

Reports of alleged thylacine sightings in Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

The thylacine (Tasmanian tiger *Thylacinus cyanocephalus*) was Australia's largest carnivorous marsupial at the time of arrival of Europeans. The animal was the size and shape of a large dog. Thylacines lived in Tasmania until 1936 when the last one died in captivity at Hobart Zoo. There have been a few hundred sightings in Tasmania since then, but none have been confirmed in a scientific sense. The Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service considers that the thylacine is probably extinct in Tasmania. Fossil remains of thylacines have been discovered in all Australian States and New Guinea but they are considered by scientists to have been extinct on the mainland for some 3000 years. There have been alleged thylacine sightings in all of the mainland States but as in Tasmania, none of the sightings have been confirmed scientifically. This paper provides some data derived from 203 alleged thylacine reports from Western Australia, brought to the attention of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and/or the Mystery Animal Research Centre of Australia (MARCA) to 1998.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to report on alleged thylacine sightings reported to and/or held on file by the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Mystery Animal Research Centre of Australia to 1998. It is not intended to discuss individual sightings, or disclose the names of the persons who made the reports. Such details are available for many of the reports, notably in newspaper articles; some sighted by the author include the *Sunday Telegraph* [Sydney] (27 March 1977, p. 46), Douglas (1986), Harris (1984), Mannion (1995), de Moeller (1998) and Slee (1987). To 1998 a total of 203 alleged thylacine sighting reports (excluding duplicates) were recorded on the files of these two bodies, of which 138 were held by MARCA.

THYLACINE NATURAL HISTORY

Description

The thylacine (Tasmanian tiger *Thylacinus cyanocephalus*) is Australia's largest, recent, carnivorous marsupial. Its closest relatives are the Tasmanian devil and two species of quoll (Guiler and Godard, 1998). The thylacine is the size and shape of a large dog with a kangaroo like tail. Adult head and body length is typically 0.8–1.2 m, excluding the tail of 0.3–0.6 m. Some thylacines were allegedly 2.1–2.7 m in total length. Height at the shoulder was up to about 60 cm. The head of the adult is typically larger than that of a dog of the same size. The jaws of the thylacine are capable of opening very widely. Mature body

weight is often in the range 15–35 kg. Their colour was typically light or dark brown, with vertical dark stripes on the back but their bellies were much lighter, often cream. The number of stripes on mature thylacines varied from about 13 to 21.

Habitat and habits

Thylacines were most common in grassy plains, scrub and open forest. They were uncommon in dense forest. Thylacines were thought to be mainly nocturnal. Most of their prey were most active in the late afternoon to early morning. Thylacines were apparently not pack hunters. They usually hunted alone or in pairs, or small family groups of up to two adults and four young, preying on kangaroos, wallabies, small animals and birds. Single animals usually lay in wait and then jumped on their prey. They were capable of rapid speed over short distances to bring down their chosen prey. Their gait was not as smooth as that of a dog or fox and occasionally they hopped bipedally, like a kangaroo. Apparently they were able to leap like a dog or cat. Thylacines communicated using noises such as a cough, yip-yap, growl and whine. It is believed that the range of a thylacine family was typically some 40–80 square km. Tasmanian devils can move up to 16 km in a night, so it is likely that the larger thylacine would go even further. Like the devil, the thylacine was probably an opportunistic predator/scavenger, with a preference for killing its own food but also likely to eat fresh carrion. The thylacine was shy and secretive and avoided contact with humans. They were always rare and not often sighted by the public.

Thylacine history

The thylacine is a probably extinct marsupial, which formerly lived in a large part of the Australian mainland, Tasmania and New Guinea. Data indicating possible past distribution are provided in Archer, Clayton and Hand (1984) and Guiler (1985). Fossil records suggest that thylacines vanished from mainland Australia some 3000 years ago (Smith, 1982). It is possible that the thylacine disappeared from the mainland because of competition with humans and their hunting dogs (dingoes). Dingoes did not occur in Tasmania, where thylacines still existed at the time of European settlement in 1803. Thylacines were probably always a rare animal in Tasmania. The first thylacine was not captured until 1808, five years after the settlement of Tasmania and the last recorded thylacine capture was in 1933. Data presented by Guiler (1985) suggests that at least 55 thylacines were held in four Australian and six overseas zoos. Thylacines were blamed for the killing of sheep and poultry. Paddle (2000) examined early records of thylacine behaviour and has challenged some of the conventional theories about thylacines. Prior to 1829, there are few records of thylacines preying on sheep. Thylacines may have been a convenient scapegoat to account for farming losses. Losses caused by inappropriate European-styled husbandry combined with global economic conditions and agricultural prices. The Government introduced bounty scheme from 1888–1909 was paid on more than 2200 thylacines. Thylacine numbers were reduced due to the bounty scheme, land clearing, and possibly disease. The last recorded shooting of a thylacine was in 1930 (by Wilf Batty) and the last thylacine died in captivity in 1936.

