https://doi.org/10.26749/rstpp.106.1.119

THE THYLACINE ON THE CENTRAL PLATEAU

by J. Griffith

Launceston

INTRODUCTION

James Malley, a local dairy farmer-come-naturalist, and I, have been looking for the thylacine for the past 6 years or so. In that time we have spent about two years each on field trips, mostly in the northern half of Tasmania and on the south-west coast. Our major sponsors have been the Australian Conservation Foundation, the "Australian" newspaper, the Science and Industry Endowment Fund and the British Tobacco Company. Since June this year, with the assistance of Dr. Robert Brown, we have been conducting what we intend to be an exhaustive investigation of north-eastern Tasmania while investigating any leads that may come from elsewhere in the State.

It is difficult to put the thylacine into true perspective as there are so few facts available and so much legend and fantasy associated with this extraordinary animal.

Smith's early account of the thylacine (1909) is a typical version of the now much duplicated thylacine story. He mentioned the Central Plateau as seen in the following extracts from his account of the thylacine:-

"The pouch opens backwards .... the muzzle and dentition are very dog-like .... the lair is in the forest, either in an old stump or cave but the Tiger's favourite hunting grounds are the open plains between the forests and especially on the large sheep runs in the Lake District. The destructiveness of these animals is greatly enhanced by the fact that a Tiger will only make one meal of a sheep. .... It is a cowardly animal. The Shepherds wage incessant war on the creature, in the summer laying traps and hunting it with dogs, in the winter following up its tracks through the snow. A reward of a pound is given for the head by the government. Although the Tiger is by no means confined to the Lake District, it is more abundant there than anywhere else. The only cry uttered when hunting is described as resembling the whine of a puppy. The Tiger is helpless if

grasped by the tail ....."

This account may or may not be accurate.

Guiler (1961) showed that the government thylacine bounty records reveal that the Central Highlands yielded 663 thylacine which is about a third of the total of 2,184 bounties paid for the State during the period from 1888 when the bounty was introduced, to 1909 when the last bounty was paid. It should be noted here that the thylacine wasn't given final protection until 1938 - some 4 years *after* the last thylacine in captivity died in the Hobart Zoo, and 8 years after the last wild "tiger" was produced in 1930. As Guiler pointed out, the sudden drop in bounty payments from 153 in 1900 to nil in 1909 supports the theory of a thylacine disease outbreak rather than excessive hunting, causing the sudden disappearance of thylacine.

The reason for the apparent non-recovery of the thylacine since early this century is a matter of conjecture and in view of our experience I would like to comment on some factors that may have been and may still be involved.

CAUSES OF APPARENT NON-RECOVERY

Population Fluctuations

It seems that Tasmanian marsupials generally suffer drastic population fluctuations. They may have natural number-disease relationships rather than the usual predator-prey relationships. The ringtail possum is now relatively rare and the brush possum is common. In the 1930's the reverse was evidently the case. Many bushmen have reported that ringtails suffered from a disease during the early 1940's. Devils are in more or less plague proportions throughout Tasmania now and a disease outbreak would seem the most likely controlling mechanism. It has been postulated (Guiler 1958) that the thylacine, the devils and the tiger and native cats were all affected by a similar disease earlier this century. If this were so another disease outbreak amongst devils might kill any remaining thylacine. Man may have introduced new diseases which have affected the fluctuations.

Snaring and Poisoning

I know and have lived with some of the old bushmen and to illustrate this aspect I would like to give a typical

case history. A trapper who lives in the south-western part of the Central Plateau has snared the area for the last 14 years. Of wallaby snared in 1964, one third were mauled by raiding devils. On obtaining a permit to poison, the trapper poisoned, trapped and snared 140 devils in a fortnight, including a total of 19 in one particular snare. In 1969, he wiped nearly every devil out of the area by poisoning 50 possum carcasses along his four mile snare line. During the depression and even up to recent years snaring was a very common practice in Tasmania. This trapper claims there are no thylacine left in the Lake Country because his dogs have never found one, he has never snared one nor tracked one in the snow. When a boy he snared two "tigers" at Mole Creek.

Approximately 15 million wallabies and possums have been killed for fur in Tasmania since 1923. Snaring is practised in remote areas where the thylacine could be expected to be making a final stand. Although thylacine were caught in some varieties of snares, the associated practice of poisoning for the raiding devils along the snare lines has probably been a principal cause for the complete disappearance of thylacine in many areas. Snaring is practised in the winter months when the thylacine would be possibly ranging greater areas in search of food. They could thus be prone to feed on the poisoned wallaby carcasses left by the snarers. A number of 'old-timers' have told us that at times they had 'tigers' regularly visit their snare lines for the wallaby carcasses they had left. The hypothesis outlined above would account for several puzzling facts, e.g. why snarers apparently have not caught a thylacine over the last 30 odd years. Since 1930 the most promising sightings have, in fact, been in areas outside those of extensive snaring. Fleay (1946) reached a similar conclusion. Fleay's suggestion for saving the thylacine in 1946 was to "prohibit snaring in any form".

