

HUMANOID Denizens of the Dreamtime

*Nyols, whowies, and net-nets, oh my!
These bizarre creatures of the Australian continent exist in the
folk memories of Aboriginal people.*

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The Shadow People



According to the Wiradjuri people of west central New South Wales, the elders always tell their children to count their shadows when playing, and to be sure to tell them if they count an extra one — for that will surely mean a *winambuu* or a *yuuri* is playing with them.

Roughly equivalent to the “*Little People*” found elsewhere in the world’s folklore, the *winambuu* and *yuuri* resemble tiny dwarf-like beings, only three feet tall and often hairy. They can be benevolent or antagonistic, depending upon their mood and the manner in which they are treated by humans. Also spoken of in New South Wales, but this time by the Gumbangirr people, are the *bitarr*, who derive great pleasure from playing with Gumbangirr children.

Concealed to all but the sharpest of

native eyes in the eastern Australian state of Victoria, as they play amid the shadows of dusk, are the *nyols*. These small stony-gray humanoids spend their days underground like Antipodean gnomes, inhabiting deep subterranean caverns. The *net-nets* also hail from Victoria and inhabit rocky caverns, but mostly above ground. They have brown skin with long claws instead of nails.

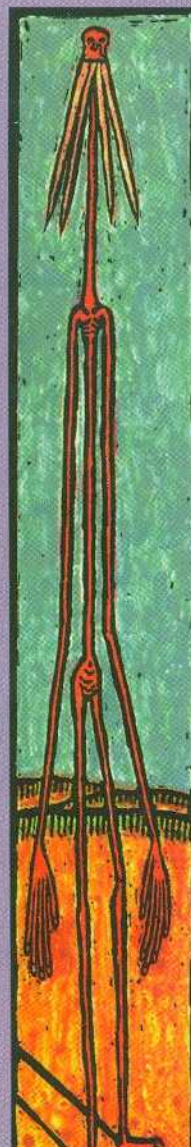
Ask any well-informed zoologist what a *ningau* is, and he or she will reply that it is a tiny shrew-like form of marsupial mouse, the first known species of which was formally documented by science as recently as 1975. But to the native Australians, *ningaus* are ancient, familiar entities — and it is from these that the *ningau* marsupial mice derive their name. In Aboriginal lore, the *ningaus* are a hairy race of two-foot-tall beings with short feet and a passion for eating raw food, as they have no knowledge of how to make fire. They are active only at night and inhabit dense mangrove swamps on Melville Island, off Australia’s northern coast. The *ningaus* assisted in the earliest Kulama ceremonies, initiation rites into religious cults that feature the special preparation for eating an otherwise poisonous yam known as the *kulama*.

Stick Men and Night Spirits



Stranger in form than the Shadow People are the various “stick beings” of Dreamtime tradition. They include the desert-dwelling *mimi* of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The *mimi* are tall and exceptionally thin, resembling animated sticks, and are thus able to live inside even the narrowest crevasses and amid the densest bush or scrub. Many ancient but finely executed rock paintings in the area, usually painted only in red ochre, portray the *mimi* hunting, dancing, and running. According to Aboriginal lore, these paintings are the work of the *mimi* themselves.

Despite their artistic ability, the *mimi* are feared by native Australians, for their diet includes not only yams, of which they are exceedingly fond, but also



In the traditional beliefs of the Australian Aborigines, the "Dreamtime" was the Time of Creation. As Mudrooroo Nyoongah wrote in the 1994 book *Aboriginal Mythology*, it "symbolizes that all life to the Aboriginal peoples is part of one interconnected system, one vast network of relationships which came into existence with the stirring of the great eternal archetypes, the spirit ancestors who emerged during the Dreamtime."

In the Dreamtime, all of today's Aus-

tralian animals existed in human form, as kangaroo-men, emu-men, koala-men, and even starfish-men, only later transforming into animals. However, there were also many stranger beings — some humanoid, some monstrous. These are discounted as fictitious by westerners and are largely unknown outside Australia. However, this continent's native people firmly believe that they exist even today and can occasionally be seen — if you know where and how to look for them.

The Dreamtime entities offer fascinating insights into the ancient beliefs and traditions of Australia's indigenous people. Some of these entities appear to be supernatural. Others may represent folk memories of real but long-extinct giant animals that were still alive when the Aborigines' ancestors first reached Australia over 30,000 years ago.

For example, it is possible that the *marrukurii*, a dog-like Dreamtime beast, is based on the famous Tasmanian wolf,

any unwary humans that they may choose to seize with their skeletal hands. Consequently, when passing through mimi territory, it is best to choose a windy day. These weird-looking entities are frightened to venture forth in such weather, in case their fragile necks should be broken by the wind's bluster power.

