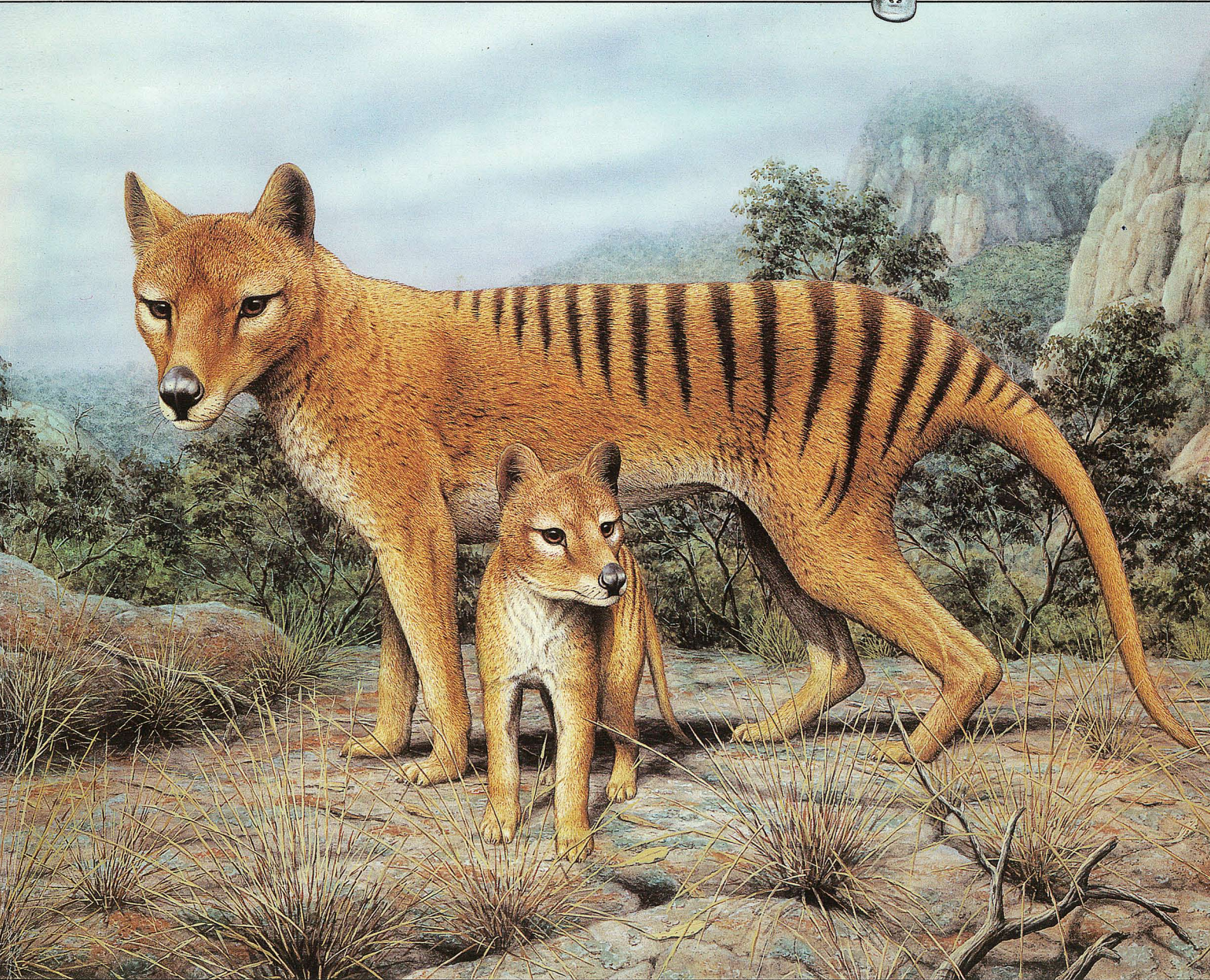


# Australian GEOGRAPHIC

VOL 1 • NO 3  
JULY • SEPT 1986

\* \$6.50

DICK SMITH'S JOURNAL OF DISCOVERY AND ADVENTURE



- TASMANIAN TIGER • TRACKING CAPTAIN STARLIGHT
- SORREL WILBY'S TIBET TREK • RARE LUTH TURTLE
- NEWCASTLE • SINKING OF THE SOUTHERN QUEST

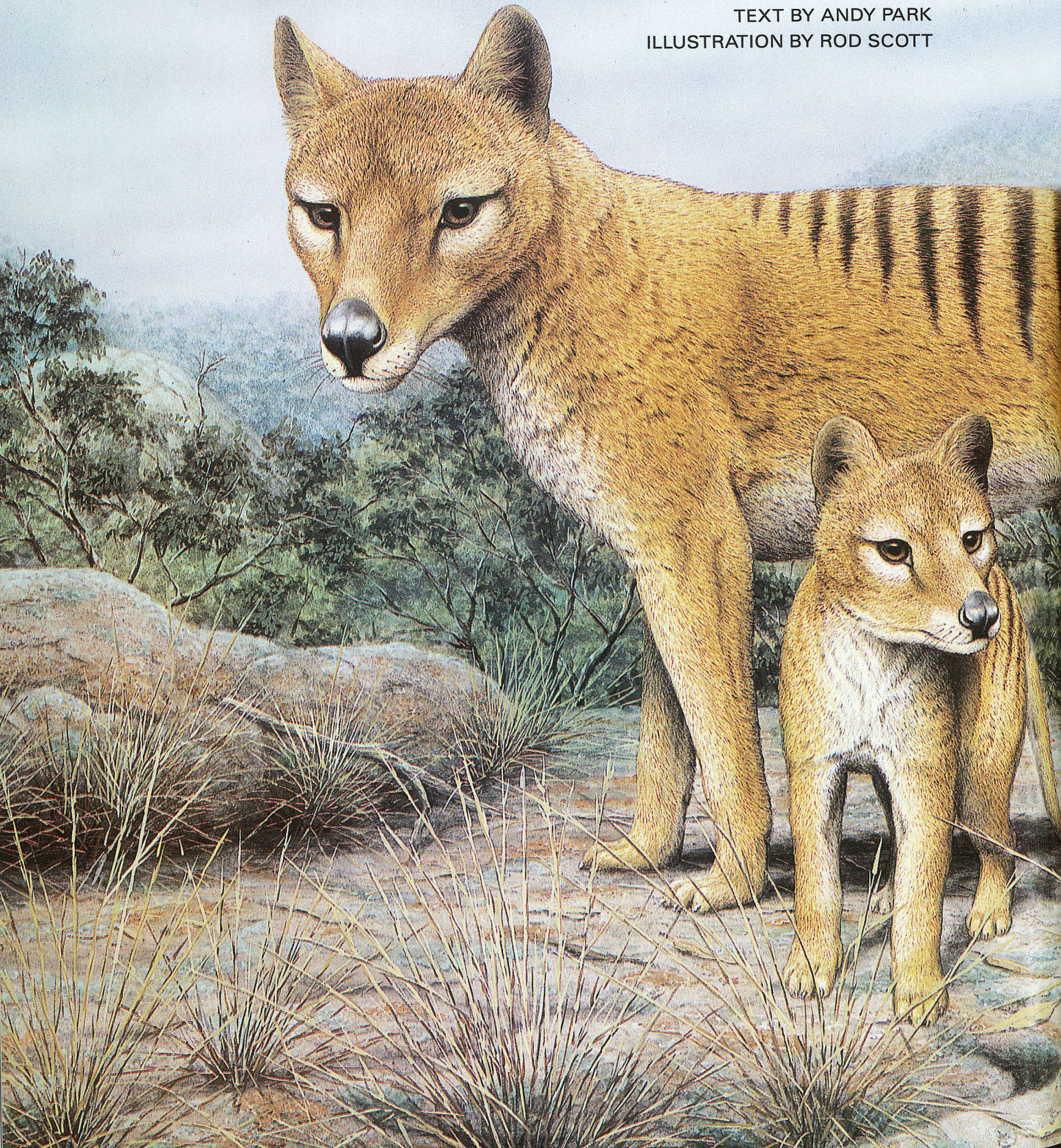
ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR POSTER INSIDE



