

# Oxford Australia Word of the Month

May 2008

**quoll** – ‘any of a number of small spotted marsupials of the genus *Dasyurus* of Australia and New Guinea.’

*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary, 4th Ed*

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# quoll

## The story behind the Word of the Month

The term **quoll** is used of any of a number of small spotted marsupials of the genus *Dasyurus* of Australia and New Guinea. The rare **western quoll** is found only in south-western Australia. The **northern quoll** is found in a few areas of northern Australia. The **spotted-tailed quoll** is found in Tasmania and parts of Victoria, New South Wales, and southern Queensland. The **eastern quoll** is found in Tasmania and is rare or extinct on the mainland.

Where does the word **quoll** come from? On his voyage of discovery in 1768–71, Captain James Cook had detailed contact with the indigenous people of Australia only when the *Endeavour* had to be beached for repairs at the site of present-day Cooktown. During their seven-week stay Cook and his crew had contact with the local Aboriginal people, the Guugu Yimidhirr. It was here that both Cook, and his botanist Joseph Banks, collected a number of terms from the language of the Guugu Yimidhirr, including **kangaroo**. Another word they collected was **quoll**, and our earliest record of this word is in Joseph Banks's *Endeavour Journal* in 1770, where he writes:

'Another [quadruped] was calld [sic] by the natives Je-Quoll: it is about the size and something like a polecat, of a light brown spotted with white on the back and white under the belly.'

Although Joseph Banks had collected the Guugu Yimidhirr word for the creature, the word **quoll** disappeared from the record for another 150 years. The animal was called a **native cat**, because the early settlers saw some kind of resemblance between this animal and the European domestic cat!

**Quoll** reappeared in strange circumstances in 1924 in a *Dictionary of Australian Words and Terms*, prepared by Gilbert H. Lawson. There are six Australian words under the letter Q and one of them is: 'QUOLL —Aboriginal name for native cat.' Where Gilbert found this word remains a mystery.

There is silence for another thirty-seven years, when the word appears briefly in a reference to 'baby Quolls' in the October 1961 issue of the *Victorian Naturalist*, and then in 1963 in the June issue of *Wildlife Australia*: 'Just as all wombats are wombats, implying their distinctive status as pure Australians so each species of the spotted hunters is nothing else but a **quoll**.' The third reference in the 1960s is in *Nightwatchmen of Bush and Plain* (1968) by David Fleay: 'In those early days ... we domesticated **quolls** ("native cats")'.

David Fleay (1907–98), the author of *Nightwatchmen*, was an extraordinary Australian naturalist who was a pioneer in the captive breeding of endangered Australian animals. For example, he was the first to breed a platypus in captivity, at Healesville Sanctuary in 1943. When we checked the authors of the articles that mentioned the **quoll** in the journals from 1961 and 1963, we discovered that both articles were written by David Fleay. This means that all of the references to the **quoll** in the 1960s are from David Fleay.

All of this suggests that it was in fact David Fleay who popularised the term **quoll**, and was responsible for it replacing the absurd term **native cat**.

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weapon  
of mass  
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karrack  
glycaemic  
burka  
index  
barbecue stopper  
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