



Thylacine

Thylacinus cynocephalus

Despite its fame, the thylacine is one of the least understood of Tasmania's native animals. European settlers were puzzled by it, feared it and killed it when they could. After only a century of white settlement the animal had been pushed to the brink of extinction.

Most people thought that it was a rather dull kind of native dog, or 'hyaena'. In fact, any resemblance between the thylacine and dog is a coincidence of nature (convergent evolution). The thylacine is a marsupial and its closest relative is the Tasmanian devil. Like all marsupials, it raised its young in a pouch.

Extinct or not?

Officially unseen since 1936 the thylacine is now technically classified as extinct but continues to 'survive' through myth and unsubstantiated sightings, even from mainland Australia.

Little is known about this fascinating animal — the largest of modern, carnivorous marsupials. All that we know is based on old records of sightings, pictures, bounty and limited zoological data.

What were they like?

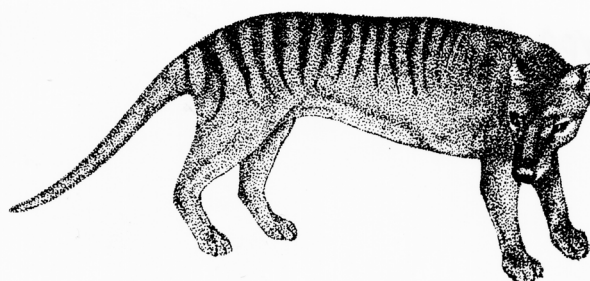
The thylacine looked like a large, long dog, with stripes, a heavy stiff tail and a big head. Its scientific name, *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, means 'pouched dog with a wolf's head'. Fully grown it measured about 180 cm (6 ft) from nose to tail tip, stood about 58 cm (2 ft) high at the shoulder and weighed up to 30 kg. The short, soft fur was brown except for 13 - 20 dark brown-black stripes that extended from the base of the tail almost to the shoulders.

The stiff tail became thicker towards the base and appeared to merge with the body.

Thylacines were usually mute, but when anxious or excited made a series of husky, coughing barks. When hunting, they gave a distinctive terrier-like, double yap, repeated every few seconds. Unfortunately there are no recordings.

The thylacine was shy and secretive and avoiding contact with humans. Despite its common name, 'tiger' it had a quiet, nervous temperament compared to its little cousin,

the Tasmanian devil. Captured animals generally gave up without a struggle, and many died suddenly, apparently from shock. When hunting, the thylacine relied on a good sense of smell, and stamina. It was said to pursue its prey relentlessly, until the prey was exhausted. The thylacine was rarely seen to move fast, but when it did it appeared awkward. It trotted stiffly, and when pursued, broke into a kind of shambling canter.



Breeding

Breeding is believed to have occurred during winter and spring. A thylacine, like all marsupials, was tiny and hairless when born. It crawled into the mother's rear-opening pouch, and attached itself to one of four teats. Four young could be carried at a time, but the usual litter size was probably three. As the pouch-young grew, the pouch expanded, and became so big that it reached almost to the ground. Large pouch-young had fur with stripes. When old enough to leave the pouch, the young stayed in a lair such as a deep rocky cave, well-hidden nest or hollow log, while the mother hunted.

Thylacines lived in zoos for up to nine years, but never bred in captivity. Their life expectancy in the wild was probably 5-7 years.

What did they eat?

The thylacine was a meat-eater — in fact, the world's largest marsupial carnivore since the extinction of *Thylacoleo* the marsupial 'lion'. Its diet is believed to have consisted largely of wallabies, but included various small animals and birds.

Since European settlement, the thylacine also preyed upon sheep and poultry, although the extent of this was much exaggerated. Occasionally, the thylacine scavenged.

In captivity, thylacines were fed on dead rabbits and wallabies, which they devoured entirely, as well as beef and mutton.

Where did they live?

Fossils and Aboriginal rock paintings show that the thylacine once lived throughout Australia and New Guinea. The most recently discovered thylacine remains have been dated as being about 2,200 years old. Predation and competition from the dingo may have contributed to the thylacine's disappearance from mainland Australia and New Guinea.

Bass Strait protected a relict population of thylacines in Tasmania. When Europeans arrived in 1803, thylacines were widespread in Tasmania. Their preferred habitat was a mosaic of dry eucalypt forest, wetlands and grasslands. They emerged to hunt on grassy plains and open woodlands during the evening, night and early morning.

Why are they extinct?

The arrival of European settlers marked the start of a tragic period of conflict that led to the thylacine's extinction. The introduction of sheep in 1824 led to conflict between the settlers and thylacines.

- 1830** Van Diemens Land Co. introduced thylacine bounties.
- 1888** Tasmanian Parliament placed a price of £1 on each thylacine's head.
- 1909** Government bounty scheme terminated. 2,184 bounties paid.
- 1910** Thylacines rare — sought by zoos around the world.
- 1926** London Zoo bought its last thylacine for £150.
- 1933** Last thylacine captured, Florentine Valley, sold Hobart Zoo.
- 1936** World's last captive thylacine died in Hobart Zoo, (7/9/36).
- 1936** Tasmanian tiger added to the list of protected wildlife.
- 1986** Thylacine declared extinct by international standards.

Do they still exist?

In 1863, John Gould, a famous naturalist, predicted that the Tasmanian tiger was doomed to extinction. 'When the comparatively small island of Tasmania becomes more densely populated, and its primitive forests are intersected with roads from the eastern to the western coast, the numbers of this singular animal will speedily diminish, extermination will have its full sway, and it will then, like the Wolf in England and Scotland, be recorded as an animal of the past...'

Bounty records indicate that a sudden decline in thylacine numbers occurred early in the 20th century. Hunting and habitat destruction, leading to population fragmentation, are believed to have been the main causes of extinction. The remnant population was further weakened by a distemper-like disease.

Since 1936, no conclusive evidence of a thylacine has been found. However, the incidence of reported thylacine sightings has continued both in Tasmania and occasionally from mainland Australia. Most sightings occur at night, in the north of the State, in or near areas where suitable habitat is still available.

Further Information

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