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Editor: L.E. Wall

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## FORESTRY OPERATIONS

One of the most significant Tasmanian news items of recent times received scant attention from the media, possibly because of the emotive current issues of the South West. It announced an intensive study, particularly by National Parks and Wildlife Service staff, of the ecology of Tasmanian forests and the effects of current practices adopted by forest-based industries.

These industries are of the utmost importance to Tasmania, both financially and environmentally, but little has been done to monitor the effects of their practices on the State's future. It is most heartening to see the growing realisation that the future of our forests could be in jeopardy and that firm steps should be taken now to safeguard them and their wildlife.

It is reassuring to learn that the industries themselves are backing financially the studies now under way and they should receive our full support. It is not widely known that the Forestry Commission and forest-based industries have jointly set up a substantial research fund for this purpose.

The recent Mant Report recommended the amalgamation of National Parks and Wildlife Service with many of the Lands Department functions without an increase in scientific staff: the additional workload now being undertaken by National Parks and Wildlife Service confirms our belief that the Service should be retained as an independent body and with more biologists at its disposal.

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## THE WEST COAST MONSTER, 1962

L.E. Wall

It is now twenty years since considerable publicity was given to the discovery of a large controversial animal on a remote beach on Tasmania's west coast.

Although much was written at that time all the events which led up to that publicity received no attention, and it seems pertinent that those events should be made known so that the record is complete. The following notes were prepared then but not published.

Early in March 1962 public interest was aroused by Press reports of a strange monster, as the Press called it, washed up on a lonely beach on the West Coast of Tasmania. A report of the presence of this creature first reached Hobart during February, and a private expedition was organised to go in search of it. The purpose of this expedition was purely exploratory to find out whether the creature was still there, and, if so, to assess whether a full scientific investigation was warranted.

The remains of the creature were found and the party reported to the Press on its return early in March that it was unable to identify the creature and recommended that such a scientific expedition should be sent to the spot. So great was the interest shown by people all over the world that an official expedition was organised and despatched about a week later. This expedition spent about two days at the site and then returned to Hobart where it expressed the opinion that the remains on the beach were none other than old whale blubber. No further official action was taken, and it was accepted that another mystery of the sea had been explained. However the full story of this strange incident has not been told, and it appears appropriate while the details are still fresh in our minds they should be faithfully recorded.

In June 1960 the creature was first seen by Mr. Jack Boote and Mr. Ray Anthony, both of Smithton, who were droving cattle down the coast to agistment areas in the vicinity of the Interview River just north of the Pieman Heads. Both these men have had long experience of the West Coast, and are familiar with animals and fish washed up on the beaches, but they immediately realised that this creature was something quite new to them. Ray Anthony's horse would not approach the animal closely, and he did not dismount, but Jack Boote was able to do so, and he examined the creature in fairly close detail and was able to supply an accurate description of it. It was about 20 feet long and 18 feet wide, and 4½ feet high, and he estimated its weight at about 7 tons. The highest part of the animal was at one end, and it tapered to the other where it was about 6 inches high. It had no recognisable head, tail or limbs, but at what is presumed to be the front end — that is, at the higher part, there were 4 distinct lobes of flesh, and these he examined in some detail. Between the middle pair was an orifice which he described as a mouth. It was smooth and gullet-like, but it had no evidence of teeth. Fatty globules were present in the orifice. As far as he could see there was no evidence of a skeleton of any sort, and the whole mass was composed of a tough tissue covered with hair or fur which he described as being like sheep's wool with a greasy feel. They likened it to a 3-months' growth of a Border Leicester sheep's fleece.

On either side of the mass, and about 4 feet from the supposed mouth, were four slits which appeared to be like gills. They were about four feet long and terminated about 2½ feet from the edge of the mass. Mr. Boote inserted his hand into one of these but did not reach the bottom. The rear end of the animal had its margins scalloped giving the effect of cushion-like pads about 2 feet wide and 18 inches deep, and each of these carried a single row of quill-like spines, sharp and hard, and about as thick as a pencil. It was impossible to make any further examination of the animal because of its bulk, but the two men returned to Smithton convinced that as soon as they made their find known scientific interest would be aroused and experts would go to the spot to examine it in detail and to have with them all the equipment which might be needed.

Mr. Boote reported his find to Mr. E.O.G. Scott, a former Director of the Queen Victoria Museum at Launceston, but received a reply suggesting that the animal was a sea elephant, and enclosing a sketch of that animal. Mr. Boote is familiar with sea elephants which are cast up on that coast periodically and he is quite convinced that that is not right.

