

The Gunni (*Turpis maialis cimex*)

The Gunni (pronounced 'goon-eye') is a shy secretive animal that was thought to be a myth until a fossil was uncovered in 1930. Believing that it had long been extinct biologists were startled when one was found alive in 1946. This little known and studied animal has successfully hidden from the prying eyes of humans for decades, and while it may be extinct now, the possibility remains that a few individuals are still alive, hidden away in deep mountain valleys.

Early Reports

There have been many reported sightings of the Gunni, or 'Guni guni' to the local aboriginals, since European settlers first penetrated the Victorian Central Highlands as goldminers in the 1860s. Early sightings were thought to be the product of 'fertile imaginations' (the rough liquor often drunk by miners was also blamed), or simply mistaken for Hog Deer that had been released into Victoria in the early 1800s.

One account by eminent botanist Ferdinand Von Mulleur was published in the Melbourne Tribune 12th July 1882, causing a minor sensation and lending credibility to previous reports.

"17th May 1882. 10 pm...a sudden ruction erupted outside my tent with raised voices and much activity. Fearing the horses had pulled loose, I rose to investigate.

It seemed a strange creature had raided our camp. My footman, Joseph, described it thus: build and size were near that of a Badger, sporting dull colouring with a light stripe along its ridged back, brushy tail held erect, small upright ears, and horns or antlers about 8 inches long which it appeared to use to push through the thick foliage.

It had made for a pannier containing provisions, wasting no time in cutting through the thick leather with what must have been formidable teeth.

Before the men were able to alight and send the beast on its way, it was able to secure a substantial portion of the contents, devouring a quarter pound of salt meat, some potatoes and making off with a satchel containing pipe tobacco."

Fossil Remains

The Gunni was first discovered as a 10,000-year-old fossil, found in 1930 at Foster by noted biologist Herbert Kantral. Being a cold climate creature it was thought to have died out at the end of the last Ice Age about 8,000 years ago, as the Australian continent became warmer.

First Capture

In 1946 migrant workers on the Snowy Hydro Scheme near the town of Bogong captured the first live Gunni after it had been stunned by explosives used in the construction of a dam. The animal survived the concussing effects of the explosives but didn't take well to captivity and died a few days later.

This specimen provided the first 'hard' evidence that the Gunni was not extinct. In 1964 a bush walker from Melbourne named Charles Tupin became a minor celebrity when he found a dead Gunni in rainforest on the remote Errinundra Plateau. This specimen is currently on display in the Melbourne Mammal Museum.

The specimen on display here was found in 1967 by timber workers near Cambarville, just 16 kilometres from Marysville. This is one of only 3 specimens found to date.

Biology

The Gunni is a Marsupial, carrying its young in a pouch, and is thought to be omnivorous (eating both meat and plants).

Gunni live a long time compared to other marsupials of similar size with the three specimens estimated ages being 30, 50 and 35 when they died.

In spite of some resemblance to the Common Wombat, DNA sampling has shown the Gunni to be more closely related to the Tasmanian Devil, which also once inhabited mainland Australia.

Except for a few fossils, the three deceased specimens and a few dozen rough photographs, we know very little about this elusive animal and its habits. None have been studied in the wild and due to academic disagreement about its extinct status, proposals to search for and study the Gunni have not been able to attract government funding.

Is it still out there?

"This animal is classified as extinct, as is the Thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger). And like the Thylacine reports of sightings of the Gunni persist. However, unlike the Thylacine, the Gunni has proven to be very shy, its habitat is thick forest, and in the past it has survived long periods with very small population numbers. Are there Gunni still alive today? I can't rule that out."

Dr Barry Fenner

**Director of Marsupial Sciences
Melbourne Mammal Museum**



Several years of negotiation between local Parks staff and the Melbourne Mammal Museum has resulted in the loan of the 'Cambarville Gunni' to Mystic Mountains Tourism for public display. We would like to acknowledge the efforts of Richard Uden and Dr Barry Fenner of the Melbourne Mammal Museum for making this possible.

Wildlife Permit Number:
10000331

Wildlife must not be taken
from the wild