

## Historical reports of quolls in Victoria's south-west

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### Abstract

The Eastern Quoll *Dasyurus viverrinus* is now extinct on mainland Australia, but was once common in south-western Victoria. It was persecuted by landholders for its predation of poultry, but also suffered dramatic declines in population through an unknown disease from about 140 years ago. Eastern Quolls were also considered significant predators of young European Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. The Spot-tailed Quoll *D. maculatus* was historically widespread though uncommon in south-western Victoria, but now is confined there to only a couple of sites. (*The Victorian Naturalist* 138(3), 2021, 78–85)

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### Introduction

Quolls are the largest, native, carnivorous marsupials on the Australian mainland. Three species are known from Victoria (Menkhorst 1995). The Eastern Quoll *Dasyurus viverrinus* (Fig. 1), now absent from the state, and the larger Spot-tailed or Tiger Quoll *D. maculatus* (Fig. 2) have been the most numerous. A third species, the Western Quoll *D. geoffroii* (Fig. 3), was collected during the Blandowski expedition in 1857, along the banks of the Murray River near Mildura (Wakefield 1966). This species is now confined to the south-western corner of Western Australia, a massive decline in its range since European settlement (Menkhorst 1995).

Quolls are very attractive marsupials, about the size of a Cat *Felis catus*—in fact Eastern Quolls were commonly called ‘native cats’ and



**Fig. 2.** Spot-tailed or Tiger Quoll *Dasyurus maculatus*. Image taken from Gould J (1974) *Australian marsupials and monotremes*, p. 111.



**Fig. 1.** Eastern Quoll *Dasyurus viverrinus* showing the two colour forms. Image taken from Gould J (1974) *Australian marsupials and monotremes*, p. 113.



**Fig. 3.** Western Quoll *Dasyurus geoffroii*. Image taken from Gould J (1974) *Australian marsupials and monotremes*, p. 115.



Fig. 4. Map of Victoria, showing main sites mentioned in text.

Spot-tailed Quolls were called 'tiger cats' by early settlers (Peacock and Abbott 2013). Abbott's (2013) extensive searches of historical sources found over 400 Aboriginal names for Australian quoll species and recommended adoption of Chuditch (*D. geoffroii*), Bindjulang (*D. maculatus*) and Luaner (*D. viverrinus*) as vernaculars instead of Western, Spot-tailed and Eastern Quolls.

Quolls were once quite common in a wide range of habitats in Victoria (except for the Mallee), but their numbers suffered dramatically in the late 1800s and early 1900s, probably as a result of disease that also affected several other marsupial species (Menkhorst 1995; Ford 2014; Peacock and Abbott 2014).

Here, I present historical reports of quolls in south-western Victoria, many hitherto unreported in modern times. The reports were obtained from old newspaper and other reports. I also document descriptions of the species' predatory interactions with Domestic Chickens *Gallus gallus domesticus* and European Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus*.

#### Quolls in Victoria today

The Spot-tailed Quoll was once widespread in southern and eastern Victoria, but is now confined to the Eastern Highlands, East Gippsland, the Otway Ranges and Budj-Bim National Park (Menkhorst 1995). In 2013, one was photographed in the Grampians, which is good news indeed (Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC] 2013). The south-eastern Australian mainland population is classified as Endangered, by both the Victorian (2013, Fig. 4); and Commonwealth Government (2020).

The Eastern Quoll was once widespread across Victoria and in some locations occurred in high numbers, but by the late 1950s it had become extinct in this state. Seebeck (1984) noted that, even by 1923, it was found in only three Victorian sites: Alvie-Dreite on the east bank of Lake Corangamite, Studley Park in Melbourne and Gelantipy in East Gippsland. It is considered Endangered by the Commonwealth (Australian Government undated).

#### Quolls in Victoria's south-west

Samuel Hannaford described marsupials he encountered while working in Warrnambool

from 1854 and recorded these in his delightful little book (Hannaford 1860), which describes the natural history of the sea and riverbanks of Melbourne, Warrnambool and Geelong. The marsupials mentioned inhabiting the Hopkins River banks, south of the Hopkins Falls in Warrnambool, include 'flying squirrels' [gliders, probably Sugar Glider *Petaurus breviceps*], 'opossums' (possums), wombats, Koalas *Phascolarctos cinereus* and the 'Long-snouted Bandicoot *Perameles nasuta*' (Long-nosed Bandicoot). Closer to the sea, Hannaford noted 'herds of Wallabies frequent this neighbourhood' and 'the tracks of the Native Cat are everywhere conspicuous' (Hannaford 1860: 115).