# TASMANIAN TIGER

Extinct or merely elusive?

TEXT BY ANDY PARK  
ILLUSTRATION BY ROD SCOTT











*It was the middle of the night, rain streamed over my Land Cruiser and the wind was howling a gale. I'd woken up, so I figured I'd have a look around. Still wrapped in my sleeping bag, I rolled the window down a bit so I could get my arm out and shine my spotlight around. I switched it on and swept the beam around. Suddenly, in the middle of the beam, was a thylacine! It wasn't more than seven metres away, just on the edge of the scrub. The rain was coming down in buckets and water ran down my arm and into my sleeping bag but I didn't dare move a muscle. The animal just stood there, staring into the distance – he didn't seem to notice me or the driving rain. After about three minutes he turned and disappeared into the scrub.*

(Extract from an interview with Mr Hans Naarding)

**T**HIS may sound like another mythical bunyip story, but the Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine, is a real animal that may or may not still exist somewhere in our island State. Over the past 50 years, tiger searchers have spent over half a million dollars looking for some conclusive evidence of the animal. Scientific results? Absolutely nil so far. Yet eyewitness reports abound and many people think the animal will reappear at any moment, while others consider it extinct. What are the facts, who is right and, more importantly, does it really matter?

In 1984 I spent nine months in Tasmania researching the tiger including several weeks in the Central Highlands covering the most expensive tiger search ever undertaken. Since then I've closely followed the story and now, two years later, after a further visit to Tasmania, the pieces of the tiger puzzle are beginning to fit together.

Calling on the locals for assistance in finding tracks, tiger hunter Jeremy Griffith prepared a rough poster for distribution in Tasmania. He investigated numerous claims, but never had to pay the reward.

Surprisingly, most of the reported tracks were of wombats with only an occasional devil or dog track. During his four-year study, Griffith never saw an alleged tiger print that he could not readily identify as something else.

**REWARD \$100 FOR TIGER TRACKS**

**TIGER:** Back and front foot.  
 • Toes set approx. 3 in. away from the palms  
 • Claws leave dots like a dog's claws.  
 • Don't look for the long heel as it rarely shows.  
 • Don't especially look for the fifth toe on the front foot as only its claw shows.

**WOMBAT:** Front foot.  
 • Claws long — they go into soft mud like an eagle's claws.  
 • Heel is heart shaped.  
 • Back foot is a bit like a baby's foot.  
 • Short steps one handspan apart.  
 • Back foot may tread in front-foot-print.

**DOG:**  
 • Palm is triangle shaped.  
 • Toes have more of a two-in-front and two-behind arrangement.

**DEVIL:** Front and back foot.  
 • Small.  
 • Back foot has a square arrangement.

**IF YOU FIND TIGER TRACKS PLEASE GO TO ANY LENGTHS TO PRESERVE THEM AS WE DESPERATELY NEED THE EVIDENCE**

**TIGER CENTRE** 163 Vermont Rd  
 Ph. L'En 463163  
 or Ph. L'En 371248

**To Find Tracks we must be informed of Sightings Quickly.**





PHOTOS: DAVID FLEAY

## WHAT IS A TASMANIAN TIGER?

**T**hylacynus cynocephalus (meaning pouched dog with a wolf's head) is the tiger's scientific name, but it has a string of aliases including tiger, thylacine, wolf, hyena, zebra-wolf and zebra-opossum. Whatever its name, this animal was the largest carnivorous marsupial of recent times. It looked a bit like a dog with short legs and a long, stiff, kangaroo-like tail. The males were more solidly built than the females, weighing up to 35 kilograms and measuring some 60 centimetres high at the shoulder, but their average weight was around 25 kg. The head was nearly as large as a timber wolf's, with a body about half a wolf's size, and its mighty jaws could gape 120 degrees. Both sexes shared the tiger's most distinctive feature and the source of its most popular common name – a series of 15 to 20 black to dark brown stripes running across the back from the shoulders to the base of the tail.

Being a marsupial – more closely related to a kangaroo than a dog – the tiger had a pouch, but it was quite different in that it opened to the rear.



This was practical as the pouch couldn't snag on obstacles as the tiger ambled through the bush. The female could carry up to four pups at a time and, when they were too large for the pouch, she would hide them in a lair while hunting.

