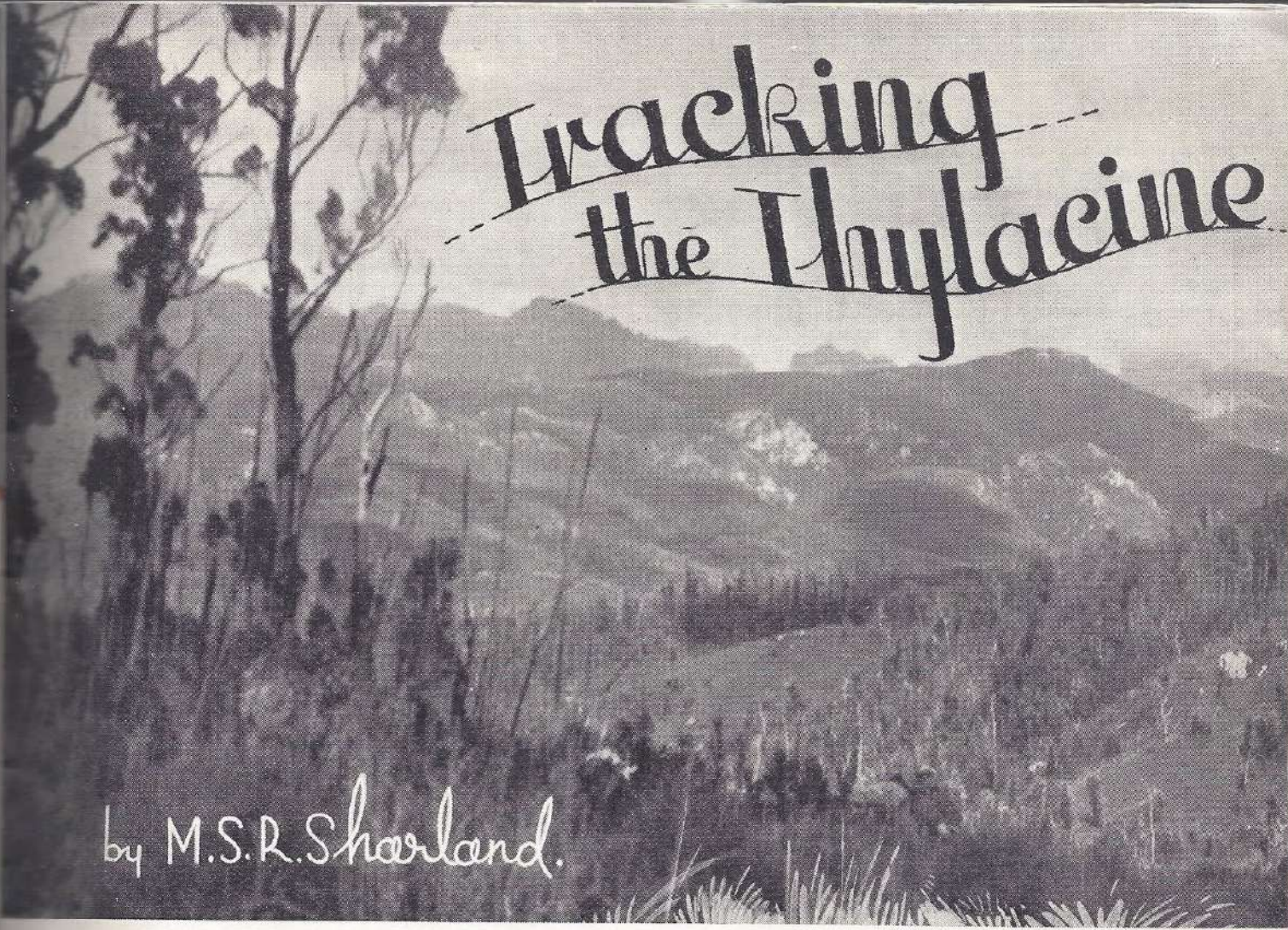




Tracking the Thylacine

by M.S.R. Sharland.