An even more malevolent race of stick beings are the vampire-like *gurumukas*, frequenting Groote Eylandt (Great Island) in the northern Gulf of Carpentaria. These nocturnal spirits have long, projecting teeth. If a *gurumuka* should encounter a native Australian walking alone at night, it will bite the back of his neck, dooming him to a painful death unless rescued and swiftly tended to by a medicine man.

Equally malign are the *nadubi* of Arnhem Land, which are equipped with barbed spines projecting from their elbows and knees. These bizarre spirit beings also seek solitary humans, and if they should succeed in stabbing a spine into one's body, the human will surely die unless the spine is removed immediately by a wise shaman.

The most famous of all spirit stick men, however, are the *quinkin*, from Queensland's Cape York Peninsula. Quinkin represent the embodiment of human lust — because of their excessively large (and often grotesquely shaped) male organs. As with the mimi, many prehistoric cave paintings depict the quinkin, in Cape York's Laura rock galleries.

Dreamtime Birds and Dogs



The Dreamtime lore of western Victoria's Tjapwurong people tells of gigantic flightless birds, said to be "taller than the mountains," which were still alive only a few thousand years ago. Likening them to "super emus," they referred to these veritable big birds as *mihirung paringmal*, and there are even depictions of them, portrayed with characteristically deep beaks, in native cave art from Queensland's Cape York Peninsula.

But two of the most interesting Dreamtime beasts are dog-like entities. The Wiradjuri still speak of magical canine creatures more than a little reminiscent of the paranormal Black Dogs featured in Western (particularly English and American) folklore, which they refer to as *mirrii* or *mirri-uula*. A *mirrii* is black and very hairy, with bright red eyes and pointed ears, but is usually quite small when first seen. The longer that someone stares at it, however, the larger it grows, swiftly becoming as big as a calf or pony, before suddenly vanishing in full view of its astonished observer.



Although they are often merely inquisitive, mischievously following someone home before abruptly disappearing, they can be dangerous. Sometimes a *mirrii* will emerge from a river or pool and attempt to befriend a passing human — but only with the sinister intention of luring him to death in its watery depths.

Another Dreamtime dog is the *marrukurii*, which, according to Aboriginal traditions prevalent in the vicinity of South Australia's Lake Callabonna, resembled a dog in outline, but was brindled with many stripes. They were believed to be dangerous, carrying away any children that they could find to their camp at night, where they would devour them. Native Australians denied that the *marrukurii* were domestic dogs or dingoes. It is possible, then, that these beasts are actually based upon memories of the striped Tasmanian wolf or thylacine.

which died out only 2,300 years ago. And the gigantic emu-like *mihirung* seems to be inspired by an extinct species of colossal flightless birds called dromornithids, which were related to the chicken or pheasant. Ornithologists even use the Dreamtime term *mihirung* to refer to the real-world dromornithids.

The Aborigines' ancestors traveled to Australia from southern Asia, which is home to a small, tree-dwelling, lemur-like primate known as the tarsier. Harmless to

humans, the tarsier has enormous eyes and suckers on its fingertips. Cryptozoologists have speculated that the entity known as the *yara-ma-yha-who* may be an exaggerated version of the tarsier.

But how do we explain the *kulta*? According to native lore, long before central Australia became a desert it was carpeted in lush vegetation and was browsed by the huge but inoffensive *kulta*, which possessed a slender neck and tail, a huge bulky body, and four sturdy legs. This de-

scription recalls the sauropods — long-necked, elephantine dinosaurs exemplified by *Diplodocus* and *Apatosaurus*. Fossilized remains of various sauropods have indeed been excavated in Australia.

Is it conceivable that native Australians have sometimes found giant sauropod fossils, and that the *kulta* myth has arisen as a means of explaining where these bones came from? An alternative (albeit far more radical) possibility is that sauropods in Australia did not die

Neither Man nor Beast



The most frightening monsters in any culture are those that appear partly, but not entirely, human.

This is certainly true of the Australian Dreamtime beings.

The *yara-ma-yha-who* is a grotesque spirit entity that has red hair, red skin, and huge eyes; lives in fig trees; and superficially resembles a small, toothless old man. However, it is also equipped with some decidedly non-human attributes. Suckers on the ends of its long fingers and toes allow it to extract the blood of unsuspecting humans. Its flexible jaws are not hinged at the back; they open so wide that it can swallow a human victim whole. And its stomach is so massive that it can readily hold its victim until totally digested! Sometimes, however, it does not digest its victim, but regurgitates and reswallows him several times. Each time, its victim becomes smaller and redder — until at last he too has transformed into a *yara-ma-yha-who*.