Mr. Boote then rang C.S.I.R.O. Regional Office in Hobart and gave his description to Dr. D. Martin. Dr. Martin recalls the telephone conversation he had with Mr. Boote, but states that no mention was made of a width of 18 feet, and he also came to the conclusion that it was a sea elephant. Subsequently he discussed the find with Mr. J.L. Davies, of the University staff, who is also a specialist in the study of seals, and Mr. Davies agreed that in all probability his assessment was correct, and the subject was not pursued further.

On August 3, 1960, Jack Boote and Ray Anthony on a return trip to the Interview River area brought back with them a specimen of the fur of the animal in a tobacco tin, and showed it to Mr. Ben Fenton of Temma. This tin was subsequently lost between Temma and Smithton. Jack Boote commented at this time that the quill-like spines on the pads were beginning to disintegrate. The animal was seen again on September 6, 1960, by Jack Boote, Ray Anthony and Jim Malley, and on October 5, 1960, by Jack Boote, Ray Anthony and Ben Fenton, this being the first time on which Mr. Fenton had seen it.

As requested by Mr. Scott, Mr. Boote forwarded him a letter enclosing 2 drawings which Mr. Scott found of extreme interest. It is unfortunate that pressure of work prevented Mr. Boote from arranging for Mr. Scott to visit the find.

From that time we pass to April 28th, 1961, when Ben Fenton says that 'We looked for it in the original position but didn't see it', and again on July 19th, 'It could not be found'.

Then on October 7th, 1961, it was seen by Ray Anthony and Ben Fenton but at this time further south along the same beach, a distance of about ½ mile, but no more.

The next information about it came from Mr. Rex Cowper, of C.S.I.R.O. Fisheries, Division, who was in Devonport on February 1st, 1962, aboard the fisheries patrol vessel 'Penghana'. At the home of Capt. Dick Burgess that evening, together with Dr. and Mrs. A.G. Nicholls, and Fisheries Inspectors Ray Taylor and Peter Douglas, Dick Burgess related the report he had heard either from Jack Boote or Ray Anthony of Smithton of

their finding of an unusual animal almost 2 years previously. Mr. Burgess had in his possession a sketch which one of the finders had made from memory following questions which he (Dick Burgess) had asked concerning its appearance. On February 7th, 1962, the "Penghana" reached Hobart, and Mr. Cowper called at "Stowell", the headquarters of C.S.I.R.O. in Hobart, where he related to Mr. Max Bennett, of the Administrative staff, and Mr. Bill Mollison, of Wildlife Section, the information he had obtained from Dick Burgess. "Max Bennett made an appointment for me to call on Dr. Bryden at the Tas. Museum at 9 o'clock the following morning", writes Mr. Cowper. Dr. Bryden told him that he had heard previously of the reported find, and believed that a party that included Dr. Guiler had located an object at the reported place on the West Coast, and had identified it as the remains of a species of pigmy whale. At the time of Mr. Cowper's visit Dr. Bryden was organising an expedition to the West Coast, and stated his intention of including a further investigation of the animal in his expedition's programme. Meanwhile Bennett and Mollison had decided that an expedition should be made as soon as possible, and at Mr. Cowper's last meeting with them prior to his departure for Melbourne on February 8th, they were discussing ways and means of carrying this out.

They discussed this with a mutual friend, Mr. George Cramp, who was a Trustee of the Tas. Museum, and he agreed to finance an aerial search of the area to determine whether there was anything left. This was carried out in a light aircraft from Smithton on February 24th, with Mr. Jack Boote as a passenger, and the animal was found on the beach. Having satisfied themselves thus far the investigating party was organised, and left Hobart in the late afternoon of March 2nd, travelling as far as Wynyard that night. Next morning they continued to Smithton where they contacted Mr. Boote and arranged with him that he should join the party the next morning at Ordnance Pt., about 25 miles south of the Arthur River. The party then proceeded to the Arthur River, where its car was left in the charge of the ferryman, and the party was picked up by Mr. Ben Fenton of Temma, and taken in a 4-wheel drive lorry as far as Ordnance Pt. Mr. Fenton also made available a pack horse and a riding horse and with these the party left Ordnance Pt. at 5.45 p.m. on Saturday, March 3rd, to proceed to Sandy Cape, where they spent the night in a drover's hut.

Next morning Mr. Boote reached Sandy Cape just as the party was leaving to proceed south towards the Interview River, and he accompanied the party to the site of the animal, which is about 2 miles north of the Interview. Having located the animal Mr. Boote returned to Sandy Cape. The party remained at the site of the stranding and made a preliminary investigation of the animal the following morning.

