

Mr Stocqueler's Bunyip

Mr Stocqueler informs us that the Bunyip is a large freshwater seal having two small paddles or fins attached to the shoulders, a long swan like neck, a head like a dog, and a curious bag hanging under the jaw, resembling the pouch of a pelican. The animal is covered with hair like the platypus, and the colour is a glossy black. Mr Stocqueler saw no less than six of the curious animals at different times, his boat was within 30ft. of one, near McGuire's point, on the Goulburn and fired at the Bunyip, but did not succeed in capturing him. The smallest appeared to be about 5 ft. in length, and the largest exceeded 15 ft. The head of the largest was the size of a bullocks head and 3 ft. out of the water.

The account above will be well known to most cryptozoologists, apparently describing an encounter with the ubiquitous bunyip of Australia which plagued the early white settlers from 1847 onwards. Taken at face value, it has perhaps been one of the more convincing pieces of evidence for a long necked pinniped, an animal which could remain safely hidden from science in the vast Australian outback.

There were thought to be several types of bunyip. One typical bunyip described by the aboriginal people of the Port Philip district, *Tunatpan*, was aquatic with an elongated neck and head resembling an emu, a mane like a horse, flippers like a seal and a horse like tail. *Too-roo-don*, a bunyip of the North West Victoria aboriginal people is similar. In fact these peoples differentiated between two types, *banib*, pronounced *bunnip*; a lake living pig like creature and *banip-ba-gunumar* meaning bunyip and swan. The Aboriginal people of the Murrumbidgee area also had a firm belief in *katenpai*, *kinepratia* and *tanatbah* according to dialect. It could grow as big as a bullock and again had an emu like head and neck, a mane and a horse like tail. It also had four legs with three flipper-like webbed toes on each foot.

The encounter was described by a [Mr Edwin Stocqueler](#) (1829-1895), an artist come naturalist who took it upon himself to sail down the Murray and Goulburn rivers (New South Wales) in a canvas boat. He apparently spent much of 1856/7 doing just this, whiling away the time compiling sketches for a diorama that he was working on which when complete was to be displayed in England. It was reported in the Moreton Bay Free Press of 15/4/1857, although it had occurred in March.

Had he not been deterred by the stories of the natives concerning the power and fury of the bunyip, and by the fact that his gun had only a single barrel, and his boat was of a very frail description we have every reason to credit the statement of Mr Stocqueler, and, considering the imperfect way in which some of our rivers and lagoons have been explored, we imagine it is quite possible for an amphibious animal of extremely shy habits to have escaped.

Now firstly, apart from the swan like necks of the creatures, it would appear that Stocqueler was observing seals although it is not entirely clear if the paper nominated them freshwater seals, or whether Stocqueler did. A subsequent account in the Portland Guardian and Normanby General Advertiser 23/3/1857, appears to suggest the latter.

Although many species of pinniped can wander widely, the native pinnipeds of Australia are the Australian sea lion, *Neophoca cinerea*, and the South African or Australian fur seal, *Arctocephalus pusillus*. The Australian fur seal has slight cranial differences to the South African fur seal but is classed as the same species.



Brown Fur Seal: [David Siu](#) / [CC BY 2.0](#)

Whilst in their neighbours, the New Zealand or Hookers sea lion, *Phocarctus hookeri*, adult males may reach 6-10ft, the males of both these Australian species average 6-8 ft., while the females of each species are smaller.

Otariids (sea lions and fur seals) do have flexible necks that can appear quite long when extended but Stocqueler likens them to the necks of swans which are thin and distinct and while bunyip reports have mainly been equated with seal like animals over the years, an otter like identity has also at times been suggested. An otter would certainly have a glossy coat and its outstretched neck may appear thinner and more distinct than an otariids. In fact the South American giant otter, *Pteronura brasiliensis*, can reach well over 6 ft., but a fifteen-foot otter is presently unknown.

