

# Man-Eating Teddy Bears of the Scrub: Exploring the Australian Drop Bear Urban Legend

Catherine Livingston, Felise Goldfinch & Rhian Morgan

James Cook University, Australia

## Abstract

Urban legends are contemporary forms of folklore that are often used to provide lessons in morality or explicate local beliefs, dangers, or customs. In Australia, one such tale describes fiendish, carnivorous, blood-sucking koala-like animals that launch themselves from trees at unsuspecting tourists in the Australian scrub. The drop bear (also known as *Thylarctos plummetus* or *Thylarctos plummetus vampirus*) is an urban legend common to tropical Australian scrub regions that serves as a cautionary tale intended to warn against the dangers associated with traversing the Australian bush. As such, the figure of the drop bear represents a uniquely Australian manifestation of the vampire motif. This article examines representations of the drop bear urban legend as provided in contemporary pseudo-scientific, satirical, and popular media sources by means of critical discourse analysis, in addition to exploring how archaeological evidence has been mobilised in support of drop bear narratives. Through a critical review of drop bear tales in accordance with established folklore typologies the paper posits a categorisation of drop bear narratives as urban legend, while also explicating the impacts of social media and the internet on the perpetuation and dissemination of the drop bear legend.

**Keywords:** Drop bear, urban legend, Australian folklore, digital legend cycle, vampire

*All urban legend is folklore, though not all folklore is urban legend*  
- Mikel J. Koven (2006)

Narratives of vampires, ghouls and were-creatures exist in most countries throughout the contemporary world. The typically nocturnal creatures featured in these narratives tend to prey on humans for the purposes of consumption and corruption. In many cultures these narratives have occupied a place in the oral and written traditions of folklore for centuries. For example, the beast of Gévaudan from France (*La Bête du Gévaudan*), depicted as a man-eating 'wolf', is said to have terrorised the former province of Gévaudan in south-central France between 1764 and 1767, leaving 210 victims of which 113 died; the remainder were maimed to varying degrees (Fabre, 2001). Eyewitness accounts describe a large wolf-like beast with formidable teeth, an immense tail, and eyes that glowed like fire (Fabre, 2001).

Similar folktales of witches, werewolves and vampires have been documented throughout Europe. Western vampire narratives, such as the stories surrounding *Vlad Tepes* (Vlad Dracula<sup>1</sup>), were often orientated around the nobility and reflective of divisive class systems. Similarly, in parts of Africa, vampire lore has merged historical facts, superstitions, and gossip into narratives that explicated or subverted colonial power relations (White, 2000). More contemporary avant-garde vampire narratives have been mobilised in Mexican subversive fiction as a means of transgressing hetero-normative Judeo-Christian doctrine (Borgia, 2016). In Southeast Asia the female vampire-like figure of the Pontianak, it is reasoned, “provide(s) an explanation for the otherwise incomprehensible death of an infant” (Melton & Hornick, 2015, p. 39). Throughout the world, vampire stories are used to represent specific cultural anxieties or express fears of the outsider, the other, the inexplicable, or the unknown. Yet, despite the popularity of vampire motifs in European, African, Central American, and Asian folklore, outside of contemporary cinematic and literary contexts, few ‘traditional’ vampire folktales prevail in Australia.

Isolated and somewhat removed from the rest of the world, Australia has developed its own distinct style of vampire narrative in the form of the drop bear urban legend. In contrast with the vampire narratives found across the rest of the world, this uniquely Australian tale is more satirical than serious, but is still representative of specific cultural anxieties. Australia is internationally known for its unique, highly dangerous animals and inhospitable terrain. As a result, it is hardly surprising that these features of the landscape form some of the core components of the drop bear urban legend. This legend describes a fiendish, carnivorous koala-like creature that preys on unsuspecting scrub<sup>2</sup>-goers from the treetops. The creature is said to subdue its victims through the impact induced when it falls from the trees, before feasting on their flesh and blood.

The following discussion explores the drop bear urban legend through a literature review and critical discourse analysis, orientated around representations of drop bears in popular culture and digital media. The paper begins with a retelling of the drop bear legend that draws on a range of contemporary pseudo-scientific, satirical, and popular sources. This explanation is followed by a review of the ways in which archaeological evidence is mobilised in retellings of the legend within popular media. This review is supplemented by an analysis of the drop bear legend in accordance with established folklore typologies. The article concludes with an exploration of the spread of the drop bear narrative via the internet through the application of

---

<sup>1</sup> Vlad Țepeș (also known as Vlad Dracula or colloquially as Vlad the Impaler) was a 15th Century ruler of the Wallachia region of Romania. Links between Vlad Tepes and vampirism were first publicised with the publication of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1897, although tales of his brutality had been spread across the centuries prior to this publication.