Unfortunately no scientific research was ever done on the social behaviour of tigers so even fundamental information, like age at maturity, longevity, pair-bonding, responsibility for young, or even hunting range, are unknown. Hunting habits are better understood; the animals were predominantly nocturnal and usually hunted in the evening or at night, singly or in twos (not necessarily pairs). Using what was

*Gaping in an enormous yawn, Benjamin, the last tiger in captivity, poses for tiger researcher David Fleay in 1933 at the Hobart Domain Zoo. A closer encounter (left) put photographer Fleay within range of the animal's powerful bite and a moment's inattention resulted in a painful nip to Fleay's posterior. "I'm the only man still living to be bitten by a Tasmanian tiger," he recently told AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC.*

believed to be an acute sense of smell, a tiger would tirelessly track a wallaby to exhaustion, then kill and eat what it wanted. The animals usually wouldn't return to a kill as is common among many predators.

Fossil records show tigers were once common throughout Australia and New Guinea, but disappeared from the mainland between 200 and 2000 years ago. Their extinction was most likely due to climatic changes and competition from the dingo, a more efficient carnivore, which never reached Tasmania. So the tiger continued to survive on the island in splendid isolation and in almost total harmony with the local Aboriginal tribes (who only ate them occasionally).



In 1805, two years after the founding of Tasmania's convict settlement at Risdon Cove, Lt-Governor William Paterson filed the first description of a tiger. The world's press had already been introduced to the platypus, echidna and kangaroo, so the tiger joined the ranks of Australia's bizarre animals.

Tigers were never very numerous in Tasmania – only four animals were collected in the first 17 years of the colony. They were also very shy of humans but, unfortunately, were very fond of mutton. By the mid 1820s, sheep were well established in Tasmania and the early settlers saw the tiger as a real threat to their blossoming pastoral industry.

In 1835, the Van Diemen's Land Company introduced the first bounty on tigers, which was augmented by a Government bounty in 1888. By the end of the 1800s, at least 3000 tigers had been killed and the animals had become uncommon even in remote areas. Incredibly, the shooting and snaring continued. Captured alive, tigers were worth up to 150 pounds and several zoos in Australia, the United States and Europe had the animal on display.

But the end was in sight. In the early 1900s the tiger population 'crashed' – suddenly they were very rare indeed. Hunting pressure alone would not account for this and an unidentified contagious disease, which also decimated the Tasmanian devil population, was blamed. Fortunately the devil has since recovered. In 1909, only two tiger bounties were paid and over the next 20 years the animals virtually disappeared. One of the last tiger killings occurred in May 1930, when a young animal was shot on a farm at Mawbanna in the State's north-west. In 1933 Elias Churchill snared one in the Florentine Valley and sold it to the Hobart Domain Zoo. It is thought that this was the same animal that died at the zoo on Monday 7 September 1936, the last tiger to have been undisputedly alive. In the past 50 years, no conclusive evidence for the continued existence of the Tasmanian tiger has been discovered. However, claimed sightings of the animal, not only within Tasmania but also throughout the mainland of Australia, have proliferated.



COURTESY TNPWS

**Above:** Alert with curiosity, a female tiger and her half-grown pups wait for their daily feeding in this 1920s photograph. With small ears and wedge-shaped faces, their resemblance to domestic dogs is purely superficial. **Below:** Despite being only about a third its size, the feisty Tasmanian devil is the tiger's nearest living relative and will become the world's largest living carnivorous marsupial upon the official demise of the tiger.



ANDY PARK





PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

**Above:** Squinting in the morning sun, a turn-of-the-century tiger hunter exhibits his latest victim. Note the characteristically short legs of this fully grown animal. **Left:** Researcher Jeremy Griffith designed an eye-catching display for the window of his thylacine centre headquarters in Launceston.



JAMES WALLEY

**Right:** On a track near Frenchmans Cap, David Fleay prods the grisly remains of a snared wallaby. **Below:** Radio-carbon dated at about 4500 years old, an astonishingly intact tiger mummy was found in Thylacine Hole, a cave on the Nullarbor Plain.



DAVID FLEAY



COURTESY W.A. MUSEUM



## THE SEARCHERS

Is it really possible the rarest animal on Earth is fooling all the sceptics and still survives? I repeatedly asked this question of myself and became fascinated with the idea. I would walk through the bush, camera at the ready, thinking a thylacine was lurking somewhere around the next bend. When I sought out the people and organisations who knew much more about the tiger, I found many others who shared my enthusiasm.

The Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service (TNPWS) is officially responsible for the tiger. As well as monitoring all searches for the animal it logs the continuous stream of eyewitness accounts. As these are the only evidence for the tiger's claimed existence, keeping the lines of communication open between the TNPWS and the general public is vital.

The key figure in this public relations exercise is research officer Nick Mooney. Tall, square-jawed and incredibly fit, Mooney is more at home in the dense Tasmanian bush



Carefully cradling his prized tiger skull, TNPWS research officer Nick Mooney demonstrates the jaw positioning in the animal's amazing 120-degree gape.

Mooney races into the bush to investigate and hopefully uncover some conclusive evidence. His personal speciality is tracking and in the basement of TNPWS headquarters I gazed in amazement at hundreds of plaster casts of tracks. "I've had a few good prints," he explained, pulling several out of a box to show me, "but nothing absolutely, positively concrete. The wallabies and devils are in such great numbers the few promising prints are always partially obscured – it's really frustrating."

Actually searching for tigers can be a very costly business. Peter Wright, a Tasmanian wildlife park operator and entrepreneur, financed and directed a large-scale tiger hunt during the winter of 1984 – at about \$250,000 it is the most expensive expedition to date. I covered Wright's hunt for *Smithsonian* magazine and spent several weeks helping in the search. Between constant equipment malfunctions and atrocious weather, we fell hopelessly behind schedule. Then

than in the confines of his Sandy Bay office. Watching him stride recklessly through the narrow corridors of TNPWS headquarters in his lug-soled hiking boots, it is difficult to picture him as the tiger PR man. But he deals with the public effortlessly, patiently listening to the accounts of sightings, then sorting through the details to determine which accounts are worth continued investigation.

Several times a year, when a particularly good sighting is reported,

PHOTOS: ANDY PARK



**Left:** Fascinated by tigers for over 30 years, Dr Eric Guiler pioneered the use of an infra-red beam trigger (foreground) connected to a pole-mounted camera. His thousands of pictures have never caught a tiger although he does have a stuffed tiger head (below) amongst his memorabilia.







