

SCIENCE

A Mysterious Marsupial That Ambushed Its Prey

Observatory

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR MAY 3, 2011

It was known as the Tasmanian tiger, for its striped coat, or the Tasmanian wolf, for its doglike appearance. But new research indicates the bone structure and hunting habits of *Thylacinus cynocephalus* may make the “tiger” designation more apt.

Although the now-extinct marsupial was kept in zoos until the 1930s, little is known about its life in the wild. But the shape of its elbows offers some clues to its behavior and calls into question a commonly accepted reason for its extinction, researchers report in the journal *Biology Letters*.

The authors classified 32 species of mammals into three groups: ambush predators, like tigers; pounce/pursuit predators, like foxes, which engage in a short chase; and pursuit predators, like wolves, which follow their quarry for long distances and may cooperate to bring down larger animals. They found that the groups can be characterized by elbow joints — more flexible for animals that hunt with little running, and more rigid for the distance runners.

The thylacine, with its twistable elbow, was more of an ambusher. Though its nonretractable claws suggest that it did not grapple with its prey, it almost

certainly did not run after it like a wolf.

Christine M. Janis, a professor of biology at Brown University and an author of the study, said the finding made the story of the Tasmanian tiger's extinction in Australia more complicated.

“People have assumed that the immigration of the doglike dingo was the reason for the extinction,” she said. “But the thylacine had a different hunting style from the dingo, and so it was not likely an issue of simple competitive replacement.”

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