Valley of the Thylacines — an imposing view of the great mountain-fringed amphitheatre in which the events described in this article took place.

Quest Reveals Footprints in Southern Tasmania

Known to science as Thylacine—"the pouched dog with the wolf head"—but to bushmen as the "tiger" or "hyaena," the Tasmanian marsupial wolf has diminished so rapidly in recent years that fears have been expressed for its future, and in some quarters it is believed even now to be extinct. That it is still fairly well distributed over the western part of Tasmania, however, has been proved by recent investigation, and particularly by an expedition which was sent out by the Tasmanian Fauna Board last November. This article is the first general account of that expedition.

TRAVELLERS on the new road from Hobart to Queenstown, the chief business centre of Tasmania's western mining fields, may catch a glimpse from their car of the impressive outline of the Frenchman's Cap, a high, conglomerate cube-shaped peak, some 15 miles to the south as the eagle flies, but two days' hard journey for a man on foot. This mountain, on which few people had gazed before the opening of the West Coast road three or four years ago, and which was a landmark for Sir John Franklin on his notable walk overland to Macquarie Harbour while he was Governor of Tasmania nearly a century ago, forms the north-western boundary of a vast amphitheatre, or natural basin, from 30 to 40 miles long and some 25 miles wide, extending southward to the well-wooded country of the Jane River and minor tributaries of the beautiful Gordon, along which tourists are taken in small steamers.

The eastern rim of this rift-like valley consists of the high columnar dolerite wall of the King William range

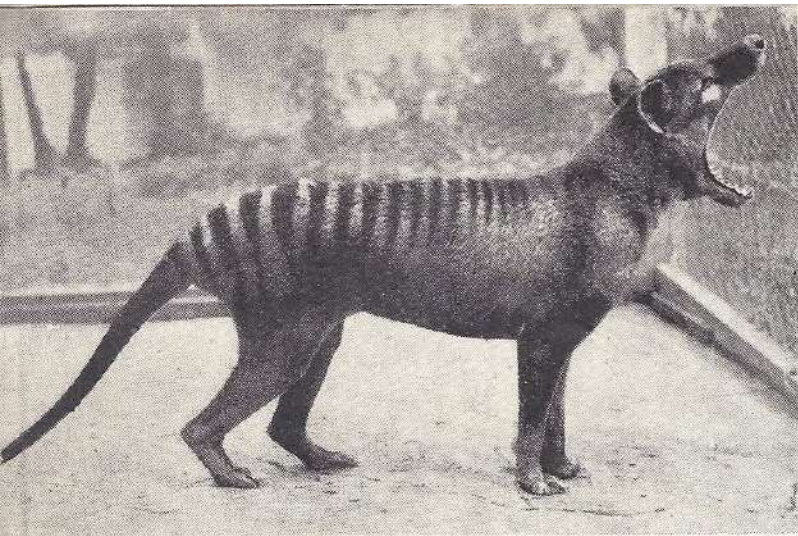
from which, over the years, great blocks of stone have fallen to form steep slopes of barren talus, extending in some places to the bottom of the valley, with mighty rocks and broken sections of cliffs strewn in utmost confusion.

The rim is broken in the south-east, where there is a gap between the end of the King William Range and the beginning of the Prince of Wales Range, another long mountain wall, composed of archaic schists and flaked marble, which forms the southern boundary and sweeps away to the distant Gordon. Then the rim of the valley swings round by way of the Jane River hills, the Surveyor and Deception ranges, to link up again with the glistening quartzite peaks of the Frenchman's Cap, the highest of which rises for just on 5000 ft. and seldom is free from cloud.

Within these encircling walls lie deep basins of button-

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Like a striped tawny wolf in general appearance, the Thylacine possesses the strongly tapered "carrotty" tail characteristic of many marsupials and of no other mammals. The gape of the jaw is phenomenal; surely nothing short of the old sabre-toothed tiger would be capable of such a yawn.

