

## The Tasmanian tiger

It is a sad irony that the mammal which is most often asked about by visitors to Tasmania, and which supports the State's coat-of-arms, is also the only Tasmanian mammal to have become extinct since European settlement. Despite no conclusive evidence of its existence since 1936, alleged sightings have led to the thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, becoming one of the most fabled of animals.

### Biology

The thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) was the world's largest carnivorous marsupial. An adult weighed about 25 kg, stood about 60 cm high at the shoulder and measured about 180 cm from nose to tail tip. Distinctive black stripes ran down the upper surface from the shoulders to the base of the tail. The large, wolf-like head (from which the animal

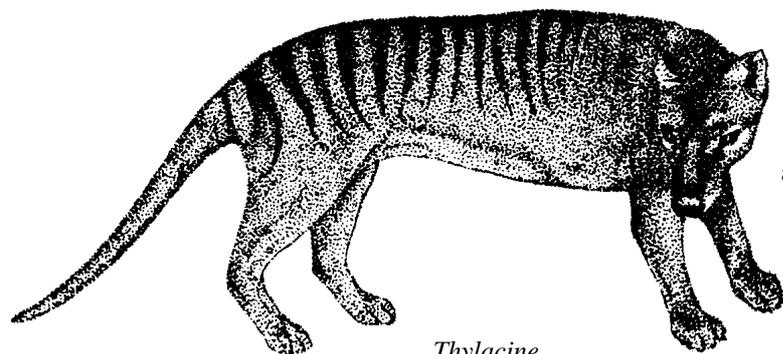
derives its scientific name — 'cynocephalus' is Greek for 'wolf head') was equipped with powerful jaws capable of a remarkable 120° gape. Indeed, the thylacine's similar appearance to other large, non-marsupial carnivores led to it being variously known as the native hyena and Tasmanian wolf.

Females gave birth to up to four young, which like other marsupials, were tiny, embryo-like and carried in a pouch. The pouch contained four teats and opened backwards, as is the case in a number of ground-dwelling marsupials such as the Tasmanian devil and the wombat. When the young became too large for the pouch they were left in a den while the mother hunted.

Our knowledge of the behaviour and ecology of the thylacine is very poor. Much of the information available is based on anecdotal accounts and casual observations — the animal's demise leaving no opportunity for scientific study. It would appear that the

thylacine was usually active at night, hunting either singularly or in pairs. Prior to the introduction of sheep, kangaroos and wallabies, possums and smaller mammals probably formed a major part of their diet. The thylacine was relatively slow and could not outrun its prey. Instead, it relied on stalking and stamina to wear down the animals it hunted. Thylacines were generally mute, although coughing, growling, hissing and distinctive terrier-like yapping vocalisations have been recorded. Early accounts suggest that the animal was secretive and shy.

Fossil evidence reveals that the thylacine was once widespread on mainland Australia and New Guinea. Aboriginal rock paintings of the animal can be found in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It is believed to have disappeared from the mainland at least 2000 years ago due to competition with the dingo and Aborigines, possibly combined with loss of habitat associated with climatic change. The animal was probably never very abundant in Tasma-



*Thylacine*

nia. As is the case with other predators that occupy the top of the food chain, such as wedge-tailed eagles, population levels are by necessity much lower than those of their prey. Historical accounts suggest it was widespread throughout a variety of habitats, possibly preferring hilly terrain with thick, dry eucalypt forest.

### Persecution

Shortly after European settlement, sheep became an important part of the fledgling economy of Tasmania. It was not long before farmers came into conflict with 'an animal of the panther kind, which commits dreadful havoc among the flocks' (J. Lycett, 1824). The thylacine certainly preyed upon sheep, particularly lambs; but, regrettably, also became the scapegoat for stock losses caused by poor management practices, harsh weather or other native and feral predators.

The Van Diemen's Land Company introduced a bounty scheme on their north west sheep properties as early as 1830 in order to control thylacines and other perceived predators, such as the Tasmanian devil and feral dogs. A Government bounty system operated from 1888 to 1909, which resulted in the payment of 2184 bounties. The number of bounty payments peaked at the turn of the century, but declined markedly during the next 10 years.

As early as 1850, concerns

that the thylacine would become extinct were being expressed. The famous naturalist, John Gould, wrote in 1863 that, like the wolf in England and Scotland, the thylacine would soon be an 'animal of the past'. Nonetheless, indiscriminate persecution continued unabated, largely spurred on by the Government bounty system.

The last definite record of the thylacine's existence occurred in 1936, when the world's last captive animal died in Hobart Zoo. Ironically, in the same year, the animal was added to the list of protected wildlife.

### Is it extinct?

By definition, an animal is extinct if there is no reasonable doubt that it no longer exists. Following this definition, the thylacine is *presumed* to be extinct.

However, unverified sightings of the animal have been reported consistently since 1936. Most sightings occur at night and are of fleeting duration. Given the large area of relatively remote bushland still intact in Tasmania, there is some possibility that the animal continues to survive as yet undetected. However, if the population is of sufficient size to remain viable, it would be expected that clear evidence would have by now been found.

Several attempts have been made to systematically search for the thylacine using photographic equipment

triggered by infrared sensors. Photographs of a variety of animals were obtained, but none were thylacines.

### Thylacines at Macquarie Harbour

There are relatively few reports of thylacines from the Macquarie Harbour region. Between 1888 and 1909, only four bounty payments were made at Strahan. Since 1936, a number of thylacine sightings have been reported from the desolate coastline to the west of Macquarie Harbour and to the north-west of Strahan. In 1956, a sighting was reported from the Strahan-Queenstown road, while a further sighting was reported from the Strahan-Zeehan road in 1959. In January 1957, headline news around the world was made when a dog-like animal was photographed from a helicopter on a beach west of Macquarie Harbour. The photograph, however, was too indistinct to identify the animal.

### Further reading

Guiler, E. (1985). *Thylacine: The Tragedy of the Tasmanian Tiger*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Guiler, E. (1991). *The Tasmanian Tiger in Pictures*. St Davids Park Publishing.

Smith, S. J. (1980). *The Tasmanian Tiger - 1980*. Wildlife Division Technical Report 81/1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania.