

THE TASMANIAN TIGER

by Bob Brown, for James Malley and Jeremy Griffith (the Thylacine Expeditionary Research Team).

The Tasmanian Tiger (*Thylacinus Cynocephalus* — zebra, wolf, hyaena), is the largest marsupial carnivore. It was found until recently in all areas of Tasmania. Until the arrival of the dingo, with more recent migrations of aborigines to the Australian mainland, the Tiger was widely distributed there as well. He could not compete with the dingo and became extinct. Fossil remains of the Tiger have been found in New Guinea and South America.

The animal is a tawny-grey colour having twelve to eighteen distinct stripes from mid-back to tail-base. It stands two feet high to mid-back and specimens up to ninety inches from nose to tail-tip are on record. The Tiger, though a marsupial, has a dog-like head — an example of convergence (similar to the development of the duck's bill in the platypus, although the platypus is in no way related to birds through evolution). It has a one hundred and fifty degree jaw span. It has dog-like forelegs with five toes, though the fifth toe rarely shows in tracks. The toe marks are seen about half an inch away from the pads, and a pad mark would measure approximately two and a half by two and a half inches. The hind legs are notable for the very low knee and the long heel, showing the animal's close relationship to kangaroos. There are only four toes on the hind foot, and the heel marks are not often seen by trackers. The female has a rear facing pouch and suckles three or four young. The Tiger's natural feed is wallaby and other marsupials, but it quickly took a liking to sheep. It is not fast but is a relentless tracker with an unsurpassed olfactory capacity. It seems the Tiger is most commonly heard at night when hunting, having a harsh coughing type sound. Though clear descriptions are hard to get, many a pioneer's child turned in the cot to this nocturnal cry. The animal moves almost exclusively (as the Tasmanian Devil) at night.

The Tiger is mentioned in records of 1808. There is a drawing of one entering a trap in 1823 and Robinson of "the aborigines friend" fame gave a good account of seeing many Tigers in daylight in the 1830s. He mentions that the aborigines ate them and were in 1832 paid ten shillings bounty for skins by settlers.

The Naturalist, Gould, in 1863 wrote that "the numbers of this singular animal will speedily diminish, extermination will have its full sway . . . but the fastnesses of the Tasmanian rocky gullies clothed with impenetrable forests will, for the present, preserve it from destruction".

The Tiger slaughtered many sheep of the settlers and by 1888 the Government was forced to declare a bounty of a pound per head for the animal. Till 1909 two thousand one hundred and forty-eight such bounties were paid, but many hunters found it more profitable to ask bounties directly from the settlers. It seems probable that at least five thous-

and Tigers were killed after 1888. Tiger-skin waistcoats were sported on many a fashionable chest in English drawing-rooms. And, later on, a fair trade in live animals to overseas zoos took place.

Many theories as to the cause of the Tiger's decline have been advanced, but it is clear that man's activities is the foremost. It is possible that a virus outbreak early this century may have killed Tigers. It is less likely that the introduction of rabbits, which the Tigers could swallow whole (so causing fatal fur build-up and bowel obstruction) was a cause. In 1930 the last one proven to have been shot, died at Mawbanna. In 1934 the last captive Tiger died in the Hobart Zoo. There is no irrefutable evidence proving the existence of one since 1934.

A number of expeditions have set out to locate and retrieve the Tigers, notably those of 1939 and 1945. Though unsuccessful, the former claims to have found tracks. A current search has evolved from the determination of Jeremy Griffith and James Malley to surmount the uncertainty and indecisiveness that have frustrated thinking about the Tiger's possible retrieval from extinction for the last four decades. James Malley from Trowutta has spent a large amount of his time since 1959 in the search, and Jeremy Griffith, a zoologist from New South Wales, since 1965. In June of this year, Griffith mounted a display centre in Launceston to try to stir support for their efforts. It did; financial aid resulted. Moreover, the local population for the first time became aware that a constructive effort was afoot, and they supplied great encouragement, especially in providing new information through recollections from the near and distant past. A realistic plan was now made possible. Bob Brown joined the two.