—David Fleay, photo.

grass and sedgy plains, interspersed with dense forests, scrub-covered hills, and innumerable creeks born of melting snow on the nearby peaks. Here one may see to perfection the Antarctic rain-forests for which western Tasmania is noted. Occasionally, one comes upon shrubs gay with blossoms, especially the waratah and native laurel, or trees festooned with flowering climbers, but mostly one may travel for miles and see nothing but the varied greens of the beech foliage and the deep gloom of its tangled recesses, from which moisture is never absent and where seldom a note of a bird breaks the silence.

HAUNT OF THE THYLACINE

It is in such areas that the Thylacine still lives, and hunts its prey along the game trails that intersect both forest and plain. The expedition of which I was privileged to be a member, confined its investigations to this mountain-hemmed district between the Frenchman's Gap and the Jane River, and found a number of traces of the marsupial, thus proving that it was far from being as uncommon as was supposed previously.

In no district, of course, can it be said to over-run the country; probably in the aggregate there would be only one pair to many square miles of territory, but that it is fairly well distributed over the western and south-western parts of Tasmania is beyond question. In the 100 miles or so that we covered during this investigation, we saw several footprints of the Thylacine, and though some of these may have related to one animal, or rather a pair, since it generally hunts in pairs, it was not unreasonable to estimate that the district contained as many as half a dozen pairs. And the area of our search was but a comparatively small section of "Thylacine country," which extends in one direction for more than 100 miles to the southern extremity of Tasmania, and in another for about 150 miles to the island's north-western corner.

While the Thylacine today is confined to these mountainous and unsettled parts of Tasmania, and is probably finding the amount of game there barely sufficient for its needs, not so many years ago it was well distributed throughout the State, and had a price upon its head for its depredations among settlers' flocks.

PROTECTION FOLLOWS DECIMATION

The Government paid a reward of £1 a head for all scalps that were deposited at a police station. The animal was pursued relentlessly by shepherds and trappers until most of the sheep runs were rid of it, and those that were left were forced to take refuge in the remote western districts where they are now making their final stand.

Today, as against rewards offered for its capture, the Government imposes penalties for its destruction. Conservation is the watchword. But so rapidly has the

Thylacine diminished in a period of about 50 years that unless conservation catches up with and overtakes this dwindling rate there must come a time when ultimately the last Thylacine will have disappeared, and Science will be the poorer for its passing.

The expedition was arranged with the object of making a preliminary biological survey of the western country and its Thylacine inhabitants, in order that conservation might be expedited. Influenced largely by the interest manifested in the Thylacine's welfare by the Royal Zoological Society and other scientific bodies in Sydney, which had offered to contribute towards the cost of its preservation, the Animals and Birds Protection Board of Tasmania arranged for me to accompany the field party that was despatched in the spring of 1938 to examine the country about the Jane River and the Frenchman's Gap.

IN THE TIGER COUNTRY

Areas to the north of this district had previously been examined and proved to contain a sprinkling of the Thylacine and other marsupials, including the voracious "devil," a small, dog-like creature quite distinct from the "tiger." But the country to which we were heading was zoologically a *terra incognita*, and for this reason there was considerable speculation about what we might find.

None of us expected to discover Thylacines in any quantity, for reports had come from mineral prospectors living along the Jane River that game was not plentiful. Nevertheless, when we climbed over the northern rim of the amphitheatre and descended to the button-grass plains and beech forests we found tracks of the Thylacine every few miles, the front feet, each with five claw-tipped toes, having left excellent impressions in soft parts of the track and the numerous intersecting wombat trails. From some of these footprints we made casts with plaster of paris brought for the purpose. As the toe marks were well defined and the claws had been pressed deeply into the mud, the plaster casts when taken from the ground resembled dental plates, with the claw impressions, now in reverse, projecting like teeth.

The five toes, each on the same level, served to distinguish the footprints as those of Thylacine and not those of any of the semi-wild dogs that roamed the district, because the first toe of a dog's front foot, or hand, is an inch or two higher than the others, and therefore does not make contact with the ground.

RETREATS ON MOUNTAINS

The high and broken ridges on either side of our course were doubtless the sleeping quarters of the Thylacine. Torn and jagged through the disintegrating action of frost and snow and running water, they contained many crevices and fissures in which such an

Members of the expedition halt to examine footprints in the dense Antarctic rain forest of beech and sassafras near the Jane River, south-western Tasmania.