Old newspapers are an excellent source of information on natural history. Peacock and Abbott (2013) searched for items about native cats or quolls and their interactions with Rabbits in Australia. A report in 1856 stated: 'Found five chickens killed this morning. I suppose by the wild cats.' (McCorkell 1967: 26). Peacock and Abbott (2013) believe the species to which this referred was the Eastern Quoll. The site was a farm in Yangery, 8 km west of Warrnambool.

In 1856, a writer also recorded native cats in North Warrnambool in what was then Dooley's paddock, along with the 'destructive parrot, and kangaroo [and] the valueless wombat opossum' (Anon 1856 p. 3).

The Atlas of Living Australia (ALA) (2021a) records one 'sub-fossil' record (bones) of *D. viverrinus* in Warrnambool, just north of McMeekin Rd in what is now the industrial estate. The record was from January 1900 and is the only record for either quoll species in Warrnambool. The ALA (2021a, b) also has records, supposedly provided by Andrew Bennett, of historic sightings of both Eastern Quolls and Spot-tailed Quolls near Woolsthorpe from 1840. This was based on Bennett (1982) in which the author cited James Dawson, a squatter who settled at Kangatong station near Hawkesdale (Dawson 1881). The local Aborigines called the Eastern Quoll 'Dasyure, brown and spotted native cat' and the Spot-tailed Quoll 'Dasyure, tiger cat' (Bennett, 1982: 232) and both species then lived in the Hawkesdale area. The next report of Eastern Quoll closest to Warrnambool in the Atlas is in the Stony Rises, in 1931 (ALA 2021a).

Were there any other historical records of quolls in the region? Seebeck (1984) tells of an interesting find of nine mummified carcasses of quolls under the woolshed floor of a property at Darlington in 1980. The woolshed had been built in 1855 and the property owner had no idea when the quolls might have died. Seebeck (1984: 41) dryly notes 'perhaps there are many such caches of Eastern Quoll remains beneath Western District buildings—it would certainly be worth the search.'

Bennett (1990) reported on two residents of the south-west recalling native cats (believed to be Eastern Quolls) around 1920 at Framlingham Forest and Terang Lake.

Atlas of Living Australia (2021b) records of the Spot-tailed Quoll in the south-west are more numerous. Thus, in 1970, a *D. maculatus* was found 32 km north of Port Fairy, on the Hamilton Road and presented to the Museum of Victoria. Similarly, in 1964 the Museum received a specimen found at Bessie Belle, and another in 1967 from 16 km SW of Macarthur. In 1966, a Spot-tailed Quoll was found 12.8 km west of Heywood, near Deadwood Swamp.

### Just how common were quolls?

Most early reports suggested quolls (especially the Eastern Quoll) were very common in the south-west. Rolls (1969) tells of an 1867 sporting magazine article reporting that 622 native cats were shot at Barwon Park, Winchelsea in 1866. Earlier, in the 1850s, some 600 were shot in one night around Wando Vale, north of Casterton (Nelson 1968).

Seebeck (1984: 40) reported on information provided by a correspondent in 1934 to the then Fisheries and Game Department about the abundance of quolls in the Warrnambool area:

... 55 years ago I was offered a bonus of ½d a scalp ... to trap these native cats ... but I caught so many that the contract was ended.

In 1886, the *Warrnambool Standard* carried a note under the heading 'Ellerslie News' that the district was overrun with native cats (Anon 1886a).

They were also common in parts of the Wimmera. It was reported in 1895 that the Horsham Police Court was told by a rabbit trapper that 'He saw a few burrows and some fresh tracks of rabbits and others of native cats, with which it

was infested.' (Anon 1895: 3). In the Stony Rises, Cromelin (1886: 31) noted native cats 'could be found under every stone.'

The Spot-tailed Quoll, however, seemed less numerous and less likely to take poultry, but lasted in the south-west longer than the Eastern Quoll. In western Victoria its current distribution is confined to the Otway Ranges, the Grampians and Budj-Bim National Park.

