

INFORMATION SHEET



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Thylacine *Thylacinus cynocephalus*

One of Australia's best-known marsupials, the Thylacine (or Tasmanian Tiger as it is fondly known), has not been recorded for many years and is considered to be extinct. It probably became extinct on mainland Australia more than 2000 years ago due to competition with the dingo. But in Tasmania where the dingo does not occur it survived to recent times. The last known individual died in Hobart's Beaumaris Private Zoo (now closed) on 7 September 1936.

In 1808 the species was first described in a scientific journal by the Surveyor-General of Van Diemen's Land, George Harris, who named it *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, the 'dog-headed pouched-dog'. A sandy-yellow carnivorous marsupial about the size of a wolf, it had 15 to 20 distinctive dark bars across the rump. The forefeet each had five pads, and the hindfeet had four.

What was its distribution?

Thylacines are known from fossil records in mainland Australia and New Guinea, where they lived until fairly recent times. When Europeans arrived in Tasmania the species was well established, with a range extending from the mountain-tops 1200 m above sea level to the coast. It seems that it was never common in rainforest or the button-grass plains of the south-west of the island.

What did it eat?

The natural diet of the Thylacine seems to have consisted mainly of kangaroos and wallabies. It was a predatory hunting animal and would lie in wait for its prey. In captivity, Thylacines accepted almost any food they were given. European settlers introduced sheep to Tasmania and the Government was led to believe that they were attacked by Thylacines. As early as 1830

the Van Diemen's Land Company in north-eastern Tasmania placed scalp bounties on these marsupials. The Tasmanian Government followed in 1888, and Thylacines were killed in large numbers. Over 2000 scalps were taken in the period from 1888 to 1912.



The Thylacine
Artist: John Gould / Source: Museum Victoria

How did the Thylacine breed?

It is claimed that females retreated to a lair in a hollow tree or rock cavity to rear their young. The breeding season extended throughout winter and spring. Like other marsupials, they were born at an early stage of development and were carried by the mother for the first few months of life. In the backward-facing pouch there were four nipples, but usually a litter of two or three young were born and fed on milk in

the pouch. Young Thylacines stayed with the mother until they were at least half-grown.

What led to its extinction?

The government encouraged culling of Thylacines along with habitat degradation through land clearing led to a rapid decline in numbers of the species. The last animal taken in the wild was shot at Mawbanna in 1930, and the last captive animal died in 1936. Little biological information was obtained when the species was plentiful, and most of our knowledge of Thylacines is based on the observations of the naturalists of the day.

Supposed sightings of the Thylacine are still reported, and many expeditions have been funded in an attempt to relocate this legendary marsupial. To date, no reliable Thylacine sightings have been made.



Two mounted Thylacines on display in a Museum – the only place you'll see Thylacines today.
Photographer: John Broomfield / Source: Museum Victoria

Further reading

Dixon, J. M. 1991. *The Thylacine – Tasmania's Tiger*. Museum of Victoria, Melbourne.

Menkhorst, P. and Knight, F. 2001. *A Field Guide to the Mammals of Australia*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Paddle, R. 2000. *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The History and Extinction of the Thylacine*. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Strahan, R. (ed.) 1995. *The Mammals of Australia*. Reed Books, Sydney.

Internet resources

Museum Victoria's "Cloning Thylacines?" page
www.museum.vic.gov.au/scidiscovery/dna/cloning.asp

The Australian Museum's Thylacine page
www.amonline.net.au/thylacine/

The Sydney Morning Herald Thylacine tales
www.smh.com.au/specials/thylacine/
Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania
www.parks.tas.gov.au/wildlife/mammals/thylacine.html

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