Similarly, just as there are many reports in southern Asia of giant bat-like entities, native Australian lore also contains legends of veritable "bat-men" known as the *keen-keeng*. Long ago, this half-human tribe inhabited a cave on the Western Australian border and worshiped a fire god, to whom they sacrificed living humans. In their normal state, the *keen-keeng* appeared human, which assisted them in luring victims to their cave. They could be distinguished by their hands, which lacked the first two fingers of human hands. Their greatest difference, however, was their magical aerial ability — the *keen-keeng* could raise their arms and instantly transform them into a pair of large, powerful wings. This talent enabled these eerie entities to travel great distances when seeking potential sacrifice victims, but they were finally destroyed by two wise medicine men known as the Winjarning brothers.

A most extraordinary Australian spirit entity is Old Red-Eye, documented in Frank Povah's fascinating 1990 book *You Kids Count Your Shadows*, a unique account of Wiradjuri lore. Old Red-Eye is vaguely humanoid, though

often poorly described — except for his glowing red eyes.

He can materialize anywhere, at any time. Those who look into his eyes are immediately mesmerized. Time stands still for Old Red-Eye's victims until he decides to release them from their trance, or until someone else turns them away from his basilisk gaze.

Another semi-human monster was Cheeroonear, who lived with his wife and dogs in a dense forest near Nullarbor Plain, which overlaps the present-day Australian states of South Australia and Western Australia. According to William Ramsey Smith's *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines* (1930), Cheeroonear was:

...a being with ears and face like a dog, but without a chin. From the lower jaw there hung a flesh-like bag, shaped like the pouch of a pelican, and leading into the stomach. The ribs did not join in the centre to form a chest with one cavity, but were arranged so as to make two compartments. The compartment on the left side contained the lungs, and the one on the right side held the heart and its vessels, leaving the throat like a wide sack between the two, so that when it held water or food it looked like a tube.... He stood eight feet high. His arms reached below his knees to his ankles.

Responsible for the disappearance of several humans from camps around the edge of the forest, Cheeroonear was finally ambushed by the Winjarning brothers, with the assistance of a dense fog sent by the God of the Dew-drops, and duly slain with their boomerangs.

Not all semi-human Dreamtime entities are dangerous or evil. The *pot-koorok* of Victoria, for instance, is a shy, inoffensive man-frog, resembling a small human but with a wet pear-shaped body, long mobile fingers, and webbed feet. Highly reclusive, it hides in deep pools and rivers.



out when other dinosaurs did 65 million years ago, but persisted into much more recent times, to be marvelled at by the first humans to reach this island continent. But if Aboriginal belief in the kulta is simply derived from their discovery of dinosaur fossils, it would not have been the first such case.

The Diyari people say that central Australia was once covered in verdant pastures and giant eucalyptus trees that stretched up to Heaven. Their mighty

trunks supported a thick canopy of vegetation inhabited by gigantic Dreamtime beasts called the *kadimakara*. Sometimes, these animals would descend the trees and explore the lands below, but once, while they were on the ground, the giant trees were destroyed, preventing the *kadimakara* from returning to their home. From then on, they lived in permanent exile on the surface, wallowing in the waters of Lake Eyre until they died.

Scientists scoffed at such fanciful tales,

until the Diyari showed them massive bones lying on the surface of salt pans along Cooper Creek and in the Lake Eyre Basin. These proved to be from immense herbivorous marsupials known as diprotodonts, resembling giant wombats. They had lived many millennia before, when the region had indeed been verdant, becoming extinct when the vegetation died. Cave paintings only ten millennia old clearly depict diprotodonts, confirming that these giant marsupials and humans

Rainbow Snakes



Perhaps the most famous Dreamtime entity of all is the great rainbow snake. It is known to many different Aboriginal tribes throughout Australia, and by more than a dozen different names.

Details of the rainbow snake's activities vary from one region to another, but in general it is described as a creature of the sky that helped to create rivers and other water courses amid the dry land at the time of creation. Since then, it has chosen to remain concealed in deep water holes during the dry season. Indeed, native Australians believe that each water hole is guarded by its very own rainbow snake. When the rains begin, however, this enormous serpent ascends to the thunder clouds, its huge

rainbow snakes was the *mindj*, which was said to be 10 miles long, with a huge head, a three-pronged tongue, and an immense mouth that spewed venom. Its merest gaze brought instant death. It suffused a foul stench and left the terrible disease smallpox in its wake. Equally formidable was the *yero*, whose head was covered in red hair instead of the usual reptilian scales, and spouted forth entire waterfalls from its voluminous throat. Even more impressive was the *wollunqua*, which was claimed to be 150 miles long — so tall that its head would vanish into the heavens if ever it should stand upright.

