

# In Pursuit of the Thylacine

By *Eric R. Guiler*

The thylacine, now confined to Tasmania, is not only one of the rarest but also one of the most elusive animals. The accidental killing of one in 1961 prompted the Tasmanian Animals and Birds Protection Board to follow up the detailed records it had been collecting over the years with a field investigation. Aided by a grant from the government, the expedition set out in October, 1963, led by Dr Guiler. The thylacine, however, maintained its reputation for elusiveness.

**T**HE thylacine *Thylacinus cynocephalus* was once widespread in southern Australia.<sup>3</sup> In recent times it has become extinct on the continent and is now confined to Tasmania. It does not occur on the Bass Strait islands and has never been recorded there in historic times.

In Tasmania thylacines were once found from the coast to the mountain tops,<sup>6</sup> but by 1863 Gould noted that they were confined to the mountain tops and the more inaccessible parts of the island. In spite of this thylacines apparently killed numbers of sheep throughout Tasmania, and in 1888 Parliament agreed to pay a bounty of £1 per head for each animal killed, and 10/- for every pup. Between 1888 and 1909, the last year in which a bounty was paid, 2,184 bounties were paid.<sup>5</sup> It is believed, however, that the bounty was not the main reason for the decline of the thylacine, but that alteration of the habitat, together with a possible disease, contributed to their reduction. The population appears to have reached a maximum about 1900-01; in 1905 a rapid decline set in and by 1914 thylacines were no longer common. In 1930 a close season was declared for the month of December, then believed to be the month in which breeding took place, but it was not until 1936 that the species was given the complete protection which it enjoys today. Between 1914 and 1930 there were a number of confirmed killings and captures, the last at Mawbanna in April, 1930. Since then there have been several claims of captures, but none has yielded a specimen. There have also been many claims of sightings from many parts of the State, some undoubtedly correct.

To search for positive evidence of the thylacine three expeditions were organised, described by Sharland,<sup>8</sup> Fleming<sup>2</sup> and Fleay.<sup>1</sup> Two of these expeditions, in 1937 and 1938 to the Raglan Range and Cardigan River area and the nearby Jane River area, found only footprints. The third in 1945 and 1946 worked the same area with equally meagre results, which shows how much work has to be done to capture these elusive creatures.

The Animals and Birds Protection Board keeps a file of alleged sightings and other evidence of the thylacine, and each sighting claim is investigated both in the field and by interrogation of the claimant. The field evidence usually consists of footprints, which are compared

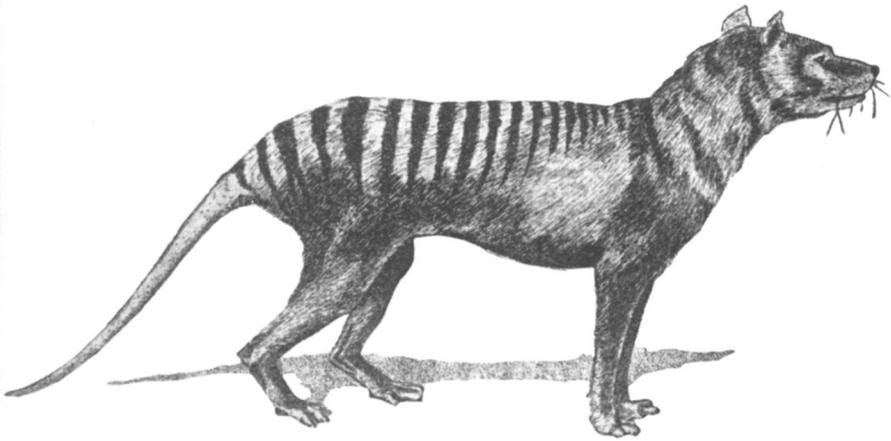
with the drawings of Pocock,<sup>7</sup> with plaster casts of all other known Tasmanian species and with casts made from museum specimens of thylacines. Droppings are frequently found and may be used in conjunction with the footprints. Rarely, a kill has been seen, recognisable because thylacines kill their prey in a characteristic fashion, opening the chest and eating the vascular tissues. In addition, research into the history and former distribution of the thylacine has been carried out.