Breeding

Thylacines are believed to have had one litter of two or three young per year. The pouch had four nipples. Mating occurred throughout the year, with a peak in spring and the young were carried in the backward opening pouch of the female for 4–5 months, after birth. The young were dependent on the mother until about half grown. When too large for the pouch, the young were left in the lair, while the adult pair hunted. Lairs have been described as rocky caves or under a bush.

THYLACINE SIGHTINGS

Since their apparent disappearance in Tasmania and during the last century, there have been many alleged sightings of thylacines, both in Tasmania and on the mainland. Alleged thylacine sightings in Tasmania to 1978 were covered in a paper by Smith (1981) and also by Rounsevell and Smith (1982). Details of alleged sightings in other States may not have been formally published in scientific journals but some informal data are available on the Internet and in newspaper articles. There have been hundreds of alleged thylacine sightings in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

WEST AUSTRALIAN SIGHTINGS

The alleged thylacine reports vary greatly in detail. Dates and times are available for some sightings, and some reports describe the animal's features and the habitat it was seen in. All reports describe the location of the sighting but few details are available for many of the sightings. Some reports have details about the quality of the sighting such as visibility, distance from the animal and number of seconds the animal was in view.

Years sightings made

Year of sighting is available for all 203 sightings (Fig. 1) but some are approximate. This paper covers sightings to 1998. The first sighting was made in 1936. Sightings ranged from 0 to 17 per year, with an average of about 3 sightings per year.

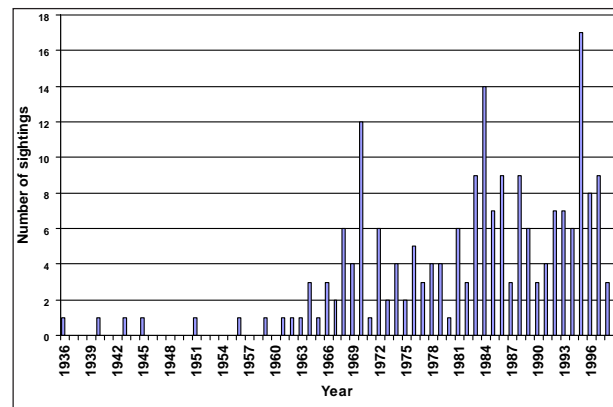


Figure 1. Alleged thylacine sightings by year.

Months sightings made

The month of sighting for 120 sightings, where this information was available is shown in a graph (Fig. 2). Sightings were made in all months, with the least in April (2.5%) and the most in July (12.5%).

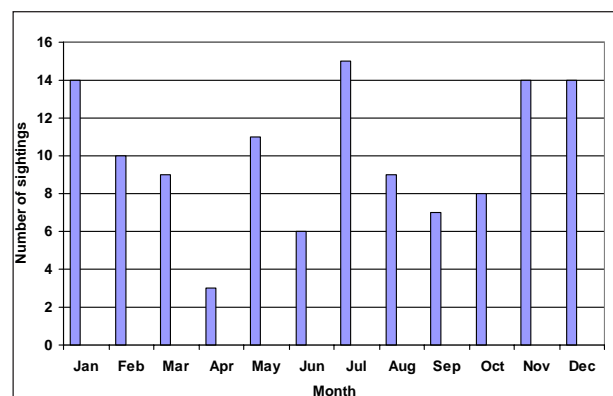


Figure 2. Alleged thylacine sightings by month.

Times sightings made

Timing of sightings are displayed for the 42 sightings for which this information is available (Fig. 3). Sightings were made at all times of the day and night. The most common sighting time was 10 am–midday (26% of all sightings).

