

# In search of the Tasmanian tiger

**DESPITE earnest study, and extensive scholastic travel, I was forced to face the uncomfortable fact that I was making little progress towards passing my Diploma of Veterinary Cryptozoology exams.**

Yet without doing so, I had no chance of realising my goal of becoming the first RCVS Recognised Specialist in the medicine and surgery of those unfortunate animals considered extinct, or otherwise non-existent, by mainstream biologists.

Something seemed to be impeding my progress, but what? As I gazed into the night, icy sleet battering the windows of my London flat, it occurred to me that perhaps I had focused unduly on the cryptozoological species of the Northern Hemisphere.

My scholastic expeditions in search of the European yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis yetii*, the Irish leprechaun, or leithbrágan, and even Scandinavian elves, or ælfen, have all been previously



The author near Cradle mountain.

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chronicled in this esteemed journal.

Yet, I had unjustly neglected the cryptozoological species of the south. I resolved henceforth to make haste for Australia, where by an entirely unrelated coincidence it happened to be midsummer.

## Thylacine ecological history

The most southerly cryptozoological species reported within my texts appeared to be the Tasmanian Tiger, or *Thylacinus cynocephalus* – the largest known carnivorous marsupial of modern times. An apex predator, it

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continues his series on 'CPD with a difference' with an account of his search for a species believed extinct - but of which many unofficial sightings persist

occupied a similar ecological niche to the tigers and wolves of the Northern Hemisphere.

Although unrelated, it displayed a similar form and adaptations through convergent evolution, including powerful jaws, sharp canines and incisors for seizing and slicing prey, and a fast, powerful body. Interestingly, its muscular stomach was extensible, allowing it to eat large amounts of food at one time, which gave me a curious sense of affinity with this wonderful, misunderstood creature.

Once ranging as far north as New Guinea, the thylacine was almost entirely restricted to Tasmania by the time of European arrival. To our deep shame, we then proceeded to hunt it to the edge of extinction. Although hundreds of unofficial sightings have been reported since the last official specimen died a lonely death in Hobart Zoo in 1936, none has ever been confirmed.

Prizes of up to \$Aust1.75 million for the capture of a thylacine – which would, thankfully, be illegal under protective legislation – were never claimed. Yet, rumours of their presence persist, to this very day.

## Modern thylacine research

To locate any surviving thylacines, I would need to search the wildest, remotest parts of an island already dominated by wilderness. That clearly meant the infamous Overland Track. This 100km (with side-trips) mega-hike traverses the pristine Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, the heart

of the Tasmanian World Heritage Wilderness Area. Most of it was several days walk from the nearest road, and completely cut off from civilization.

There would be no electricity, hot showers, chocolate or soy lattes available throughout this massive sub-alpine wilderness, and mobile phone reception could only be achieved by climbing the tallest mountains in Tasmania – and maybe not even then.

How on earth would this pampered veterinarian survive? My longest previous expedition had been a day walk in Snowdonia, and I measure my inter-soy latte intervals in hours, rather than days.

Some very serious soul-searching was clearly called for. How badly did I want to be a veterinary cryptozoologist, really? Could I live for a week without chocolate? What about a hot water bottle? Looking deep into my heart, I knew that my choices would define me as a man.

And so we filled massive packs with tents, dehydrogenated meals and survival gear. In the spirit of honesty I informed my partner that in a survival situation I'd be forced to eat the smallest person, which resulted in me staggering under half her load as well, in a punishment I thought rather unfair.

Finally we arrived at the last outpost of civilization: the Ronny Creek Visitor Centre café. After a desperately large final meal of chips, coffee and other culinary delights (albeit assisted, in my case, by an extensible stomach), we shouldered our packs and set forth into "questionable"-looking weather.

## Midsummer in Tasmania

Unfortunately, any questions about the weather were soon resolved, as we slowly ascended under massive loads (at least, in one case) toward the high alpine plateau.

Freezing conditions eliminated our enthusiasm to detour to the summit of world-famous Cradle Mountain, which by then was completely hidden within ominous-looking

clouds. Instead, we trekked for hours through beautiful, albeit largely invisible, terrain, finally battling our way through snow flurries to the haven of Waterfall Valley Hut.

Thank God it was midsummer, I reflected. Although I'd travelled the rest of Australia, this was why I'd never yet dared visit Tasmania. The realisation that I was almost missing English weather snapped me upright, with a sudden jolt of fear. I was obviously becoming hypoglycaemic. Or hypothermic. Or perhaps delirious. Urgently, I tore the Kendal Mint Cake from my emergency supplies, whilst my partner fired up the butane stove. The solid infusion of sugar and peppermint soon restored my equilibrium, as I knew it would.