<sup>2</sup> The following is an exploration and discussion of an aspect of Australian folklore. Due to the specific focus, it is necessary to clarify key terminology. Australia is somewhat disparate from the rest of the ‘West’, and within Australian folklore, an accepted convention is that the phrases ‘urban legend’ and ‘urban myth’ are used interchangeably (Gilding, 2005; Ryan, 1998; Scott, 1996; Seal 1994 & 1995). Other colloquial terms specific to the Australian folklore context, include: scrub (bushland area lying beyond a farming community), yarn (a story, tale or anecdote passed on via oral traditions), and watering-hole (a local hotel, bar, pub or similar establishment where Australian’s gather socially) (Johansen, 1996).

Peck's (2015) concept of the "digital legend cycle" to online reference materials and social media.

## Methodology

The drop bear urban legend is analysed through a qualitative review of popular and scholarly sources. The literature review examines folklore retellings found online and through social media sites, in conjunction with archaeological case studies and research into folklore theory. Online retellings of the drop bear legend were identified using popular search engines and the keywords 'dropbear' or 'drop bears'. Satirical articles and websites referring explicitly to the drop bear legend were selected for analysis. Search results orientated around the use of 'drop bear' as an online pseudonym or company name, and results where mentions of drop bears were peripheral to the article or website's main focus were excluded from the final review. The search process resulted in the selection of thirteen key sources, which together provided a comprehensive retelling of the drop bear legend. Sources selected for the final analysis included pseudoscientific papers, such as Janssen's (2012) article '*Indirect Tracking of Drop Bears Using GNSS Technology*' (published in *Australian Geographer* as part of an April fool's joke), in addition to satirical webpages from the Australian Museum, Wikipedia, mythocreatology.com and Urbandictionary.com. Social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit that made explicit mention of drop bears or contributed to the development of a collective narrative through video imagery or storytelling, were also included in the review.

Once selected, sources were subjected to a process of critical discourse analysis that examined recurrent patterns of expression, rhetoric, opinion, and narrative. The following description of drop bears draws on these narrative commonalities to summarise key features of the legend. Retellings of the legend, as identified in online sources, were also examined in the context of references to archaeological records of encounters between Indigenous Australians and prehistoric megafauna. Through reflexive processes of thematisation and interpretation, iterations of the drop bear legend were then analysed in accordance with established typologies of folklore, myth, and legend to determine how this particular Australian vampire narrative should be categorised. Following this process of categorisation, sources were examined through a digital ethnographic lens. This final analysis uses Peck's (2015) concept of the 'digital legend cycle', Wikipedia's revision history, discourse analysis, and social media to explore how the internet is helping spread this particularly Australian vampire legend.

## Drop bears! The man-eating Teddy bears of the scrub

According to the legend, the drop bear (*Thylarctos plummetus*) is a carnivorous tree dwelling marsupial. Although often thought to be closely related to the koala, a satirical 'educational' webpage hosted by the Australian Museum (2015) depicts the drop bear as having several defining traits. These traits include a substantial physical stature and opposable digits suited for hunting large prey, in addition to dental adaptations indicative of a carnivorous diet.

Similarities between the alleged physiology of drop bears and other Australian marsupials has led to the classification of these legendary creatures within the order of *Diprotodontia*<sup>3</sup> (the largest marsupial family). For example, the hind paws of the drop bear, like many members of the order of *Diprotodontia*, are described as having fused second and third digits and claws that are used for grooming (Australian Museum, 2015). Furthermore, drop bears, like koalas and the prehistoric *Thylacoleo carnifex*, are said to have a pouch in which their underdeveloped young reside for the first few months of life (Ackerman, 2009; Ackerman & Willing, 2009; Prideaux et al, 2010). The following account provides a summation of the drop bear's key physical features before moving on to examine the creature's habitat, range, diet, and predation practices.

The most frequently described species, the common drop bear, ranges in size from roughly that of a leopard (30 kg) to a large dog ([45 kg]; Australian Museum, 2015; Coate, n.d). A lesser known species, the Mammoth drop bear (now extinct) is said to have grown to approximately five meters (Figure 1). Some sources also describe a nocturnal variety of drop bear (*Thylarctos plummetus vampirus*) that drinks the blood of its prey (Janssen, 2012).

