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ISSN 2744-5011 (Print) ISSN 2744-502X (Online)

www.kingcountrynews.co.nz

Tuesday, May 25, 2021

FREE

Unusual find in local caves

Brianna Stewart

THEY'RE smaller than a fingernail and not much is known about them, but the humble cave beetle could be the key to unlocking hundreds of years of geological information.

New Zealand Speleological Society research and conservation co-ordinator Anna Stewart has been busy spending hours in local caves hunting for the bugs, of which two have been sent to Lincoln University in Canterbury for further research.

Both are thought to be the same species, *Duvaliomimus (Mayotrechus) mayae mayorum*, and are common to South Te Kūiti karst landscapes.

These beetles are special, however, because Anna found them a couple of weeks ago in an area where they haven't been observed before.

She said there are multiple species of cave beetles in New Zealand which all live on karst (limestone) around the country.

Karst has different characteristics based on its geographic location, Anna said, and the beetles have likely evolved to thrive in their area but very little is known about their life cycle and what they eat.

"These little beetles could have taken from hundreds to thousands of years to become adapted to living in the cave.

"So, if we can find out where they first started from it might tell us about the geological history of the area and maybe the climate history."

Anna located one beetle in a Piopio cave and said there is potential to learn about the area's volcanic history from that one.

"In terms of finding out about the past, they're really useful little creatures."

The beetles can only travel within connected cave systems and their ability to travel through micro-chasms, very small channels in the cave walls, may provide updated information on which caves are connected.



TWO cave beetles have been found in King Country caves, where they have not been found previously, and sent to Lincoln University for further research. PHOTO BY DR JOHN MARRIS, LINCOLN UNIVERSITY.

"If you've got two caves and you're not sure if they meet, the parts that we can walk through are great ... but it could be there are micro-chasms that join the two caves up.

"If you can find that beetle in one of them and that beetle in another one, it suggests they might be joining up." Anna's joint effort with Lincoln University's Dr John Marris to learn

more about the King Country's cave beetle is part of the Union of Speleology's announcement of the cave beetle as the first international cave animal of the year.

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