### Quolls and Domestic Chickens

There are many newspaper reports of large numbers of quolls and how they preyed on Domestic Chickens in the south-west. Most articles concern the Eastern Quoll. For example, correspondent BEC (1944: 3) reported in his regular 'Nature Notes' column in the *Portland Guardian*:

J.C. FitzGerald writes: Your notes on native cats takes my memory back a long way. I haven't seen one for over 40 years. In the 70's a plague of them, similar to present day mouse plagues, swept over the country. They were in thousands and spent the day in hollow logs, under out-buildings, or anywhere they could get shelter. Any fowls not securely shut up were soon mopped up, and they must have taken a tremendous toll of ground birds, which were far more numerous than they are now. I can't say how long the plague lasted. The years are very long when one is young, but it probably was not long before they died out to a great extent ... They were sleek and fat, with good skins when they arrived, but after some time got thin and mangy, with a lot of ticks of a slate-grey colour on them, which I always thought may have had something to do with their poor condition. There were no rabbits when the native cat army arrived. I have often thought that had there been they might have survived longer. Why they were called cats I do not know, as they are not a bit like a cat. The long, pointed nose for one thing makes them unlike any cat. The larger tiger cat was not nearly so numerous as the smaller kind, and though I have seen plenty of them, I didn't know until I read Mr. Stuchbery's comments that they, like the smaller kind, were of two colours. I have only seen the grey and he is quite right about them putting up a good fight, and it took a game terrier to kill one.

Similarly, in the same newspaper, Cundy (1936: 1) wrote:

Now for the native cats, which are at present very rare, but at one time were classed as a nuisance. Their favourite sport was raiding hen roosts at night, and it was a common experience for householders to lie disturbed by a commotion in the fowl pens at some unwelcome hour. Box traps were one method of dealing with

the pests. There were two varieties in colour, but they were actually the one breed ... Native cats, like the wallaby, died out in hundreds from some disease that broke out among them. Many people said that the laying of poison for the rabbits was the cause, but they died before poison laying became general. So much for the native cat, whose, botanical [sic] name was *Dasyurus* or *Dasyure*, which I have seen spelled both ways. There was also another and larger variety known as the Tiger Cat. He was about three times the size of his smaller brethren, and it took a really strong dog to kill one of them, but they were never very numerous.

In the Naringal area some 10 km east of War-rnambool, Goldstraw (1937) recalled fowls being attacked by 'tiger' or 'native cats' during the night in the 1890s.

In South Dreeite (east of Lake Corangamite), also, it had been noted that native cats were playing havoc with soldier settlers' fowls and chickens (Anon 1926). In 1934 a writer in the same area reflected on the large number of quolls in years gone by and the effects they had on poultry (Carter 1934: 5):

It is an unusual experience to meet with native cats nowadays, even in the more remote bush. They were, at one time, a formidable pest to poultry-breeders, but something came along and cleared them out. Some have argued that they are still in the bush, but that they find less risky prey in the rabbits, but it is doubtful, as they are never seen by trappers.

In Hamilton, in 1870, a newspaper correspondent (Anon 1870: 2) observed that native fauna was being driven from towns as a result of habitat loss, except for quolls:

... for the native cats seem to have effected a lodgment in the town, where they breed in the same way as the domestic rat. In wooden houses especially, the native cats, are particularly troublesome, locating themselves beneath the flooring or behind the wainscoting, and scamp-ering about between the roofs and ceilings. The vermin are very destructive to hen-roosts, and in some parts of the town it is impossible to keep fowls, owing to the depredations of the native cats.'

### Quolls and European Rabbits

The disease mentioned beforehand apparently reduced quoll numbers dramatically in the 1870s to 1880s. Quolls were also poisoned by landholders concerned the marsupial predators took their Chickens, and when the European Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* was introduced in 1874, quoll numbers were reduced even further (Peacock and Abbott 2013).

There are many possible causes for the decline in quolls from very high numbers in some locations. These are not mutually exclusive. Peacock and Abbott (2014) investigated the declines in number and believed pathogens, including those carried by ectoparasites such as ticks, would have been one such cause. As well, evidence was found of predation by introduced Cats *Felis Catus* and Red Foxes. There were also reports of quolls choking on Rabbit fur.