*Appearing lush and fertile from a distance, the wild south-western country near Strathgordon (above) and Adamsfield (left) in fact supports only a meagre population of wallabies. The topsoil is thin, rocky and heavily leached and the vegetation low in nutritional value. But these tens of thousands of hectares of unsettled, dense bushland sustain the dream that tigers may still haunt the wilderness, unseen by passing bushwalkers. Traditionally, tigers were most common in the game-rich regions of Tasmania – the fertile north-east and north-west, the central plains and the valleys of the south-east. These predators lived on the edge of dense forests, stalking their prey in the bordering open country. Today, these same areas support the bulk of Tasmanian agriculture.*





ANDY PARK

**Above:** Dusted with the first snow of winter, the framework of Peter Wright's expedition headquarters takes shape near Lake Adelaide, in the Central Highlands. **Right:** Snow tracking by low-flying helicopter, Peter lands to examine possible tiger prints. These turned out to be devil tracks but he is convinced the tiger still exists and is planning another search.

the money ran out. Wright seemed unperturbed, maintaining his usual flamboyance until the end. He is now planning another search as soon as finances permit. Still absolutely convinced it's there, he predicted, "I'm going to find it. We found some good tracks last time and I think it's just a matter of time and patience."

Probably the best known tiger hunter of all is Dr Eric Guiler, retired Dean of Science at the University of Tasmania. A stocky human dynamo with sparkling blue eyes, Guiler has been on the tiger trail for almost 30 years with the grim determination of a modern-day crusader. His field trips in search of the animal would number in the hundreds, but a face-



PETER WRIGHT

to-face meeting continues to elude him. "My colleagues on the mainland think I'm crazy," he explained in his lilting Irish brogue, "but the eyewitness accounts keep me going. There's no doubt in my mind it still exists."

My own tiger fever continued to rage. I was convinced, despite enormous odds, that the tiger still survived. My supporting evidence was twofold – the great number of sight-

ings and the eyewitnesses themselves. The sightings alone were not enough as I certainly don't believe in yetis, abominable snowpersons or the Loch Ness monster! But I had spoken to eyewitnesses and they were honest and genuine, certainly not frauds. I can remember thinking, sure, most of the sightings are probably something else, but *some* of them *must* be accurate.





PETER WRIGHT

On a typical Central Highlands autumn day, several members of Peter Wright's expedition take a smoko during the clearing of the headquarters helipad. This initial part of the expedition proved to be the most dangerous as supplies were limited to what could be back-packed in and the extremely cold, damp weather proved a constant danger. After several days' work, one expedition member developed hypothermia and the helipad was completed just in time for the helicopter to airlift him to safety. Subsequent supply trips by the chopper brought Antarctic clothing for every expedition member.

## CALL THE NEXT WITNESS

So far, supporting evidence (such as a tiger) that would prove an eyewitness account has yet to be discovered, so the sightings cannot be proven.

This doesn't mean the eyewitnesses are lying. We humans have almost unlimited and wonderful powers of imagination which can be difficult to consciously control. It is very easy to misinterpret what one sees, especially if there is a reason for observing it. Certainly in Australian law an eyewitness does not provide irrefutable evidence. In cross-examination the witnesses' ability to properly see the event (due to darkness, bad eyesight, weather conditions, etc.) is questioned, or a bias for or against the accused is demonstrated. Human perception can also be greatly affected by physical factors such as exhaustion, physiological responses to medications or alcohol. Eric Guiler once remarked he would be interested in seeing a graph showing 'number of tiger sightings' plotted against 'distance from the nearest pub'!

Most tiger sightings are quite sudden and unexpected and some are unnerving in their detail and accuracy. Consider, for example, the encounter reported by Hans Naarding

### The day Hans spotted an 'extinct' Tasmanian tiger

**By GORD GIBSON**  
Hans Naarding has written an eyewitness account of the day he spotted an 'extinct' Tasmanian tiger. The account is a detailed and gripping story of the hunt for the elusive creature. It describes the challenges of the expedition and the discovery of the tiger's tracks. The article is accompanied by a small map of the Central Highlands and a photograph of a tiger.

## Making a comeback?

Latest unofficial reports indicate the Tasmanian Wolf, long thought to be extinct, may number up to 100 animals in the wild. The legendary creature, which bears no relation to the wolf of the northern hemisphere but is a marsupial like the kangaroo and is often called the Tasmanian Tiger, is occasionally reported to show its stripes in the rugged terrain of Tasmania. As a result of findings by the Ligabue Centre for Studies and Research, IUCN's Species Survival Commission's wolf specialist group has issued a unanimous resolution to continue the search for the wolf. WWF-Australia funded a photographic expedition several years ago to confirm its existence, but the wolf-like creature eluded the camera. "Not surprising at all," says IUCN wolf specialist Professor Luigi Boitani, architect of WWF's successful Save the Wolf Campaign for over a decade. "The Italian wolf has never been put in the wild, not even Italy." Dr Boitani recently to see nine Wolf. After research and Tasmanian Park, vague prints for convinced the at the end of the day, the Tasmanian Tiger is not extinct. Several unconfirmed sightings of the thylacine in the wild have been reported in the past three years. Edward Viney, 58, of Dairy Fevre, 70, of ton, were charged with attempting to trap a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine, the last example of which was snared in 1936. The men were charged with attempting to trap a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine, the last example of which was snared in 1936. The men were charged with attempting to trap a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine, the last example of which was snared in 1936.

### Sighting of tigers claimed

A PARTY of Victorian bushwalkers, claiming to have seen three Tasmanian tigers, have been charged with attempting to trap a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine, the last example of which was snared in 1936. The men were charged with attempting to trap a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine, the last example of which was snared in 1936. The men were charged with attempting to trap a Tasmanian Tiger, or thylacine, the last example of which was snared in 1936.

### 'Extinct' tiger sighted twice

HOBBART: Two new 'sightings' of the Tasmanian tiger have occurred in the State's north-west wilderness. The sightings were reported by two men who were on a bushwalk in the area. The sightings were reported by two men who were on a bushwalk in the area. The sightings were reported by two men who were on a bushwalk in the area.



Adv. 28. A Tasmanian tiger

## Tassie tiger 'seen' in Vic.

From our Staff Representative  
**MELBOURNE** — Three Victorian men claim to have seen the supposedly extinct Tasmanian tiger within three days in the south-east corner of Victoria.

The sightings were near the GCMH proving ground at Lang Lang, 100 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, and were three kilometres apart. Both were at 5.40 a.m. when the men, members of a road gang, were driving to work. Mr. I. Garry, 51, of Koroit, said the tiger crossed the road ahead of them both times. It was only 50 metres from them.

Despite a total lack of concrete evidence over the past half-century, the Australian media continue to report tiger sightings with unbridled vigour.