The next morning we were greeted by the terrifyingly beautiful sight of snow crystals piled half-way up the windows. I was beyond awe at the brave souls who had scorned the safety of the hut, preferring instead to camp on the picturesque terrain outside.

Plans to detour to another summit were rapidly revised, in the face of the ongoing blizzard now raging above. Instead, we headed down to the relative comfort of the valley. It was time to get acquainted with mud.

## Mud, Tasmanian-style

Tasmanian wilderness mud is legendary. Yet very strict rules exhort hikers not to detour from tracks, thereby damaging virgin terrain. Fortunately, it was midsummer, so the pools we consequently staggered into (depth-judgement was impossible, in the inky water) tended not to swallow us whole.

Nevertheless, we rapidly learnt the



Thylacines at the Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart, 1910.



Acropolis summit spires.



*A mysterious footprint near the summit of Mt Ossa.*

true value of gaiters and waterproof boots. We were, however, extremely privileged to be truly away from civilisation, heading into the heart of pristine wilderness, I reminded myself yet again.

The following days were a coldly beautiful blur of lakes, mountains, forests and rugged heathland. A side-trip to the summit of Mt Ossa, Tasmania's highest peak, briefly resulted in phone reception, and a quick call to let Mum know we were still alive.

A photo of a mysterious (if slightly embellished) paw-print in the snow near the summit caused great excitement in a hut that night, amongst some of our more trusting hiking companions, bless them.

These visitors to our magnificent country from the distant corners of the Earth listened with rapt attention to my descriptions of the thylacine.

Particularly, the bits about the potentially massive size of this ambush predator (the largest measured specimen was 290cm (9.5ft) from nose to tail), and its unusual ability to open its jaws 120 degrees wide, thereby displaying all of its razor-sharp teeth to those it is about to consume.

### **Avoidance of clinical responsibility**

Christmas came the next day, bringing the ultimate excuse for avoiding protracted family lunches. Or even, for that matter, any relatives at all! And best of all, out-of-hours holiday cover. Let my practice find me now, I thought. Heh heh...

Yet, it seemed that I could not entirely escape my clinical responsibilities, even in this far-flung corner of the Earth. Arriving at the end of a long trek on day 6, we found Michael in one of the remotest huts. The day prior he had unbalanced under the weight of his massive pack (a common, embarrassing problem), and fallen from a log, onto his arm. Extremely swollen flesh protruded from massive holes in his ragged dressing. Yet, he was ignoring the pain, and had just climbed the Acropolis, the most fearsome peak on the entire route!

Accordingly, I had him lower his

arm into a nearby stream (i.e. ice-water) for 10-15 minutes, before re-dressing his massive biceps. He then grabbed his heavy pack and fearlessly marched off into the wilderness once more, with instructions to find a suitable stream every few hours and repeat.

Shortly afterwards I was informed that he was actually a novice opera-singer, which just goes to show that you can never make assumptions about people and their professions.

### **Value of deodorant**

Stories of marauding pack-eating rats in the visitors' book at the final hut encouraged us to push on to the finish, resulting in an epic, 25km slog. Finally, we reached Cynthia Bay at the end of Australia's deepest (glacially-gouged) lake, and descended onto the Visitor Centre café like ravenous thylacines.

Yet, although our companions and ourselves had encountered Eastern quolls, pademelons (wallabies), tiger snakes, possums, wombats, giant bumble-bees, friendly leeches and beautifully-coloured cockatoos, rosellas, robins and butterflies, unfortunately no



*Pademelon and joey.*

thylacines did we see.

However, as I faced the appalling sight of a mirror, for the first time in a week, it occurred to me that these highly evolved predators could probably smell us. Or me, at least, from a mile away. Unfortunately, I had yet to develop the intestinal fortitude required to fully immerse myself in the ice-river rather forcefully requested by my partner, some three days ago.

Therefore, the results of our survey could not really be called conclusive. The elusive thylacine may still be out there, somewhere. And so I resolved to return one day, as soon as they invent more advanced research equipment. Like a miniaturised soy latte machine, hot water bottle and hot shower. Perhaps if my practice tries to roster me on, next Christmas...

# can't cope?

Met. H. H. H. H. H.  
 Family. H. H. H. H. H.  
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