Quolls were once so common that it is believed their predation of young Rabbits prevented the eruption of Rabbit populations in Victoria (Peacock and Abbott 2013). These authors have found evidence of over 90 releases of the European Rabbit before the 1859 release by Thomas Austin at Barwon Park (Winchelsea). It was this release that experts believed was one of the main sources of the population establishment and subsequent spread to many parts of Australia. However, there were several other releases about the same time that led to large populations of Rabbits (Rolls 1969); Thomas Austin thus cannot be solely blamed for the plague of bunnies!

There were many early reports in western Victoria supporting the claim that quolls preyed especially on young Rabbits. A letter to the editor of *The Australasian* from a reader in Balmoral (Hayman 1892: 8) stated:

Data provided demonstrate that native cats eat rabbits caught in traps. These traps also catch native cats. Tiger cats are also caught in these 'abominable' traps, with 3 of this species caught in the last 2 weeks.

Across the border in Mt Gambier, a correspondent warned in 1884 that though Rabbits were not yet in the huge numbers found elsewhere in the state:

... it would not be wise to assume that we shall always enjoy this immunity. No doubt large areas of the South-East are unsuitable as a habitat for the vermin. Much of it is liable to flooding, a good deal more of it is composed of loose soil not adapted for their burrows, while the most fertile is so subdivided that they would find their quarters uncommonly warm. Besides all this they have an inveterate enemy in the native cat, still pretty numerous. But despite these favourable conditions for keeping them in check the plague is not a thing to be trifled with. The rabbit, like the British race, has a peculiar knack of adapting itself to new conditions; and if it is allowed time and opportunity, we should not be surprised to find it developing into an ani-

mal that would thrive and multiply amid our swamps and on our heaths.' (Anon 1884: 2).

In the same year, a correspondent named The Vagabond (1884: 4) described having seen a flyer in Euston, on the banks of the Murray River:

Outside the police station we read a proclamation from the Colonial Secretary of New South Wales threatening pains and penalties for the destruction of the iguana, the native cat, the mongoose, the tiger cat, the ferret, and the domestic cat, these being protected as natural enemies to the rabbit.

I think today's naturalists would be horrified to see the suggestion that we conserve mongeese, ferrets and Feral Cats because they are predators of Rabbits. Even in 1886, a Casterton resident thought it was ridiculous to even think of introducing stoats, mongeese and weasels to prey on Rabbits (Venator 1887). Nevertheless, over 1000 mongeese were indeed released in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia to control Rabbits, mainly in 1883 and 1884 (Peacock and Abbott 2010). Fortunately, the releases were unsuccessful.

Even attempts to breed Rabbits failed because of predation by Eastern Quolls. An anonymous observer in the early 1900s (cited in Ford 2014: 58) wrote:

From 1820 to 1869 probably not a year passed but some adventurous man or boy tried to turn [rabbits] out and breed them; but all met with the same fate – extermination by the native cat.

The following report (Anon 1885: 3) suggests quolls may even have been captured in large numbers and released elsewhere to help control Rabbits:

A report of their experience of native cats as rabbit exterminators has been furnished to the Government ... [in] Narrandera, New South Wales. About 700 native cats were released in sound, healthy condition. Most of the animals were obtained from about Goulburn, Bungendore and Queanbeyan, the total cost of the [operation] is much less than it takes to keep one man rabbiting for a year, and the experimenters are certain that more good has been done than 1500 would have effected, by other means. There are two places on the run where large rocks abound with holes, the best-known cover for rabbits, in which they had fairly established themselves. A large number of the native cats were put among these rocks, and for a long time it was feared that they would be a disappointment, as the rabbiters caught as many as before, and the increase in the number killed continued. About three months later an inspection

showed indications such as scarcity of scratches, deserted burrows, and fewer fresh used ones; that they had been completely hunted out of the rocks, where there were cat tracks, but no rabbits. It was supposed that the cats assisted the hunters by chasing the rabbits out of the rocky places, where they could not be got at.