Wright's plans for remotely monitored survey equipment were dashed by constant malfunctions. The trail-side cameras (above) and the head-quarters control centre were never properly linked and even constant maintenance (above right) failed to solve the problem.

at the beginning of this article. Then a wildlife researcher on contract to the TNPWS, Naarding's official report, filed with the service soon after the sighting on 10 March 1982, is tantalising in its attention to detail.

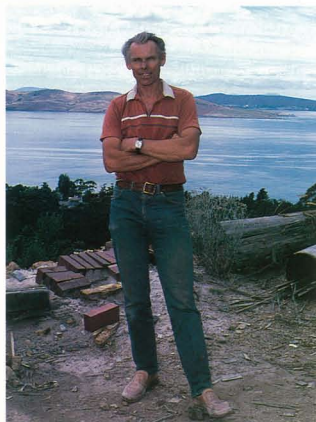
*I had gone to sleep in the back of my vehicle which was parked at a road junction in a remote forested area in the north-west of the State. It was raining heavily. At 2 a.m. I awoke and, out of habit, scanned the surrounds with a spotlight. As I swept the light-beam around, it came to rest on a large thylacine, standing side-on some six to seven metres distant. My camera bag was out of immediate reach so I decided to examine the animal carefully before risking movement. It was an adult male in excellent condition with 12 black stripes on a sandy coat. Eye reflection was pale yellow. It moved only once, opening its jaw and showing its teeth. After several minutes of observation I attempted to reach my camera bag but in doing so I disturbed the animal and it moved away into the undergrowth. Leaving the vehicle and moving*



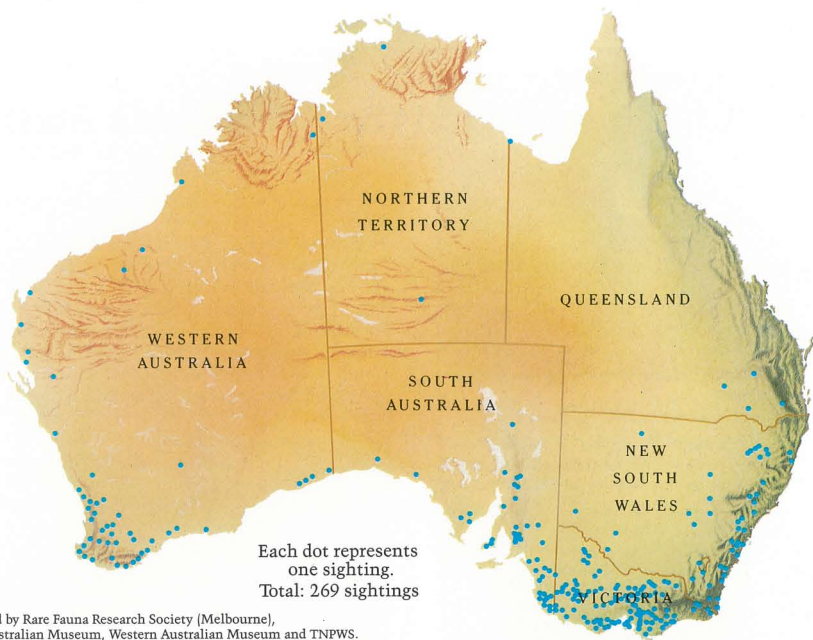
**Above:** Hans Naarding's sighting occurred here, at the junction of deserted dirt roads, only about 10 km north of the Arthur River and virtually on the edge of a wilderness to the south. **Right:** Hans Naarding.

*to where the animal disappeared, I noted a strong scent. Despite an intensive search no further trace of the animal could be found.*

The TNPWS kept this sighting a closely guarded secret for more than two years while their officers looked for further, conclusive evidence of the animal's existence. But once again even the most basic proof, like a follow-up photograph, hair or even clear tracks, was impossible to obtain.







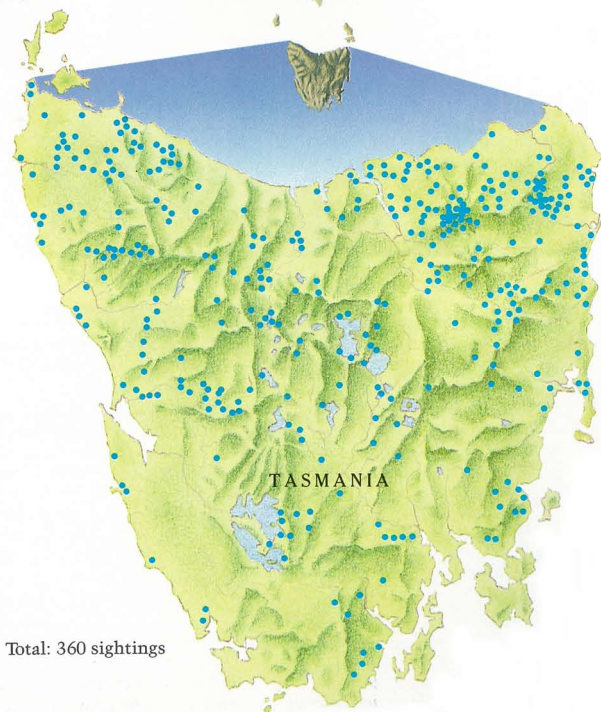
Compiled by Rare Fauna Research Society (Melbourne), South Australian Museum, Western Australian Museum and TNPWS.

## THE REPORTED SIGHTINGS

Since 1936, tiger sightings have proliferated not only in Tasmania but on the mainland as well. Yet in the 200 years since European settlement, not a single live tiger has ever been trapped on the Australian mainland and their presence now is considered virtually impossible. But widespread public awareness of 'a rare, striped, dog-like animal' offers a possible explanation for these mainland sightings. A furtive glimpse in a remote area of anything even vaguely resembling a striped dog is enough to trigger a tiger report.

The sightings within Tasmania are equally intriguing as they generally occur in areas where the tiger was known to exist before the turn-of-the-century. Of course, public awareness of the tiger is even greater in Tasmania so, once again, sightings can be clouded with preconceived ideas. Obviously, the shorter the period of encounter, the greater the chances of mis-identification: over half of these sightings were for less than ten seconds; about one in four were over one minute.

While little can be concluded from this incredible number of chance encounters with the 'Tasmanian tigers', it is interesting to consider that they may represent over half a century of national self-deception!



