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Author(s): Hunter, J.

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Susan Turner
The Hancock Museum

Governor J. Hunter 1798

A description of an amphibious animal caught on the coast of New South Wales Lat. 40. 36W.

Revd. October 8th, 1799

Sydney N. S. W. August 5th, 1798. Was in considerable numbers. Caught by the company of a ship wrecked on a voyage from Bengal to Port Jackson. As it appears to be unknown I have preserved it in spirits for the inspection of the learned members of the Literary and Philosophical Society.

I received the animal alive by a vessel which I had sent to the relief of the sufferers.

It was exceedingly weak when it arrived having during its confinement on board, refused every kind of sustenance, except a small quantity of boiled rice, which they forced down its throat.

I had it frequently taken out of its case or box in which it was kept, and exposed it in a small place enclosed, where it could get in the daytime, the benefit of the warmth of the sun which however it did not seem to enjoy, but whenever it could shelter itself under a shrub, there it would continue and sleep. It refused every kind of food on shore, as it had done on board, but we could see it sometimes nibble a little of the roots of bushes (rushes?) and grass, this kind of provision was not sufficient for its existence, I saw that it would inevitably die soon if we could find no particular food which it would voluntarily swallow - it grew weaker every day, was exceedingly harmless and would allow any person to carry it about - after having lived, we may say without any kind of food about six weeks, it died; on opening the body to see if anything new was to be seen in the construction or figure of the intestines, no discovery worth notice was made; the brain was taken out of the head, the intestines removed and the body immersed in spirits.

I feel myself unequal to relate a correct description of the living state of this uncommon animal, but shall observe that its size was nearly that of a badger, a species of which we supposed it to be by the dexterity with which it would bury itself in the earth by means of its fore paws, but on watching its general motions it struck me on having much of the manners and motions of a bear - its head is large particularly the forehead above the eyes where its breadth appeared uncommon for a creature of that size - tapers to the nose which is a hard grissly substance as if used for removing the earth when burrowing. Its teeth are in each jaw forward, two cutters long and sharp, like those of a kangaroo - then a space of an inch of naked gum and then a set of strong teeth and well set, but has no appearance of being a carnivorous animal as far as I can judge from its teeth. Its eyes are small and black, its ears short and pointed, its paws are something like the bear and all its motions partake of that animal, it is not so swift, but a man can overtake it for it gallops exactly in the awkward manner, in which a bear runs. I judge the weight of this creature to be about 40 lbs. There is something uncommon in the make of its hind parts, from the hip joint the posterior do not round off like most other animals but fall suddenly down quite flat in a sloping direction, commencing nearly from the hip joint and descending with this flat shape to the knee joint of the hind legs, from this joint to the toes it appears to tread flat upon the ground, its tail is so very short that it is scarcely discoverable in its common state, its colour is a light or cream-coloured brown intermixed with coarse black hairs.

This animal has lately been discovered to be an inhabitant of the interior of this country also, its flesh is delicate meat the Mountain natives call it Womach this one is a female and has the false belly for the security of its young.

An amphibious animal of the mole kind found in the fresh water the size of about that of a small cat or larger say considerably than the land mole; it inhabits the banks of these lakes, it has exactly the bill of a duck and probably feeds in muddy places in the same way, its eyes are very small, it has fatter legs and they are short, the fore one from the claws being shorter than those of the hind, and the web of them spreading considerably beyond, is evidently their principal assistance in swimming - the hind legs are also webbed but the claws are long and sharp, they are frequently seen on the surface of the water, upon which they rise and blow like a turtle, their tale is thick, short and very fat.

The natives say they sometimes see them of a very large size.

J. Hunter

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