If you're canyoning at this level, then you should be able to assess any feature yourself anyways. Good luck!

First descent:

19 Mar 2010, Scott Hall and Dave Vass

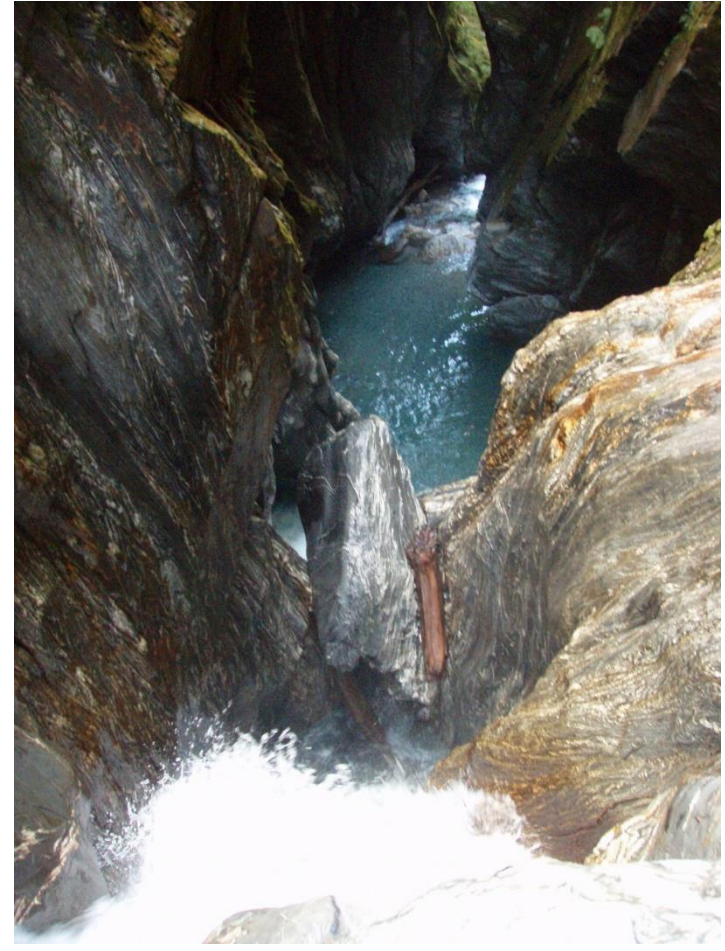
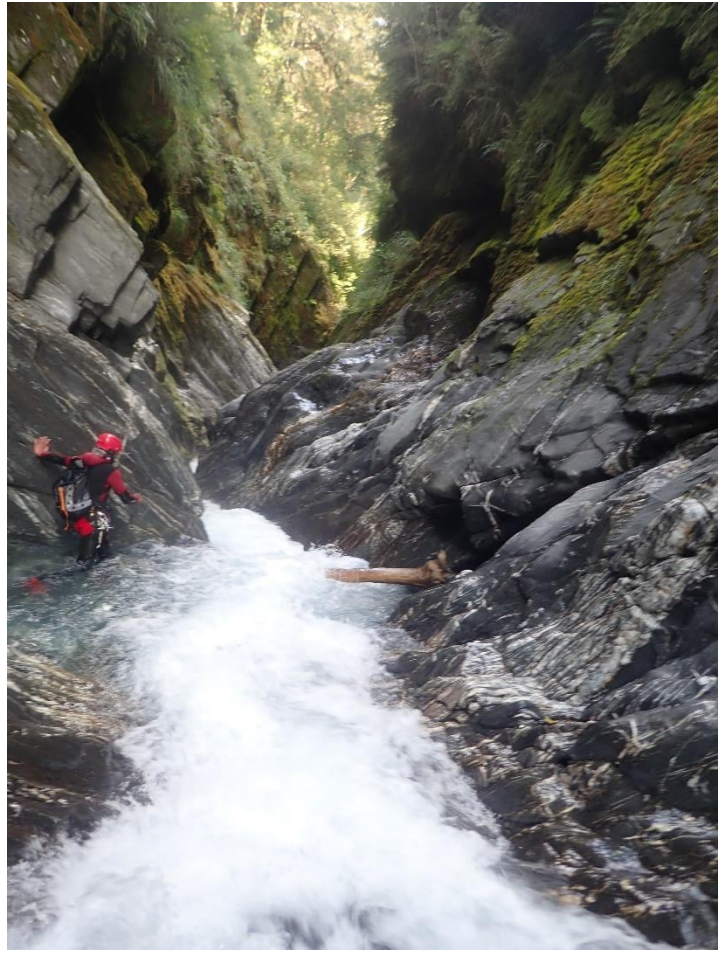
Photos courtesy of Scott Hall, Erwan Coq, showing very low water levels.



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Topo compiled by
Dan Clearwater Apr 2022
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