The remains of the animal, embedded in the sand, proved to be about 6 feet long, 3 feet wide, and only a few inches above the sand level. It was impossible to reconcile the material that remained with the description given by the finders, except that portion of one lobe appeared to be recognisable on the shoreward or eastern side of the mass. The material appeared to be of a very tough rubbery consistency, brown in colour, with shredded fibrous material on the outside. Before Mr. Boote had left the site he had marked out on the sand what he considered to be the boundaries of the animal, and the next work was to dig test holes with a shovel to determine whether the material did

actually extend to that perimeter but below the sand. Just below the sand surface on all sides was black organic matter which was presumed to be decayed material from the animal and white fibrous strands were present throughout it. This black organic material extended almost exactly to the limits which had been marked by Mr. Boote on the previous day, and it gave off a very strong stench. Since leaving Sandy Cape the day before, the weather had been marked by strong N.W. winds with frequent driving rain-squalls, and either from this cause or from the tidal effect of the sea test holes which we dug were almost immediately filled with water, so that it was impossible to investigate the sand too deeply. Using an army machete we then cut a gash across the main mass of the flesh and removed small pieces to be taken home as specimens. So tough was the material that it took over an hour with a sharp machete to cut 10 inches deep into the flesh, which we found to be consistent throughout, and of a light cream colour. The flesh appeared to be composed of very tough fibres impregnated with fat, and it was apparent that the fibrous shreds on the outside was that part of the flesh which birds and animals which had been feeding from the flesh had not been able to tear away. It was obvious from the marks about the animal that both birds (probably seagulls) and Tasmanian Devils had been feeding quite freely from it, but apparently not making very much impression. The brown colour of the surface was the result of weathering of the material and it was in no sense an outer covering, or skin. There was no evidence of the fur which had been described by the finders in the early stages, and they had in fact told us that the fur had disappeared about a year before.

As it was apparent that we could not carry out any further investigations without adequate equipment to move the whole mass, and bearing in mind that the rain would be swelling the rivers and creeks we had crossed we determined to return to Sandy Cape as soon as possible and we left the sight of the stranding at about 11 a.m., reaching Sandy Cape hut before nightfall, a distance of about 15 miles. The following day we returned to Temma homestead, and the next, that is Wednesday, we continued our journey to Hobart, arriving very late that night.

During our return journey we debated very carefully what procedure we should follow next, and we were all convinced that no public statements should be made at that stage. However, on arrival in Hobart other counsels prevailed and we had an interview with the Press at 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, March 8th.

During that interview we stressed that what we had seen was but a small part of the original as described by the finders, but this point was not given the prominence it deserved so that the public generally believed that the whole animal was still lying on the beach. In other respects the local press report of the interview was a very fair one except that one of the headlines read "Nearly as big as a house", which of course was a gross exaggeration. The report also stated that the animal was initially covered with fine hair but it did not make it clear that this hair no longer existed. That may have been the fault of our description. We were careful not to claim that the animal was new to science, but to point out that the descriptions given to us by the finders, together with our inspection of the material on the beach, did not appear to fit any common animal or fish of the sea. We believed that the flesh that we inspected was not that of a whale bearing

in mind that it had been up on the beach for over 18 months and to the best of our knowledge whale blubber would have completely decomposed well before that period had expired, and this material was much tougher than whale blubber.

The speed with which the news spread, and the interest it aroused throughout the world, was remarkable, and within 24 hours it was making the headlines of the main countries of the world. Telephone calls were also coming in from as far afield as New York and London. The fantastic stories published in some newspapers caused a mass hysteria over the whole story, and at least two newspapers within Australia published aerial photographs of the animal lying on the beach which could not possibly have been true. In the two instances to which I refer the photograph was basically the same but the detail varied from one to the other, and neither was anywhere near correct. This gives some idea of the lengths to which some newspapers will go to present a good story. As we made clear during our press interview our main purpose in making this investigation was to arouse interest so that an official exploration would be made in an effort to ascertain its true identity.

The interest shown by the general public was so great that the formation of a scientific expedition was announced on Tuesday, March 13th. In the meantime one of the original party, Mr. B.C. Mollison, had returned to the "Monster" with a T.V. Cameraman, and he did some further digging, confirming what we had found on the first trip. He also cut further into the flesh with the aid of an axe and brought back with him another small piece of flesh. His further investigation confirmed the earlier belief that this animal was an invertebrate, there being no sign of any bone structure whatsoever.

The scientific expedition, consisting of Mr. J.H. Calaby of the Wildlife Section of C.S.I.R.O., Mr. A.M. Olsen of Fisheries Division of the same organisation, Dr. E.R. Guiler, Lecturer in Zoology in the University of Tasmania, and Dr. W. Bryden, Director of the Tas. Museum, was flown into the area on Thursday, March 15th, and the expedition returned to Hobart on Saturday, 17th. The report of their investigations was released that evening by the Minister in charge of C.S.I.R.O. (Senator Gorton) and the Premier of Tasmania (Mr. Reece).