However, although Stocqueler is close enough to report hair, he makes no mention of ears or whiskers which otters and otariids both have, (although ears sleeked back may not be very noticeable in otariids), while he does compare the heads to

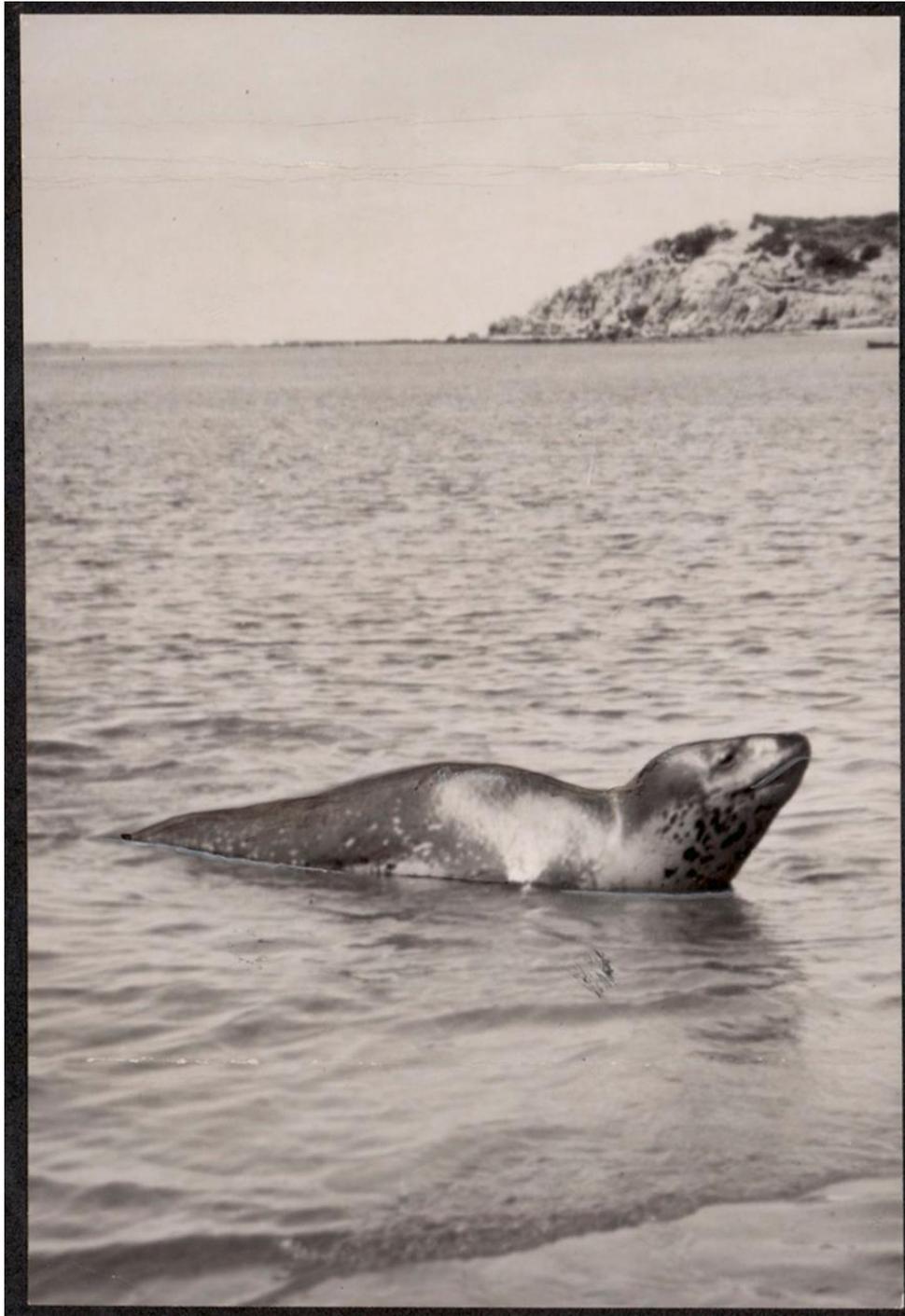
those of dogs which do have ears. What is more, he is close enough to report another curious feature, a pouch like that of a pelican, (although coming from the land of marsupials, I suppose we should expect this), a most unusual and intriguing one. No pinniped or otter displays such a feature, unless the pouch was merely folded skin.

The nearest possible comparison that could perhaps be made with a pinniped is the walrus, which has two pharyngeal pouches either side of the oesophagus that can be inflated to hold up to 13 gallons of air. These are not however visible. This attribute is found in both sexes, but is more developed in the male and is used variously as a buoyancy aid allowing the animal to float, while also enabling it to make specific sounds which are of importance in mating. Walruses are also obviously quite distinct and do not inhabit the southern hemisphere. So although going some way to explain what Stocqueler saw, neither an otariid, odobenid or otter fits the whole description meaning that we must take a look at some other possibilities.