MAP: ROD CLEMENT



# Human Imagination and the Eyewitness Account

By Dick Smith

**I**F you believe that the Tasmanian tiger still exists, you must believe at least some of the eyewitness accounts, for there is simply no other evidence.

It might also be argued that some of these eyewitness accounts must be accurate because they come from honest and genuine people, many with scientific qualifications, who would gain nothing from making a fraudulent claim. However, the matter is not as simple as this for there is ample evidence that we humans are not reliable eyewitnesses.

I know because I have first-hand experience.

In 1978, while searching by helicopter for the rusted remains of the *Kookaburra* aircraft in the Tanami Desert, I vividly 'saw' the wreckage, exactly as old photos had shown it, lying in the turpentine scrub with one wheel pointing skywards. As the helicopter was travelling fast and low at the time the 'wreckage' disappeared from view, so we made a quick 180-degree turn to confirm my sighting. But the 'wreckage' was nowhere to be seen.

I just couldn't believe my eyes and back at base camp that night I again checked the research photographs and was convinced (and tried to convince everyone else) that I had definitely sighted the *Kookaburra*. Fortunately I have always had a healthy scepticism about 'sightings' of UFOs, Loch Ness monsters, big foots, yetis and the like, so I reluctantly accepted that my imagination had played a trick on me. I'm glad I did because we then moved to a new search area and eventually found the *Kookaburra* more than 10 kilometres to the north of my definite 'sighting'.

No doubt if we hadn't found the *Kookaburra* I would

still be stating to this day that "I am confident I know where it is because I saw it".

Of course there is a great body of evidence about how our imagination can mislead us. Every policeman will tell you how eyewitness reports of accidents often vary so much that it is almost impossible to believe that the eyewitnesses could be reporting the same accident. And this is not something unique to Australia. During one 12-month period a large team of American scientists monitored Loch Ness with cameras at different locations and



*The power of human imagination was demonstrated to me in 1978 while searching for the Kookaburra. From the helicopter I vividly saw the wreckage, but I later discovered it over 10 km away from my 'sighting'.*

Naarding's sighting was called "the best in the history of the service" by TNPWS director Peter Murrell but, while it was made in an obviously responsible manner by a respected researcher and recognised wildlife authority, it provides not a shred of acceptable scientific evidence. Incredibly, this was lost on the TNPWS when the sighting was first reported to the press. Their initial reaction (probably because Naarding was well known to the department and highly respected) was one of general elation with words like 'irrefutable and conclusive' thrown at the media. But calmer heads eventually prevailed. Director Murrell recently summed up his department's official reaction to

Naarding's report: "We treated this incident as an excellent sighting with the usual follow-up investigation, but we are still waiting for a good, clear photograph."

Hans Naarding, who was conducting migratory bird studies at the time of his encounter, took his employer's wait-and-see attitude in his stride. "I'm confident it exists because I saw it," he explained, "but I did have a bit of a giggle at all the kerfuffle, especially when I believe Tasmania has many more important environmental problems, like the woodchipping issue, to consider."

The media must be held somewhat responsible for spreading tiger hysteria. For daily newspapers this is

perhaps understandable since the tiger makes such a good story and helps circulation, but prestigious international institutions like the World Wildlife Fund are equally susceptible to the contagion. In a recent issue of the *World Wildlife Fund News* it was reported not only that the tiger exists, but the population "may number up to 100 animals in the wild". Even the authoritative magazine of the Australian Museum, *Australian Natural History*, has described the tiger as if it were still roaming the wilds of Tasmania. In fact, in recent times, almost every article written on the tiger in so-called 'responsible' scientific magazines presumes that the tiger exists.



recorded absolutely nothing while 'eyewitnesses' were 'sighting' Nessie as regularly as ever!

But perhaps the most convincing evidence of our powers of self-delusion is the story of the Stinson aircraft that disappeared on a flight from Brisbane to Sydney on a stormy Friday, 19 February 1937. After a week of searching and compiling eyewitness reports it was established 'beyond doubt' that the Stinson had been lost south of the Hawkesbury River within 30 km of Sydney. Not only had it been 'seen' and 'heard' by 'reliable' observers, such as policemen and schoolteachers, on its flight down the coast, but it had actually been recorded in the log of a steamer off Barrenjoey Head at the entrance to the Hawkesbury.

The 'sightings' were all the more conclusive because in those days of limited commercial flying there was no other aircraft in the air at that time which could have been mistakenly identified as the Stinson. Fortunately, one man, Bernard O'Reilly, did not accept the so-called overwhelming evidence of the eyewitness accounts. He searched for and found the crashed aircraft (with two passengers still alive) in the McPherson Ranges just south of Brisbane.

Of course, the eyewitnesses who made the imaginary sightings were just as honest, just as genuine, and just as convinced as the Tasmanian tiger eyewitnesses.

There is ample evidence that we humans have almost unlimited powers of subconscious imagination – a wonderful gift as long as we don't kid ourselves that it is an adequate substitute for scientific methodology and evaluation.

We cannot prove that the Tasmanian tiger eyewitnesses were mistaken, but a total lack of any supporting evidence over 50 years should lead us to the conclusion that it is extinct.

## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

The non-emotive approach to the existence of the tiger is quite straightforward. Unsubstantiated eyewitness accounts do not provide sufficient evidence to prove that the tiger survives. Certainly most people would like to think the animal was still roaming the Tasmanian bush, but such romanticised ideals have to be kept separate from scientific evidence.

Zoologist Jeremy Griffith, who devoted four years of his life to diligently hunting for some sign of a tiger, is now convinced it's extinct.



Setting out on his first expedition in 1967, Jeremy Griffith's sole companion was his foxhound tracker, Loaf. This preliminary search was completely self-funded and he carried everything he needed for several weeks survival on a trail bike.



Jeremy tried to cover every option, whether checking an alleged tiger's den (above) or camouflaging his camera in a camera blind (below). These photographic enclosures were baited with a live chicken and a black, fishing-line camera trigger was stretched across the only entrance.





"I believed the sightings and got totally involved," he explained, "even though I knew 80 per cent were totally fanciful, like one old bloke who had a tiger trapped in the Launceston tip – it turned out to be a greyhound. James Malley and I investigated an enormous number of 'sightings'. We walked and tracked most of their known territory and we never found a print that wasn't eventually explained as a devil or a wombat. It was my innocence that caught me out because I just couldn't believe that so many people could be mistaken. I

was very gullible then."