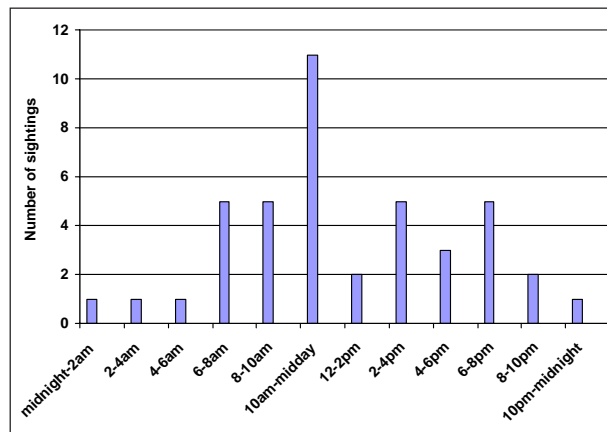


Figure 3. Alleged thylacine sightings by time of day.

Location of sightings

Most sightings have been in the south west corner of the State and within 80 km of the coast but sightings have been reported from the Ord River area in the north east of the State (one sighting) to the Nullarbor Plain in the south east (seven sightings). The map (Fig. 4) shows the location of the 195 sightings made in the south west corner. These sightings from Kalbarri to Esperance comprise 96% of the total sightings in Western Australia.

Multiple sightings from the same area

Some sightings are one-offs, by one person in one area. The actual number of persons who made the sighting is often not recorded but based on examination of the data, the average number of persons making each sighting was probably about two. For some locations there have been repeated sightings over a number of years by one person or a number of persons. Examination of the map (Fig. 4) shows that repeated sightings (5+) have been made near the following locations: Jurien (190 km NNW of Perth), Bullsbrook (40 km NNE of Perth), Mundaring (30 km ENE of Perth), Kalamunda (25 km E of Perth), Dwellingup (80 km SSE of Perth), Myalup (120 km S of Perth), Busselton (180 km SSW of Perth), Cowaramup (210 km SSW of Perth), Margaret River (220 km SSW of Perth), Nannup (210 km S of Perth) and Esperance (560 km ESE of Perth).

Distinctive features of thylacines

Thylacines display a number of features, which may assist in identifying them:

- vertical stripes on the back
- a kangaroo-like tail
- an unusual, ungainly walk.

Many of the reports covering alleged thylacine sightings refer to one or more of the above features. Some of the sightings refer to all of these features.

Thylacines have distinctive footprints (Guiler, 1985). The footprints of the thylacine are quite different from those of a dog, but resemble those of a Tasmanian Devil (but are generally much larger). Dogs have five foot pads, with a large rear pad and four front pads (about half the size of the rear pad), in two lines of two. Thylacines have a very large rear pad and four front pads (about one eighth the size of the rear pad), almost in a straight line.

Former distribution in Western Australia

Fossil thylacine remains have been discovered in limestone caves near the coast at Cape Range (600 km NNW of Perth), near Margaret River (220 km SSW of Perth) and between Balladonia (700 km E of Perth) and Eucla (1200 km E of Perth) on the Nullarbor Plain (Archer, Clayton and Hand, 1984). Alleged thylacine sightings have been reported near most of these locations.

If not thylacines, what animals have been sighted?

Some of the sightings were in poor light conditions. Many were fleeting sightings of a few seconds. The person making the sighting could have mistaken a dog, dingo, or fox for a thylacine. Dogs with aberrant patterns of colouration or mange could be mistaken for thylacines.

If thylacines exist, why hasn't a dead one been found, or a conclusive photograph been taken?

If thylacines do still exist in any of the mainland States, or Tasmania, there is likely to be no more than a few thousand specimens in the wild. Rare species are rarely seen in the wild and few live or dead specimens are found. Thylacines proved difficult to photograph in the wild and examination of the literature suggests that all of the photographs taken were of dead or captive animals. Photographs have been taken of alleged thylacines in the wild but none have been conclusive to date. Alleged thylacine photographs have been published in a scientific journal (Douglas, 1986) and in a newspaper (*Sunday Telegraph* [Sydney] 27 March 1977, p. 46). Realistically, however, photographs will never constitute conclusive proof that thylacines exist, and a live or dead thylacine will have to be produced, in order for the label of 'extinct' to be removed.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents some details of alleged thylacine sightings in Western Australia to 1998. Whilst over 200 sightings have been documented and it has been proven that thylacines have lived in Western Australia in the past, conclusive proof that thylacines live in Western Australia now is yet to be produced.

