



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I've just watched a nine-second clip of an animal that looks intriguingly like a Tasmanian tiger. Already a hit on YouTube, it's part of a much longer video taken in April 2009 by Murray McAllister – a man who has spent the past 12 years trying to prove that this dog-like carnivorous marsupial isn't really extinct.

Like many people, I've been smitten with Tasmanian tigers, or thylacines, since I first saw the classic black-and-white photograph of Benjamin, the last known survivor, who died in Hobart Zoo, Tasmania, on 7 September 1936. And I'm certainly not alone in hoping that they are still out there, somewhere, in the wilds of Tasmania.

In fact, there have so many reported sightings – some more plausible than others – that the thylacine has been dubbed “the world's most common extinct animal”. Snippets of other evidence (everything from pawprints to suspicious kangaroo kills) merely increase the intrigue.

Some experts trash the idea of it surviving as ludicrous. I'm more open-minded: just think about all the other so-called 'extinct' species, from the coelacanth to the Madagascar pochard, that have been found alive and, if not exactly well, at least hanging on in there.

But that's not really the point. The point is that it's all a bit 'after the horse has bolted'. No one cared when the Tasmanian tiger, once common throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea, was reduced to a remnant population in Tasmania. And no one cared when the Tasmanian government paid a bounty for those last surviving animals to be killed.

But as soon as the Tasmanian tiger was declared extinct, we started to sit up and take notice. Australian magazines and travel companies are now offering a modern-day bounty of more than £1 million to anyone who can capture one alive, and people like McAllister are devoting their lives to the task.

It's a classic case of only appreciating something after it has gone. I wonder what other species we will be appreciating in years to come?



Vanished: we only started to care once the thylacine had gone forever.

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