



Creatures of Myth and Legend

A HAWKESBURY REGIONAL MUSEUM FACTSHEET

THE FLABBIT

In 1985 a resident of the Hawkesbury district alerted the media to the sighting of a strange, unidentified creature in the Colo wilderness. Photographs of the creature taken at the time revealed the truth, a rabbit with wings! Thus began the legend of the flabbit.

In the subsequent frenzy of excitement and wonder throughout the district, flabbit spotters and journalists roamed the Hawkesbury searching for evidence of its existence.

...he had created the flabbit from a rabbit and a bird...

Several news stories and front page headlines later, the flabbit was exposed as a hoax, masterminded by then Councillor, Roy Rotherham. Using his taxidermy skills, he had created the flabbit from a rabbit and a bird, and took staged photos, 'leaking' them to the press. His reason: to create interest and bring tourists to the Hawkesbury District.

Although scorned by many, the flabbit became the focus of an avid following. T-shirts, posters, stuffed toys and even a song were produced in celebration of its uniqueness.

Today events such as the traditional 'throwing of the flabbit' at the Colo Wilderness Area Family Picnic Day remind us to laugh at ourselves and to ponder the possibilities of nature.

THE MOOLYEWONK/MIREEUULLA

Since the time of early white settlement, tales have been told of a mysterious creature – a giant water serpent seen swimming and surfacing in the Hawkesbury River. This has many people believing that the Hawkesbury has its very own Loch Ness Monster, and local legend tells of its being responsible for several upturned boats and missing fishermen.

Remote Hawkesbury Aboriginal rock and cave paintings are said to illustrate a creature similar to a plesiosaur, an extinct marine reptile which is known to have existed during the Jurassic Period. Could this mean that the local people had seen these creatures and recorded them for future generations?

More recent eyewitness accounts describe the Moolyewonk as having a long neck, flippers and a distinctive grey colour.

Other sightings have been documented and debunked over the years, including what was believed to be a plesiosaur washed up on Moores Beach, California in 1925, and the Ziuyo-Maru Monster caught in Japanese fishing nets off the coast of New Zealand in 1977. The first was later thought to be a decomposed Bairds Whale and the second the decomposed remains of a Basking Shark.

More recent eyewitness accounts describe the Moolyewonk as having a long neck, flippers and a distinctive grey colour.

THE MUMMIFIED CAT

The Hawkesbury Historical Society Collection contains many unusual objects and artefacts, but none more unusual than the mummified cat. It was donated by a Windsor resident who had found it while renovating her 19th century home. As a trained archaeologist, she identified its significance and relevance as a ritual object.

Ritual objects are items deliberately concealed in attics, chimneys and voids beneath floors, in the superstitious belief that they will protect occupants of the house from 'evil spirits'. This form of folk magic was practised for hundreds of years in Europe, and brought by settlers to Australia. It tells us a lot about the rituals and beliefs of the time.

Dead cats may have been used as ritual objects because of their association with witches. Often the cats are found partially dismembered, so there is little likelihood they had strayed into the space and died afterwards.

Other Items commonly used for concealment were children's shoes and clothing. These were believed to be charged with the essence of the children who had worn them, and were placed in the weaker points of the house as a kind of spirit trap or decoy, diverting any passing danger away from family members.

When claims were made by local Hawkesbury residents that a rogue black panther was roaming the hills and dales of Kurrajong and Grose Vale, many regarded it as a hoax on a par with the mythical flabbit.

However, repeated sightings and regular coverage by the media soon had many people sitting up and paying attention.

This was no domestic moggy or feral cat but a large and elusive predator, leaving a trail of Hawkesbury Black Panther believers in its wake.

Even the Hawkesbury Mayor, Bart Bassett and the former State Premier, Nathan Rees were forced to take seriously the Black Panther phenomenon, with requests to the Department of Primary Industry demanding they investigate the claims.

Panther headlines managed to grab the attention of documentary makers, who set up night vision and hidden cameras throughout the Hawkesbury bushland, in an effort to catch a glimpse of what was fast becoming an urban legend.

Plaster casts of paw prints, tree scratchings and scat samples sent for DNA testing have so far failed to prove the Panther's presence. But that doesn't mean a lot to people who believe they have seen it with their own eyes:

'The cat was bigger than half a metre to its shoulder and had a long tail which was thick all the way down. It didn't have a long snout.' Steven Rose, Ebenezer (Hawkesbury Gazette 7 May 2003).

'I turned around and came back up the road and saw it crouching down to one side and caught the yellow glint of its eyes in the car lights – and noticed its rounded ears.' Rob Saltmiras, Kurrajong (Hawkesbury Gazette 18 June 2003).

'I disturbed it and it jumped up a three-metre waterfall. I'd heard talk about a big cat in our area and I was a sceptic too. But I know what I saw.' Chris Coffee, Grose Vale (Hawkesbury Gazette 11 August 2004).

'(I noticed) something large and black walking in the bush above me and towards me.' Karen Dolan, East Kurrajong (Hawkesbury Gazette 17 November 2004).

'It was long and muscular, the tail was long and thick and had a rounded end.' Michael, Lithgow (Hawkesbury Gazette 8 December 2004).

'I saw it walking along, I was a little scared, so I ran off to my mum to tell her. I thought I'd seen the panther right away.' Dylan Busuttil, Bowen Mountain (Hawkesbury Gazette 27 June 2007).

'It stared at us and it was hunched down like it was going to jump on us.' Brianna Lloyd, Wisemans Ferry (Hawkesbury Gazette 16 April 2008).

'We've got to get the State Government to accept that this is happening out here... then we can move forward.' Hawkesbury City Mayor, Cr Bart Bassett (Hawkesbury Gazette 16 April 2008).