The use of 1080 by pastoralists and foresters is widespread. A major portion of the Central Plateau has long been used for stock runs which, with few exceptions, have been poisoned yearly, specifically for rabbits, firstly by strychnine, and since its introduction at least 10 years ago, by 1080. In the last few years rabbits haven't been as plentifull as before and the use of 1080 may have been decreased. At one stage, in the Lake Country, 1080 baits were dropped from aircraft. No thylacine could have survived on the Central Plateau proper. I am not aware of any forestry activity on the Central Plateau, but, in the North East, there are pine

plantations that are so dispersed that they involve all the remaining possible thylacine habitats. The foresters use 1080 to kill Bennett's wallaby that eat young pines and thousands of acres are poisoned every year on each plantation. At this stage we give the thylacine little chance of having survived these last 10 years in north-eastern Tasmania.

I have observed that Bennett's wallaby will travel up to six miles (10 km) from their camping grounds to their feeding grounds and that devils may travel for miles in a single night's foray. Thylacine would probably range even further. Such long forays would greatly enlarge 1080's effective killing range.

Habitat Alteration

The three main vegetation types of the Tasmanian wilderness are the so called myrtle forests of the *Nothofagus* or Antarctic beech, the eucalypt forests and the 'button grass' and 'white grass' plains. Most of the 'myrtle' forests, in my experience, remain today, relatively undisturbed by man. 'Myrtle forest itself doesn't support very much game. However it appears to play an important role in many of the remaining good game areas where it appears in association with other vegetation types.

In the rare patches of untouched eucalypt forest the floor of the forest is relatively uncluttered and open. However, in most places the forest is in various stages of regrowth with smashed trees and bulldozer tracks in all directions. In young regrowth country the growth is very thick and there is little sign of wildlife. Thylacine is unlikely to breed or live in association with logging activity.

Some of the 'button grass' and 'white grass' plains have a long history of burning off, probably dating from the time of the aborigines. We are repeatedly told by bushmen of supposedly open plains abounding in game only to find that they are now overgrown and with little sign of game. With these overgrown plains the alternatives would seem to be to leave them to return to forest or to recommence the periodic burning off. In the Lake Country with its special alpine plant communities, fires evidently destroy mossbeds and grass humus cover, in places leaving it to be replaced by poorer quality heath. Evidently the 1963 fire burnt out about one-

eighth of the Central Plateau, which must have been an ecological catastrophe for that area. Finally, many areas at first appear remote and undisturbed but turn out to be invaded by roads and tracks, and there are very few natural, undisturbed, good game areas left in the State. Man's invasion of the wilderness alone will soon make it impossible for any thylacine to survive, so that it is desperately important that we locate any remaining thylacine now.

PRESENT SURVIVAL

During a "Tasmanian 'Tiger' Exhibition" in Launceston lasting three weeks in June 1972, eighty-two sightings from north-eastern Tasmania were reported of which 64 were during the last five years and 20 were multiple sightings made by more than one person. About half of the sightings could be accounted for in four small areas. These were usually where a main road crossed a mountain range. The point is that there is an abundance of strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that thylacine survive.

A relevant aspect here is the possible nature of the thylacine. Although we track Tasmanian devils almost constantly, in the years we have spent in the bush, we have seen them running free in daytime on only two occasions. On one occasion we witnessed one dogging a paddymelon wallaby to exhaustion in the same way a thylacine is supposed to hunt its prey. At night, in car lights, devils are rarely seen as they are not 'held' by the light but dive for cover. As the devil and thylacine are closely related and have similar nocturnal habits, a few thylacine could possibly escape detection. It is generally misleading to think of Tasmanian marsupials in terms of other animal's habits as the habits of Tasmanian marsupials are often unusual.

It should also be appreciated that the character of the Tasmanian bush is unusual. Because the bush is so thick and the country is so rugged, distances are effectively larger than a map would suggest. I know, for instance, of 'white grass' plains with good game living in them that are only a few miles from a main road, but the intervening bush and country is such that they are effectively many miles away and experience no apparent inter-relationship with the road.

Further, the nature of the present development of previously remote areas does not lend itself to exposure of

any thylacine. Most encounters with thylacine in the early days were by bushmen who camped out on the job and did not travel home at night as the great majority do now. Thylacine were often described as being inquisitive and they would apparently follow bushmen through the bush or come around their camp sites at night. However, nowadays they would be more wary of man. He is often associated with machinery for instance, so that wildlife would have come to regard him as a monster rather than just another animal.

In solving the mystery of the thylacines' existence, the real problem is to investigate the phenomenon of sightings. North-eastern Tasmania has an excellent sighting history, is a geographical unit and was once a major thylacine area as revealed by government bounty records. To investigate this area we first had to undertake a major propagands program. This was to gain the necessary public co-operation. We wanted the opportunity of arriving on the scene of a sighting within hours of its occurrence. The complementary task was to investigate all those areas that the plot of past sightings suggested contained thylacine. Ideally to do this we survey and track the area thoroughly and use scent trails with electronic tracking devices set along them. This is the short term approach. For the long term we use fowl decoys with camera monitors. In north-eastern Tasmania in the June to August period 1972 we have not had one sighting where the sighter was adamant that he or she had seen a thylacine. This is contrary to what the history of sightings in the area would lead us to expect. We are planning to continue until the end of this year (1972).

Thylacine or any irrefutable evidence that they survive has yet to be found.

REFERENCES

Fleay, D., 1946: On the trail of the Marsupial Wolf. *Vict. Naturalist*, 63, 134.

Guiler, E.R., 1958: The Thylacine. *Aust. Mus. Mag.*, Sept. 15., 353.

Guiler, E.R., 1961: The former distribution and decline of the Thylacine. *Aust. J. Sci.*, 23, 7, 207-210.

Smith, G., 1909: *A Naturalist in Tasmania*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.