The results of these investigations encouraged the idea that there were still thylacines in Tasmania. In 1961 a report of the accidental killing of a young male thylacine at Sandy Cape (West Coast) proved to be correct, and led the Board to approach the Tasmanian Government for money to organise an extended search for a thylacine. The Government granted £2,000, and in October, 1963, the field investigation began. This investigation was the logical development of the Board's previous research, and not an expedition specially organised for a brief period. The object was to establish beyond doubt, by capturing and photographing a specimen, that thylacines still exist in the Tasmanian bush. Snares were used, with treadles and springers activating a leg snare which does not harm the animal, and the work was carried out under my supervision and the direction of the Board's inspector, Sgt. G. J. Hanlon, B.E.M., who is an excellent bushman. Mr. R. Martin and Wildlife Officers R. G. Hooper and K. J. Harmon assisted him. The snares were set under the direction of Sgt. Hanlon; Mr. Martin was permanently in the field, accompanied for 10-day spells by one of the other three men and by Mr. L. Hanlon in the later stages of the investigation. Each snare was examined every day, and it was not intended to keep the animal in captivity.

### The First Attempts

We started work in October, 1963, at Green's Creek in the Sandy Cape area where thylacines were numerous during the bounty period. Here a 10-mile line of some 700 snares was placed on game tracks in and around consolidated sand dunes at the back of a very narrow coastal plain or sand dunes. We continued there until shortly before Christmas, when the summer holiday period made interference from hunters and fishing parties certain. We got no thylacines, but a variety of other species was captured, of which the most numerous in order of abundance were pademelon *Thylogale billardieri*, Bennett's wallaby *Wallabia rufogrisea*, wombat *Phascolomys ursinus* and Tasmanian devil *Sarcophilus harrisi*.

The search then shifted to Woolnorth, a private property on the north-west coast where thylacines were once very plentiful and where we have been recording sightings, footprints and droppings since 1956. The country here consists of coastal dunes and headlands with dense low scrub extending for some miles inland, and some cleared areas with improved pastures. Four snare lines of about 700 snares were set, and an additional 100 snares were set around the lair which was



***Drawing of a thylacine by Josette Gourlay***

discovered in February. Although this lair was believed to have been used by thylacines in the winter of 1963, the area yielded no better results than Green's Creek.

In April, the party returned to the west coast and set about 700 snares in the country to the north-east and south-west of Balfour. This area differed from either of the other two in that it was about 10 miles from the coast, and the vegetation ranged from very extensive areas of open buttongrass plains through various grades of forest to densely timbered gullies. In bounty days thylacines had been plentiful here, and footprints had been found two years before. But the area proved equally unrewarding. Unfortunately three members of the team were injured in accidents in the bush, and as the party was clearly becoming exhausted from the very long hours of work, together with the considerable distances that had to be walked continually, the project was terminated at the end of May.

During the project, in addition to the snaring, we investigated reports of sightings and also made field examinations of possible new areas for snaring. These were: south of the upper reaches of the Arthur River; between Macquarie Harbour and Port Davey; north of the Pieman River, and south of the Gordon River. None of them offered any possibility of success or, if there was a possibility, access was too difficult.

The thylacines' preference for open savanna woodlands—areas of dense rain forest have never supported large, if any, thylacine populations—makes the animal difficult to capture, for such areas contain few game trails suitable for snaring, a few thylacines lived on the open plains of the west coast, but here the problem is not only one of finding suitable places to snare but also of having a supply of

snare materials reasonably handy; saplings suitable for springers have to be transported many miles. At Woolnorth, for example, our springers were collected 90 miles away, involving the use of vehicles, and there are many similar physical limitations to any trapping project. No previous expedition had worked over such a long period, nor covered such a wide area of country with so great a concentration of snares, which not only emphasises the difficulty of capturing these animals, but shows the amount of physical labour necessary.

The Board proposes to continue investigations of sightings and to investigate further likely areas for snaring. We will also try to devise a better means of capturing a thylacine. At the moment we know of two positive lairs which are used intermittently by thylacines, and we know of many areas in the country where animals have been seen or tracked. We hope that our luck will change.

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*The drawing on page 309 is from the Photographic Library of the World Wildlife Fund.*

## Hunter's Antelope Seen in the Tsavo Park

THE good news that a small herd of seven Hunter's antelope were seen in the Tsavo National Park (East) in Kenya is announced in the latest IUCN Bulletin. It is nearly three years since 30 of these animals were transferred to the Tsavo because of the threat to the species of a large scale irrigation project in their range on the Lower Tana River, an operation that was described by Major Ian Grimwood, then Chief Game Warden of Kenya, in *ORYX*, April, 1964. Because they had not been seen since, it was assumed that they had either died or gone out of the park. But on April 9th of this year a single animal was seen near Maungu, and next day seven more, including four young which must have been born in the park, were sighted about eight miles south-east of Aruba. So there is hope that Operation Antelope was successful after all.