It is likely that these legends were inspired by some of Australia's numerous species of snake, notably the strikingly marked diamond python. The stories also suggest the possible survival of certain forms of giant Australian python that are currently presumed extinct — such as *Wonambi naracoortensis*, which may have attained a length of 15 to 16 feet (larger than any modern-day Australian python) and could have been partly aquatic; and the memorably named *Montypythonoides riversleighensis*, whose fossils have been found in north-western Queensland.



multicolored body stretching across the sky to yield the rainbow. This spirit beast also has a strong connection to fertility, and can be male or female.

One of the most dreaded

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coexisted in Australia. It's clear that the kadimakara do have some basis in fact.

So too, it would seem, does a similar beast called the *gyedarra*. According to natives living near the Gowrie water holes, it was as big as a heavy draw horse, and their forefathers recalled seeing them in water-filled holes in this area's riverbanks, from which they emerged only to feed. This is plausible diprotodont behavior. When shown diprotodont bones, natives said that these were from the *gyedarra*.

These extinct mega-marsupials may also explain the *yamuti*—giant wombat-like Dreamtime beasts in the lore of the Adnyamathanha people from South Australia's Flinders Range. It's even possible that reports of Australia's greatest modern cryptozoological celebrity, the *bunyip*, are also based upon folk memories of swamp-dwelling diprotodonts.

The Dreamtime landscape is crowded with strange creatures with even stranger names: *mirrii* and *marrukurii*; *nyols* and

ningauis; *yero*, *yuurii*, and *yara-ma-yha-who*; *quinkin*, *howie*, and *mimi*; and many more. These are the distant denizens of the Dreaming, for whom there no longer seems to be any time in today's world. Yet time is never still, and one day theirs may come again. Who can say? ■

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Giant Lizards

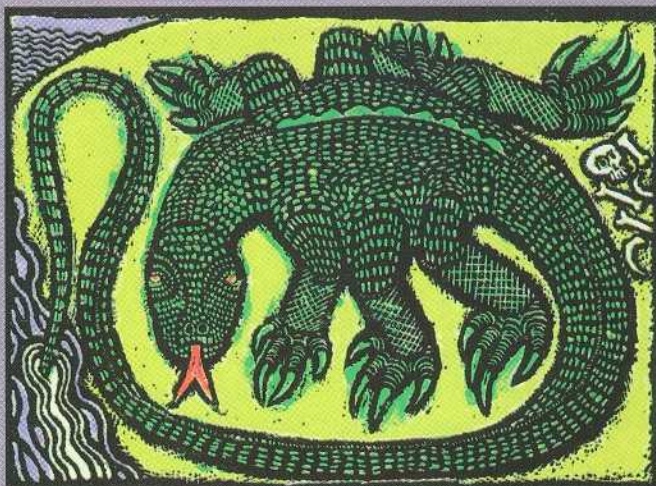


Often confused with the yowie—a hairy Bigfoot-like man-beast reported in modern times from many parts of Australia—is the *howie*. This ancient Antipodean monster was variously claimed to be a giant lizard measuring up to 20 feet and resembling the real-life goanna (an Australian lizard) but equipped with six legs instead of the normal four, or a gigantic six-legged insect with the head of a frog! Either

way, it was a ferocious creature, fond of gobbling up any human that passed by its enormous cave on the banks of the Murray River in New South Wales's Riverina District. Fortunately, a combined effort by the water-rat human tribe and the other local animal-men tribes succeeded in smoking the *howie* out of its cave, whereupon it was set upon and killed by its furious attackers.

Another aquatic monster is the *kurreah*—a huge reptilian beast with bright scales and frills. In reality, however, it is nothing more than a crocodile, whose morphology has been exaggerated over countless generations of Aboriginal storytelling in New South Wales.

Far more intriguing is the *gauarge*, a featherless emu-like creature which inhabits



water holes and will not hesitate to drag into a whirlpool anyone rash enough to bathe in its watery domicile. Oddly, the description of this peculiar beast is reminiscent of certain bipedal dinosaurs, such as the ostrich-mimicking *Struthiomimus*. Even more dramatic is the similarity between *Tyrannosaurus rex* and a bipedal reptilian monster known as the *burrunjor*, which is said by the local Aborigines to inhabit a remote expanse, also called Burrunjor, in Arnhem Land. There are even depictions of this terrifying beast in local native Australian cave art. Needless to say, it is highly unlikely that *T. rex* has a surviving cousin down under. More plausible is that stories of the *burrunjor* stem from common sightings of hefty goanna lizards running on their hind legs.