Tasmanian member of Parliament and conservationist, Bob Brown, worked with Griffith in the office of the Thylacine Expeditionary Research Team. He investigated some 250 tiger sightings over 10 months but obtained no proof. "I'd love to say it exists," he told AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC, "but the evidence clearly shows that it doesn't."

Dr Michael Archer, associate professor of zoology at the University of New South Wales, has been collecting and assessing archaeological evi-

dence on the tiger for 20 years. He said recently: "No one would be more excited than I if one turned up. But there's absolutely no substance for all these claims of its continued existence. I think it's a stunning example of over-optimism."

Ronald Strahan, retired director of Sydney's Taronga Zoo and doyen of Australian zoology, went directly to the point when asked about the tiger. "It's extinct," he stated flatly.

Even the World Wildlife Fund (Australia), which provided over \$55,000 towards the 1979 TNPWS tiger search, has adopted a very conservative approach to any further sponsorship. Although not willing to say the tiger is extinct, Mike Chilcott, assistant director of conservation, explained that "the Fund would be reluctant to embark on further search spending without a rigorous assessment by the scientific committee."

## JUST A LITTLE LOGIC

The saga of the Tasmanian tiger is like a good Agatha Christie mystery. Unlike the yeti, this animal really did exist – then, 50 years ago, it vanished. Over the past half century, more than a dozen expeditions have looked in vain for any lingering evidence of the animal, yet eyewitness reports of its fleeting presence have not only grown in number but are now coming in from all over the mainland of Australia. Could tigers really exist? Could their population be recovering as the increased number of sightings would indicate? Or, are the eyewitnesses mistaken and the increase in sightings simply a response to improved public awareness coupled with fertile imaginations?

The overwhelming scientific evidence points to extinction, for without supporting evidence all those eyewitness accounts prove nothing. The possibility of human error means eyewitness accounts cannot be classed as good evidence and all the weak evidence in the world can't add up to one piece of concrete, irrefutable proof.

On the other hand, extinction is a very difficult thing to prove scien-



JEREMY GRIFFITH

*As the tiger's nearest living relative, the now common Tasmanian devil offers tiger researchers like Jeremy Griffith an excellent study specimen. Although direct comparisons would be scientifically unsound, patterns of devil behaviour may help piece together facts about the tiger.*



tifically. Mere absence of concrete evidence is not enough. It may take another century before there is a definitive answer. After all, the night parrot and the New Zealand takahe (similar to a swamp hen) both disappeared for over 50 years, then were dramatically rediscovered – although neither was subjected to decades of intense searching.

The tragedy of the tiger, put simply, is that its demise was so unnecessary. Naturalist John Gould warned of the fragile state of the tiger population in the mid 1800s and in the early 1900s the Tasmanian Advisory Committee recommended that the animal be wholly protected. Unfortunately, the legislators of the day yielded to the political pressures of graziers, an act of total irresponsibility that led to the disappearance of the tiger.

But at the bottom line does it really matter if we believe the tiger exists when it doesn't? Yes, it does, and it's vitally important we face the truth, because by continuing the myth and



JEREMY GRIFFITH

**Above:** Devil tracks parallel those of tiger searcher James Malley on a south-west Tasmanian beach.

**Below:** Emblazoned in red ochre on top of the Arnhem Land, NT, escarpment a life-size cave painting of a tiger has existed for some 6000 years.

indulging our romanticism we avoid the responsibility of having destroyed yet another species. Mankind must grasp the irrefutable fact that modern civilisation radically changes the environment and extraordinary measures are necessary to preserve what is left of our natural heritage. How many more of our unique animals must disappear before we learn our lesson?

Bob Brown, who helped save the Franklin River but was powerless to help the tiger, should have the final word: "Here we've been spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to try and find the tiger when it's extinct. Why not use that money to save species that are now nearly extinct?"

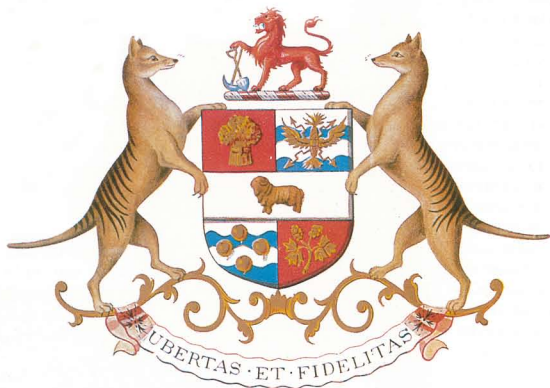


AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC would like to thank Peter Murrell, Director of the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Nick Mooney, Hans Naarding, Peter Wright, Jeremy Griffith and Dr Bob Brown for their assistance with this story.





# An Historical Perspective



**1803:** European settlement begins at Risdon Cove, Tasmania.

**1805:** Lt-Governor William Paterson describes the killing by settlement dogs of a striped hyena-like animal.

**1808:** Surveyor-General George P. Harris scientifically describes the Tasmanian tiger.

**1820:** The tiger is considered uncommon as only four have been collected.

**1824:** Sheep introduced into open grasslands of eastern Tasmania. Predation by tigers begins almost immediately.

**1863:** Naturalist John Gould predicts the tiger faces extinction "when the comparatively small island of Tasmania becomes more densely populated".

**1888:** Tasmanian Government bounty scheme is enacted: one pound paid for an adult animal; 10 shillings a sub-adult.

**1900:** A record 153 tiger bounties paid by the State Government.

**1909:** Government bounty scheme ended with payment of only two bounties.

**1910–21:** Mrs Mary Roberts ships live tigers to three mainland zoos: Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Some two dozen animals are exported to overseas zoos including London, New York, Berlin and Washington.

**1926:** For 150 pounds, the London zoo buys its last Tasmanian tiger.

**1928:** Tasmanian Advisory Committee (for native fauna) recommends that the tiger be placed on the totally protected list. The suggestion meets widespread opposition from landowners and is defeated.

**1930:** The last tiger to be killed in the wild is shot at Mawbanna. There have been many reports of tigers killed since then but no conclusive evidence has been presented.

**1936:** On 7 September, the last captive tiger, Benjamin, dies in the Hobart Domain Zoo.

**1937:** The first search for surviving tigers is conducted on behalf of the Fauna Board. Searchers claim to have found evidence in the form of tracks and reported sightings indicating the animals still live on the west coast.