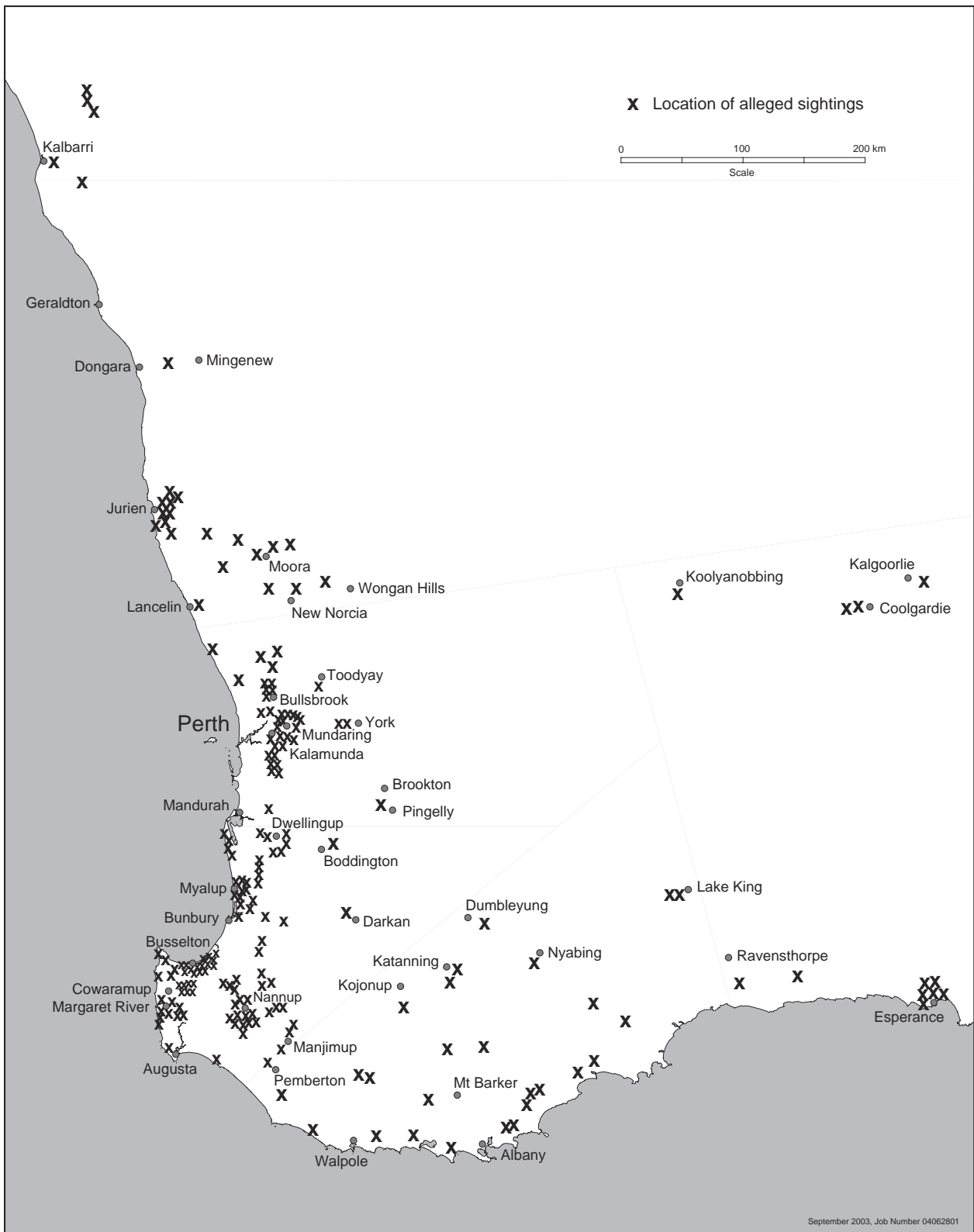


Figure 4. Alleged thylacine sightings in the south west of Western Australia.

September 2003, Job Number 04062801

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMER

The author would like to acknowledge the use of data on file at the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Kensington. The Department generally makes no attempt to validate or otherwise substantiate alleged thylacine reports and does not ascribe any such validity to them. The author appreciates comments on the first draft of this paper by Dr Ian Abbott and comments from two referees, Dr P. Christensen and Dr R. Paddle. The author would also like to acknowledge the use of data filed by Mystery Animal Research Centre of Australia (MARCA) and in particular, assistance provided by MARCA president Sharon West.

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