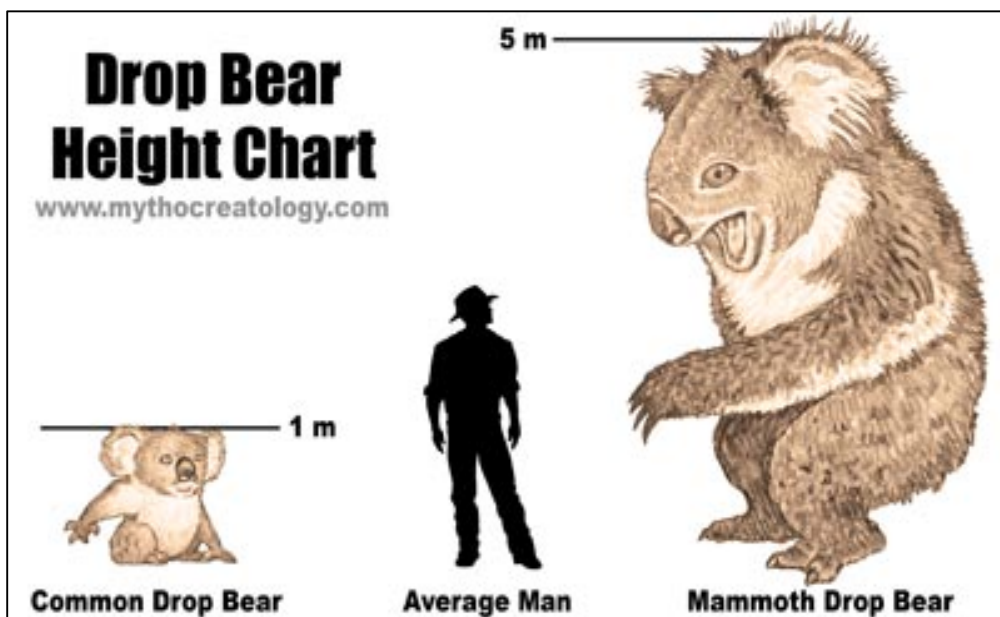


Figure 1. Drop bear height chart (Coate, n.d.).

Drop bears are commonly described as having powerful forearms, used for climbing, launching themselves from trees, and holding onto prey (Australian Museum, 2015). Sources attest to the fact that the drop bear is carnivorous and it is often depicted as having dental adaptations best suited to a meat diet (Australian Museum, 2015). The drop bear's dentition

<sup>3</sup> The term Diprotodontia is derived from the Greek *diprotos* (διπρωτός) meaning 'two front' and *odontos* (οδοντος) meaning 'teeth'. Diprotodontia are an order consisting of approximately 125 marsupial mammal species, and of the extant marsupial orders are the largest and most "ecologically diverse" (Meredith, Westerman & Springer, 2009, p. 554). These can be divide primarily into two main groups Vombatiformes, (which include wombats and koalas) and Phalangerida (such as kangaroos, wallabies and possums). Extinct Diprotodonts include *Diprotodon* (Megafauna) and *Thylacoleo* (the marsupial lion) (Meredith, Westerman & Springer, 2009, p. 554).

is comprised of incisors and single broad premolars, which are used as biting and crushing tools (see Figure 2a; Australian Museum, 2015). The nocturnal drop bear (*Thylarctos plummetus vampirus*) is described as possessing elongated incisors that are thought to be used to drain the blood of its victims (see Figure 2b; Janssen, 2012). Overall, the physiology of the drop bear contributes to its reputation as a fearsome predator well suited to life in the Australian bush.

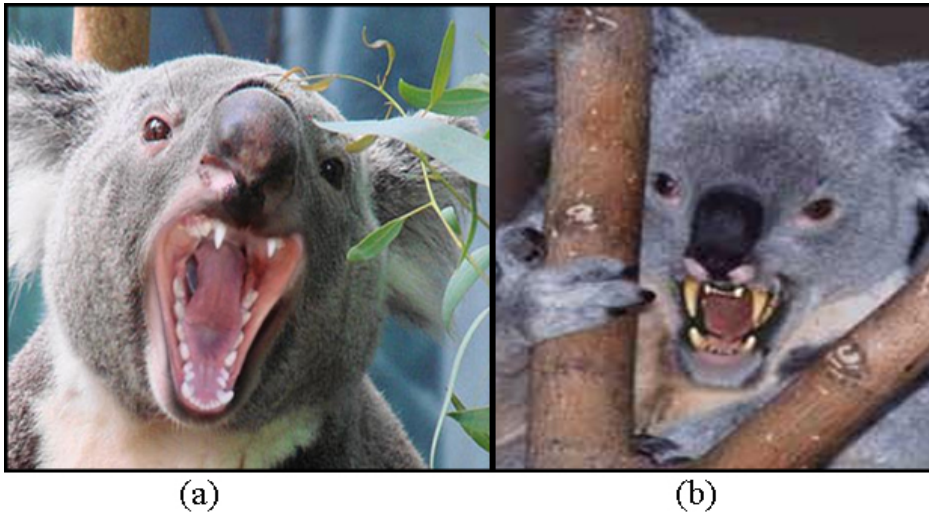


Figure 2. Satirical (manipulated) images depicting Drop bear dentition of (a) common drop bear, and (b) nocturnal drop bear (Erehgafsua, 2014; Un-Woob, 2005).