In 1921, a Perth newspaper published a report of a book written by James Matthews, a former officer of the Vermin Destruction Board of the Victorian Lands Department. The article noted that Mr Matthews claimed that originally native cats 'prevented the early multiplication of the rabbits, but that in time the rabbits increased in numbers and apparently drove out the cats from certain districts.' (Anon 1921: 7). Of course, by 1921 the disease in and persecution of quolls had reduced their numbers significantly so it was not surprising they could no longer limit Rabbit numbers. However, it would be unlikely that Rabbits would have driven the quolls away!

Not everyone in south-west Victoria agreed that quolls help regulate Rabbit numbers. An article in *The Australasian* (Bruni 1886: 11) about Rabbits in the Western District, was skeptical of this effectiveness:

It is a curious fact connected with the extermination of the rabbits in the Western District, that no sooner was the country free from rabbits than native cats appeared in immense numbers. The theory that the native cats and hawks assist in destroying the rabbits appears to be without much foundation. It has been proved on many occasions, both in Tasmania and Victoria, that rabbits will invade and establish themselves in a country in which native cats and tiger cats abound, and that as the rabbits increase the native cats disappear. I believe more rabbits have been killed in one drive on Mount Fyans than all the native cats in Victoria would destroy in a year. After many years' experience in rabbit-killing, Mr. W. Cumming is now firmly convinced that, unless their homes are destroyed, it is hopeless to attempt to exterminate the rabbits in a country where they find so safe a shelter on every hand as in the Stony Rises. Protecting hawks and native vermin is useless, and only adds other pests to the already overwhelming one of the rabbit. To be effective, the work should be carried out simultaneously by all the owners of land in the rabbit-infested districts.

In a later issue of the same newspaper, a letter to the editor described how Rabbits and native cats lived in harmony together in burrows in Casterton (Venator 1887). In Horsham, a note

also described co-habitation of a native cat, a Domestic Cat and a Rabbit. (Anon 1886b).

Another letter writer from Camperdown (Willingham 1885: 3) also disputed the idea that native cats controlled Rabbit numbers:

... we hear from Cobden of a number of rabbits and also a number of native cats occupying the same cover ... I agree with and endorse your view that the cat is not a natural enemy of the rabbit, and ... it is no uncommon circumstance for animals of both classes to occupy the same place of concealment, as I have on several occasions when digging for rabbits, found a cat in the same burrow apparently quite regardless of each other's presence. No, the cat has no partiality for the rabbit other than socially ...

The decline in quoll numbers, however, was cause for alarm from some early writers. David Fleay was a strong supporter of the conservation of native fauna. In 1931, he trapped 16 Eastern Quolls at South Dreeite, where they lived in the stone fences and rocky outcrops, and set up a captive breeding program at the Melbourne Zoo (Seebeck 1984). This might have been one of the earliest captive breeding programs of the kind that are now so important at the Zoo, which has a strong conservation function.

Fleay also wrote extensively on the plight of quolls. In 1934, for instance, he wrote an article in *The Argus*, noting: 'Nevertheless such an interesting native animal which is of value as a destroyer of young rabbits, rats, and mice, should not be allowed to die out without efforts being made to preserve it' (Fleay 1934: 22). His pleas were not in vain. In January of the following year, the Victorian Government issued a proclamation of a closed season for the whole year for both quoll species (Seebeck 1984). It is interesting that the protection was in the form of a 'no take' closed season, rather than full protection as a threatened species. Seebeck (1984) also mentions early attempts (in 1936) to use camera traps to detect Eastern Quolls near Lake Corangamite, with little success.

### Conclusion

The Eastern Quoll is now absent from mainland Australia but was once widespread and prevalent in south-west Victoria. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, quolls preyed on poultry and were shot, poisoned or trapped by landholders. However, quolls were also recognised for their

value in keeping Rabbit numbers in check, especially by preying on young kits. Reasons for the demise of Eastern Quolls in Victoria include disease, persecution by landholders and predation by the introduced domestic/feral Cat and European Red Fox.

The larger Spot-tailed Quoll is fortunately still present in Victoria, but in low numbers in isolated pockets. In western Victoria they are found in Budj Bim, the Grampians and Otway Ranges. It seems in the south-west, Spot-tailed Quolls were never numerous, but they were still reported as widespread.

This research could not have been possible without reports available in old, regional newspapers. Most towns had their own newspaper and larger towns like Warrnambool had two titles. Natural history reports were quite common in these papers and provide a valuable source of important historical information.

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