—M. S. R. Sharland, photo.



animal could find a safe retreat, and they were further protected by areas of dense, prickly scrub that made the task of climbing to them extremely arduous and exacting. Laden as we were with heavy packs, we

avoided this rough going as much as possible.

The Thylacine is a timid and somewhat cowardly animal, and would rather run than fight. Although it might attack a person when cornered or defending its young, it has rarely been known to do so, and most stories about its "ferocity" are exaggerations. But as we did not come face to face with it there was no opportunity of judging its true character. Strenuous exertion by day in traversing broken country, wading through cascading streams, or floundering over muddy plains, and the many pitfalls in the forest after dark, were not conducive to nocturnal rambling in search of an elusive hunter to which the darkness was as second nature.

There was evidence enough in footprints to prove that it inhabited the country and ranged over the mountain slopes nightly in search of game, and this evidence also told us one night during our stay in a pine-cutter's shack on the banks of the Jane River that one had been inquisitive enough to encircle the place and come near to sniffing at the chinks between the slabs that formed the wall.

CONSERVATION PLANS

It is hoped that one result of the expedition will be the reservation by the Tasmanian Government of a large area of western country as a faunal sanctuary, where the Thylacine will be free from molestation by trappers or casual shooters, to whom the new West Coast road has opened up game country, mineral lands, and fine hardwood forests which were hitherto inaccessible. The Thylacine never is likely again to be a menace to sheep, and is definitely of interest to Science. With its natural boundaries, as already described, its unsuitability for agriculture, and fair game supply, the vast amphitheatre into which the expedition penetrated, and an adjoining area enclosing the Collingwood range and the Franklin River, possess all the elements necessary for successful game conservation, and the Government will probably be recommended to proclaim this district a sanctuary.

The Tasmanian authorities naturally are jealous of their unique marsupial. While appreciating offers of assistance from scientific bodies towards conservation,



The Thylacine — a front view, showing the powerful forelegs and chest, and all five claws touching the ground.

—David Fleay, photo.

they are not disposed to regard with favor plans for its export to other States for breeding in captivity with a view to building up its numbers.

However, as zoological authorities are anxious to obtain specimens, and as special facilities are said to exist that would ensure the success of a breeding experiment, it might be desirable to export one or two pairs for this purpose. If the Tasmanian people are not prepared to part with any of the animals under these conditions, then it behoves them to see that the Thylacine has real and effective protection in its native State and is permitted to live unmolested in the region to which it has now been driven.

• THE WILDFLOWER GARDEN

An All-Australian Hedge

by EDWARD E. PEScott

Now is the time to consider planting a hedge (if you do not already possess one) or to replace your present hedge (if it is past its prime). The following hints on the use of Australian shrubs and bushes for this purpose apply to practically all parts of the Commonwealth. They were prepared specially for "Wild Life" readers by Mr Pescott, a former principal of the Burnley (V.) School of Horticulture, immediately before his recent departure for England.

WHY should not Australian shrubs and trees be used for hedges? And if the plants selected for the hedge are flowering plants, so much the better. Possibly the Australian plant longest in use for this purpose is the sweet or undulate *Pittosporum*; this plant readily adapts itself to hedge conditions, and especially to cutting. Indeed, many people who have *Pittosporum* hedges are unaware that the plant is Australian, probably because of the prevalent (and quite erroneous) impression that all Australian plants are shy "doers" under garden conditions.

Pittosporum is easily raised from seed, by planting in boxes or pans; and owing to the popularity of the seeds with the birds, seedlings spring up in gardens in unexpected places. There is a pretty variegated variety that arose as a sport, but this will not breed true from seed. It must be raised from cuttings, selecting short terminal growths, removing most of the leaves, and planting in pots in autumn. It is not too late to start now.

It is necessary, in selecting a plant for a hedge, that it should retain its lower laterals and branches right down to ground level, and that it should be evergreen