The aims of the Thylacine Team are principally to prove the Tiger exists, by finding indisputable tracks or by photographs. Or, to prove within the bounds of exhaustive field study, using all available techniques, that the Tiger is extinct in North-East Tasmania. Historically, most bounties and a great majority of sightings had been made in the North-East region of Tasmania. This area was selected therefore, for intensive study to locate Tigers.

To put these aims into practice a field plan has been drawn up and is functioning. The area of search is demarcated by the roads from Launceston to Campbell Town to Swansea. This is divided into survey areas — areas the Team have been encouraged to believe Tigers exist in (this encouragement has come from one hundred and fifty reported sightings relating to the last ten years). When plotted on a map there is a wide scatter of sightings, but in five or six specific areas they can be seen to concentrate. In practically all cases where this has occurred, sightings have been reported to the Team by individuals or groups unaware of other

nearby reports. In fact, in most cases sighters were for the first time telling anybody what they had seen. It is heartening that these people recognized their sightings would be treated seriously and if necessary in confidence. There has previously been no centre in Tasmania for the collection of such circumstantial evidence. Many a conviction has followed strong circumstantial evidence.

The full-time Base of operations is functioning at Vermont Road, Launceston. This provides a basis for the field studies and is a centre of communications with the public and with field workers.

Griffith and Malley are systematically investigating each interesting area and placing cameras and other monitoring devices in the best. The cameras, developed by Griffith, are set up with a trip line to be triggered by animals approaching a fowl in her protective enclosure. They will take four individually-triggered flash photos and eight daylight photos automatically. Their efficacy is demonstrated by clear photographs of Tasmanian Devils and possums taken from them. These monitors are checked monthly (meanwhile the fowls have an abundance of food, drink, living space and protection). Tigers would be unlikely to approach a monitor for some days after it had been left.

A further innovation is the tracking pad system being installed by Malley. For this a scent trail is dragged, hoping to cut the Tiger's range, leading to a suspended bait. Beneath the bait an appropriate surface receives clear imprints of many animal tracks. It is set so only carnivores would approach, and again has a trip line on the approach. This trip line sets off a silent transmitter to alert the men some miles away and the pad can be checked. The transmitters were developed by Trevor Briggs, a lecturer at the Launceston Technical College, and are invaluable. Each area of study is surveyed extensively, local people are talked to, local game is assessed and other relevant factors weighed up before such devices are employed. By the end of 1972 every wild corner, thickly gamed area or other likely spot in the North-East will have been assessed on the spot and, if necessary, monitored.

Since the Base opened in August, four fresh sightings have been reported. These were followed up the same day. Proof can only be accredited to sightings if tracks are found nearby. In wet weather tracks are quickly marred. As a twice-daily radio communication is maintained between the Base and the men doing field work, the latter can transfer their activities to a new sighting area quickly. However, a delay of some days in reporting of each of the fresh sightings has so far compromised this efficiency of communication.

Sightings quickly reported and investigated, and the finding of footprints will spell success in the search just as will a monitored photograph or footprint.

The few photographs and written accounts of the Tiger that still exist are being sought and collected by the Team. These, together with sighting data, are to be stored in an allotted archive of the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston. They will

therefore be available to any other interested persons in the future. Wild life interests in Australia and overseas have been informed of the Team's work.

To answer two important questions :—

What should be done if the Tiger is located ?

Up to the date of writing neither the Tasmanian Government nor scientific bodies have expressed a willingness to think about and offer suggestions to answer this question, saying, "find a tiger and we will then consider the matter".

The Team has thought about it a great deal. The conversion of the habitat of a Tiger with a view to its preservation is fraught with difficulty. The authorities, newly impressed, could consider the question whilst the area is left undisturbed by a possible multitude of well-meaning destructionists lured to the scene.

The Tiger must not be put in a cage and kept. The Team believes it should initially be studied in its natural habitat and then if necessary, and if it were evident that a number could be captured, a colony in safer surroundings (e.g. on the reserve on Maria Island) should be established.