Following this it was reported in the Press on March 20th (Tuesday), that the scientists had completed testing pieces of the "Monster". They believe that it is a big piece from a dead whale which could have fallen overboard from a whaling factory ship. They say there is no doubt that it is part of what once was a whale. So far as the scientific expedition is concerned the animal is now "dead".

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Short letters commenting on papers and notes previously published in this journal or any other items of natural history interest are always welcome. They should be forwarded to G.P.O. Box 68a, Hobart, 7001.

## BIRDS CRASHING INTO WINDOWS

L.E. Wall

Casualties from this cause are frequently presented to the Tasmanian Museum, and the question asked, "Why does this happen?". There are believed to be two reasons.

Firstly, and this mostly applies to corner windows, the bird sees through the two panes to the garden beyond where it wants to go, takes the direct route, and collides with the glass often causing fatal injuries.

The second reason is that where windows throw bright reflections a passing bird holding a territory there, probably during the nesting season, mistakes its own reflection in the window for an intruder of its own species and attacks it to drive it away. In this case the collision with the glass is not likely to be so severe and less damage, if any, to the bird results.

## GREAT CRESTED GREBES AT BRIDGEWATER

L.E. Wall

On 8 December 1981 a pair of these birds was seen near the bridge, not a common sight but not unique. I have previously seen them there in March 1960 and in October 1968.

It is well-known that Pittwater is a common refuge for them in the winter months particularly, but in other seasons they are seldom seen away from fresh water and have a strong preference for inland lakes.

## BUSHFIRE CASUALTIES

L.E. Wall

Following the disastrous bushfires which ravaged much of Southern Tasmania on 7 February 1967 the Curator of Wildlife at that time, Mr. J.H. Hemsley, gathered as much information as possible on the effects they had on native birds. Unfortunately this has never been published except for a very brief comment in *The Tasmanian Naturalist* No. 9, May 1967.

As part of this survey I searched the eastern end of Clifton Beach, which is about ten kilometres N.E. of the mouth of the Derwent River and facing Storm Bay, on 18 February. In the whole of the afternoon I covered only about half a kilometre. My notes read:—

"Apparently spread over whole beach: no doubt many more are already buried under the sand following subsequent southerly weather."

Names of species and numbers of each found were:—

|                         |   |                   |   |
|-------------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| Fairy Penguin           | 2 | Common Bronzewing | 1 |
| Short-tailed Shearwater | 3 | Swift Parrot      | 6 |

|                            |    |                    |    |
|----------------------------|----|--------------------|----|
| Black Duck                 | 1  | Green Rosella      | 26 |
| Spur-winged Plover         | 2  | Welcome Swallow    | 1  |
| Blackbird                  | 1  | Little Wattle-bird | 2  |
| Scarlet Robin              | 4  | Yellow Wattle-bird | 2  |
| Spotted Pardalote          | 11 | Goldfinch          | 4  |
| Yellow-throated Honeyeater | 5  | Greenfinch ?       | 1  |
| Black-headed Honeyeater    | 1  | Starling           | 1  |
| Crescent Honeyeater        | 3  | Black Currawong    | 3  |
| New Holland Honeyeater     | 7  | Unidentified       | 25 |
|                            |    | Forest Raven       | 4  |

Total species 22, total birds 116.

It is assumed that nearly all of these came from the western side of the Derwent where the principal fires were burning, and it is likely that they fell exhausted into the water as they fled from the fires and were subsequently washed ashore, possibly from some distance out in the bay.

It is most pleasing to see that the populations of birds in the devastated areas have returned to their former numbers in almost all habitats; the only exceptions may be in the alpine moors and in the dense fern gullies where the regeneration of the vegetation is very slow.

## DISTRIBUTION OF THE DELICATE SKINK

R.H. Green

Curator of Zoology

Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston

The Delicate Skink *Leiopisma delicata* was first recorded from Tasmania by Green (1965) who recorded its occurrence from several localities between Launceston, Greens Beach and Gladstone. Subsequent collecting (Rawlinson, 1974) has recorded it from near Sassafras, Mussel Roe Bay, Coles Bay, Triabunna and Hobart.

On 25 October 1981 an adult female (head and body length 40 mm, ovum undeveloped) was collected from beneath decaying timber on "Fairfield" 20 km south of Launceston. This record constitutes a significant extension to its known distribution and suggests the possibility that it may be found to occur throughout the midlands. Further collecting of small skinks is therefore desirable and can also be expected to produce interesting and useful information on many aspects of their life and habitats.

### References:

- Green, R.H., 1965: Two Skink Lizards Newly Recorded from Tasmania. *Rec. Queen Vict. Mus.*, No. 19.
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