There are two other possible pinniped contenders, but again neither fits the bill completely. These are the leopard seal, *Hydrurga leptonyx*, and the Southern elephant seal, *Mirounga leonina*, both usually Antarctic dwellers but known to roam widely. The Southern elephant seal is a veritable mammoth among pinnipeds, reaching up to and over 20ft in the male of the species and the male does have a sort of pouch, its inflatable proboscis, although this is situated on the front and top of its head. The leopard seal, which can reach over 10ft, is known for cutting a sinuous figure and has a neck and head to match its serpentine form although its pelage is silvery grey to blue. Both animals are known to wander from their regional climes and are phocids which would mean they would not have ears.

But besides all this, Stocqueler, having spent some considerable time witnessing the local fauna, presumably becoming familiar with indigenous species, would have surely recognised them for what they really were, pinnipeds. If he had also spent much of 1856/7 sailing up and down these stretches of water it might be expected that he would have in fact made sightings of wandering seals imitating bunyips more frequently therefore allowing him to distinguish clearly between the two.

In fact Stocqueler was not alone when he witnessed the creature; he was accompanied by his mother. *The Bendigo Advertiser*, Saturday 6th December, 1857, retrospectively comments on this partnership under the title of *Novel Enterprise*.



Sea leopard at Barwon Heads - *Argus* (Melbourne, Vic.), Oct. 16th 1948 (State Library of Victoria)



A Large Sea Lion (Elephant seal) which invaded the Derwent Estuary (State Library of Victoria)

Mr Stocqueler, an artist, and his mother are on an expedition down the Murray, for the purpose of making some faithful sketches of the views on this fine stream, as well as of the creatures frequenting it. I can pronounce the drawings faithful representations. Mother and son go down the stream in a canoe. The lady paints flowers, etc. The son devotes himself to choice views on the riverside. One of the drawings represents a singular creature, which has the appearance in miniature of the famous sea serpent. Mr Stocqueler was about twenty-five yards distant from it at first sight as it lay placidly on the water. On being observed the stranger set off; working its paddles briskly and rapidly disappeared. Mr Stocqueler states that there were about two feet of it above water and he estimated its length at from five to six feet.

A report in the Moreton Bay Free Press concurred.

Amongst the latter drawings we noticed a likeness of the bunyip or rather a view of the neck and shoulders of the animal.

A sketch that he produced had apparently been viewed by some members of the local aboriginal community. They had informed Stocqueler that the drawing showed the bunyips brother and this was interpreted by the paper as meaning an exact likeness of the bunyip. Unfortunately the picture does not appear to have withstood the passage of time which is a shame. If he were an artist of some talent

we may have gained a very accurate picture of the creature. The paper then continued and *we have no doubt that he will show his portfolio to any gentleman who would pay him a visit.* His diorama was apparently finished in the same year and according to one account of the day was a mile long depicting life on the goldfields and other parts of Australia (it was named Golden Land of the Sunny South). A reporter from the Bendigo Advertiser who viewed it noted some seventy depictions of native birds and animals while also referring to other very numerous and interesting sketches and paintings. Although some pictures from the diorama remain, the complete work including his bunyip portrait appears to have disappeared long ago.

Then following the publication of his encounter things got slightly weird and a little mysterious as Stocqueler clearly irked by what he had read sent a terse letter to the *Bendigo Advertiser*. It was subsequently published Friday 3rd July 1857 and hints at either a mundane solution for his sighting or creates an even bigger mystery.

Sir-Having seen in the Advertiser of Monday last, an extract from an Adelaide paper on the subject of the Bunyip, I think it my duty (to prevent anyone from forming incorrect ideas) to say, that the descriptions given of my accidental meeting with a strange animal in the Goulburn River, differ much from my own account of it, and had I known that it would have appeared in print, I should perhaps have been still more careful in my choice of words. In the first place, I do not call it the bunyip, nor did I ever say positively the size of it, as I never saw the whole of one. A description of it would be difficult unless accompanied with a large drawing. The neck is not like a swan's; nor is it anything like a musk-drake. However, I know more about it than I am at present disposed to tell; but when my diorama (in which is an almost life size portrait of the beast) is painted, I shall give a full, true, and particular account of what I saw, did, and discovered. I am no wonder-maker, and I do not wish that scientific people should be misled by a half-told tale. I shall consider myself under an obligation to you, if you will kindly insert this; and am, Sir, Yours obediently, Edwin Stocqueler, Sandhurst, July 1st, 1857.

So it would appear that Stocqueler never nominated his creature(s) a bunyip(s) in the first place and denies describing a swan like neck! Presumably then we can rule out a clever ploy by Stocqueler creating his own bunyip sighting to gather publicity for his diorama.

We are unlikely to know exactly what he saw...

(Adapted from [*The Seal Serpent*](#))