Isn't the Tiger most likely to survive if left alone ?

Unknown to most, new roads, especially to facilitate the forest and woodchip industry, are moving into much of the previously inaccessible areas of the State, at an awe-inspiring rate. 1080 poisoning often follows. It is historically obvious that the Tigers have never been able to survive in areas of frequent human visitation. It is evident that if any Tigers survive, the inexorable expansion of our self-interests in this State will kill it. (There are at least seven unsubstantiated reports of tiger-killings in the 1960's).

Gould was right in 1863.

We must accept the small chance we have of saving this animal from proven extinction now as that chance can only become smaller.

Anecdotes

(1) 6th April, 1834. Fine day. Sandy Cape. Early evening :

"Just before I got onto the long sandy beach my dog Fly scented game and ran to the bottom. I saw a large hyeana at bay. My son at the same time ran down to the dog's assistance and saw three young cubs who with the bitch had been feeding on the carcass of a kangaroo. The unexpected visitant surprised the animal and she ran up the hill followed by the dog. We shouted and the animal alarmed ran over the hill, thence across a plain and along the acclivity of another hill for a considerable distance, followed by the dog who from the commencement of the chase had kept close to the animal occasionally biting its rump, when the hyaena would turn round and give chase to the dog and anon pursue its way, and at the same instant she turned the dog biting her. Another large dog with us and which belonged to the old Chief, would not approach it but barked. Black Dick and a white

man came up and I sent them down to the dog's assistance. When the men went to it it ran at them. At last it fell when the dog Fly sprung and fastened on its throat, and the two men killed it and brought it to me. It was the finest hunt I has seen and a good run over clear ground. My son and some others of the men were hunting the cubs; my son caught one alive and two escaped after being chased. I brought away the skin. It was the finest I had ever seen, with a head in the shape of a fox."

—George Robinson.

- (2) "... Tigers were a proper problem with sheep in the Great Lake country... around 1900 some of the landowners near the 'Quoin' put together a Tiger Bank... the Bank was forty pounds in those days and they thought to pay two and six (25c) per head. Well, two men built a rough brush fence and caught the Tigers. They fetched in a load of Tiger skins (about 300) and broke the Bank in four months."

—Anon.

- (3) "The earliest account referred to spiny anteaters being devoured. The destruction of these would imply a cunning and adroitness beyond that of the average dog. The Tiger will put up a good fight against a dog, and some were said to be so large and powerful that several dogs would not face one. Once a bull-terrier bailed one up in a rock-niche where it kept the dog at bay by turning its head from side to side. Finally the dog came too close and the Tiger with a sharp fox-like bite tore a piece from the dog's skull."
- (4) "Miss Pricilla Murray, had her right arm gripped in the jaws of a thylacine when washing at

a bench outside a bush dwelling. The bite was luckily through winter clothing but as she tried to push the animal away her left hand was also bitten. Struggling to reach a garden hoe, she trod on the thylacine's long tail, when it let go and slunk away on being threatened with the hoe. Noting that the marsupial was minus an eye, she tolerantly suggested that it was quite old and having difficulty in obtaining its winter rations.

"However, Miss Murray can not have been so satisfied with the conclusion of the report in the Scottsdale paper that fortunately for her 'the animal was old and toothless'. She actually bled freely from several of the thirty-two odd tooth-marks."

Paraphrased from Scottsdale North-Eastern Advertiser, 1900.

- (5) "A very interesting fact about the Thylacine is that when hard pressed, or chasing a fast prey, it will often spring along on its hind legs, after the manner of a Kangaroo or Wallaby." This peculiarity was recorded as long ago as 1839.

— Harman, 1949.

- (6) "In about 1919 a shepherd bringing sheep down from the High Country in winter, had his dogs take off in chase of a Tiger. The Tiger moved quickly towards a rock face, a part of the Walls of Jerusalem, and it was seen then to leap quickly to another rock some feet away at the side. The closely pursuing dogs went over the rock face. By the time they had recovered from the fall of thirty or forty feet, the Tiger was gone."

—Bushman, Myrtle Bank.