*With its pair of rampant tigers, the Tasmanian coat of arms is unique among Australian States in that it not only features an animal restricted to the State, but one that is also presumably extinct.*

**1938:** A four-man expedition is organised by the Animals and Birds Protection Board. The party claims to have identified tiger tracks near Thirkells Creek and in upper reaches of the Jane River.

**1945:** Victorian naturalist David Fleay searches fruitlessly from November to March 1946. He retracks much of the 1938 search area setting steel-framed, chain wire traps baited with bacon, live fowls or ducks. The traps catch Tasmanian devils and native cats as well as numerous wallabies, pademelons and possums but no tigers.

**1957 (January):** A "tawny, tiger-striped dog-like animal" is photographed from a helicopter on a deserted west coast beach 50 km south-west of Queenstown. Unfortunately, the photograph, taken from an altitude of about 30 m, did not provide enough detail to positively identify the animal.

**1963:** The Animals and Birds Protection Board organised a search of the region led by Dr Eric Guiler. The five-man team searched from October 1963 to May 1964, starting at Sandy Cape on the west coast, then north to Woolnorth and inland to Balfour. No clear evidence of a tiger was found.

**1966 (March):** The World Wildlife Fund donates US\$1000 for further tiger research. Dr Guiler searches a coastal area north-west of Zeehan that is allegedly frequented by one or more tigers. However, months of trapping yield nothing.

**1966 (June):** An old boiler on the Whyte River near Luina is found to contain what appears to be a recently used tiger lair. Dr Guiler investigates, collects hair samples which he later identifies as those of a thylacine. However, other samples taken at the same time are examined by Hans Brunner at the Keith Turnbull Research Station in Victoria and found to be inconsistent with those of a tiger.



**1968 (March):** Jeremy Griffith, a zoology graduate from Sydney University, joins forces with Tasmanian dairy farmer James Malley and begins the most intensive tiger search to date. Exhaustive preliminary surveys along the west coast yield nothing but their hopes are kept alive by a continuing barrage of claimed sightings. Grants from *The Australian* newspaper and the British Tobacco Company help keep the search going. In 1972 they open a thylacine centre in Launceston specifically to investigate the 'phenomena of sightings'. Public response is overwhelming with over 40 sightings received within one three-month period. At this time Bob Brown joins the group which becomes the Thylacine Expeditionary Research Team. While Brown mans the office, Griffith and Malley investigate the sightings reported to the centre. Automatic cameras are designed, built and installed in likely locations (baited with live fowls and triggered by trip-lines), but still, nothing. By December 1972 many sightings have been investigated at first hand. None are able to be confirmed as tiger and most are accounted for as being other than a tiger. While Malley remains optimistic Griffith now concludes from the research that it is possible for all sightings to be misinterpretations. With this insight the team disbands.

**1973:** American naturalist Jim Sayles, with the help of James Malley and Kev Bowring, spends months tracking through the west and north-west of the State. Sayles has a brief encounter with a dog-sized animal in the middle of the night. He thinks

it might be a tiger, but "because of the excitement and dream-like quality of the experience, I will never be certain."

**1978:** Sydney conservationist Chris Tangey tracks for several months in north-east Tasmania without success.

**1979:** The World Wildlife Fund (Australia) makes a grant of just over \$55,000 to the TNPWS to organise and administer a scientifically-based search. This is the most expensive search to date and much of the field work is under the direction of Dr Eric Guiler.

**1980:** Tasmanian zoologist Steven Smith and trainee ranger Adrian Pyrke join Guiler. While Guiler surveys in the field, Smith and Pyrke split basic research and additional field work between them. Once again no conclusive evidence is discovered.

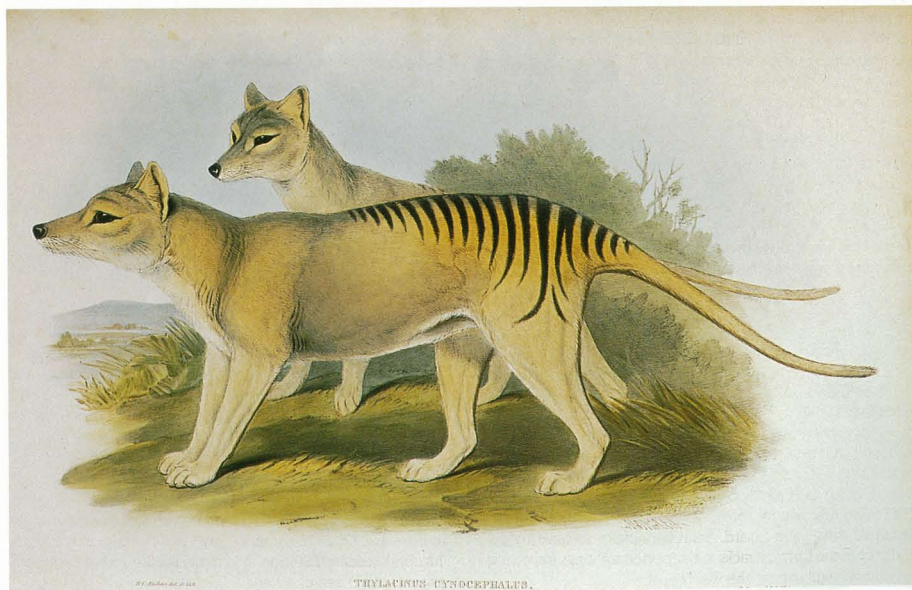
**1984:** Entrepreneur Peter Wright organises a massive tiger investigation in a secret area near Lake Adelaide in the Central Highlands. After spending \$250,000 he does not find any scientifically acceptable evidence.

**1984:** Kevin Cameron of Perth, after searching in the south-west of Western Australia for four years, photographs an animal he believes to be the tiger. Popular newspapers claim that this photograph, together with many hundreds of eyewitness sightings show that the tiger also exists on the mainland. \*

**1985:** A private search begins in a small, localised area on the west coast of Tasmania. Few details are released as organisers wish to avoid publicity. This search continues in 1986.

*In addition to accurately predicting the demise of the Tasmanian tiger over a century ago, naturalist and painter John Gould included a beautifully romanticised lithograph of the thylacine by H.C. Richter in his Mammals of Australia, Volume 1, 1863.*

While these searches continued, some extremely thorough, others not, the tiger was being continually 'sighted' throughout Tasmania and the mainland. During the period from 1936 to 1986 it is estimated that over 1000 eyewitness sightings have been reported.



THYLACINUS CYNOCEPHALUS.