The drop bear is said to inhabit a geographic region covering roughly 1,000,000 km<sup>2</sup> (390,000 square miles), across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia (see Figure 3). It has also been argued that instances of Indigenous Australian rock art may depict drop bears and consequently indicate that the animal's habitat could have ranged as far as the Northern Territory and Western Australia during the late Pleistocene era (Hansen, 2016; Seidel, 2016).

Sources unanimously described the drop bear as an ambush hunter that attacks its ground dwelling prey from above (Australian Museum, 2015; Coate, n.d.; Dropbearaware.com, n.d.; Janssen, 2012). The creature is said to wait for a suitable target to come into range, and once the victim appears, drops from high in a tree to land on its unsuspecting prey (Janssen, 2012). While the hunting techniques of the animal seem to be well known, there is much speculation surrounding the prey species of drop bears. Few investigations of drop bear scat<sup>4</sup> have been

---

<sup>4</sup> The term scat originates from the Greek skōr meaning 'dung', and is defined by the Oxford Dictionary Online as "Droppings, especially those of carnivorous mammals." Scat analysis is an important, although indirect method, used to identify animal species prevalence in particular areas, and to determine their diets (for example, predator scat contains a higher percentage of hair and bones from prey) (Perilli, Lima, Rodrigues & Cavalcanti, 2016, pp. 1-12). Additionally, this scat analysis can aid scientists in ascertaining the health of individual animals via the chemical composition of the scat material being studied (Perilli, Lima, Rodrigues & Cavalcanti, 2016, pp. 1-12). Coprolite is the term used to describe fossilised excrement or scat (Clary & Wandersee, 2011, pp. 32-42). Coprolite analyses are crucial to palaeontological and archaeological investigations, providing invaluable evidence of prehistoric diet and migration patterns in animals and hominid species alike (Clary & Wandersee, 2011, pp. 32-42).



undertaken and, as such, conclusive data on their diet is lacking. However, most sources speculate that their diet includes the flesh, bones, and in *vampirus* species, the blood, of other native fauna such as kangaroos, wallabies, wombats, and possums (Australian Museum, 2015; Coate, n.d.; Janssen, 2012). Although humans are not considered to be part of the drop bear's typical diet, people are said to have been attacked, sometimes killed, and at times consumed by hungry drop bears (Dropbearaware, 2009). Foreigners and tourists seem to be particularly susceptible to attacks (Dropbearaware.com, n.d).

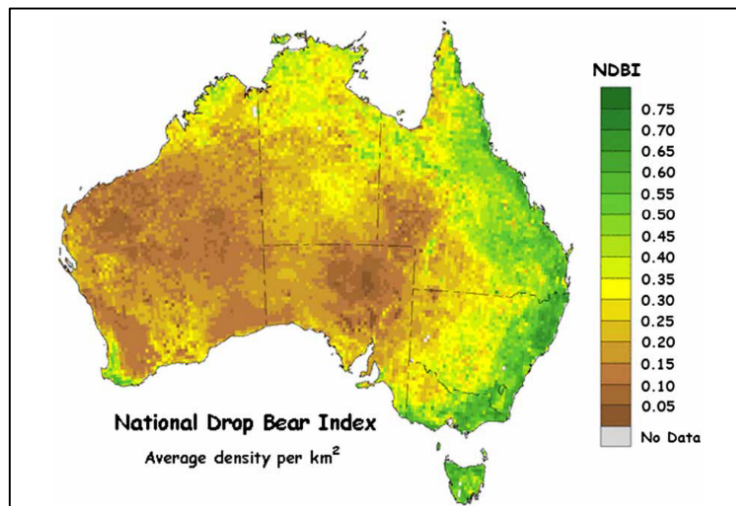


Figure 3. National Drop Bear Index (NDBI) map indicating drop bear distribution (Janssen, 2012).

Several methods have been proposed to protect people, particularly unsuspecting tourists, who, it is believed, the drop bear specifically targets when they come into range; although, the effectiveness of protection methods has not been conclusively proven. Protection methods include: talking with an Australian accent/avoiding use of foreign languages; using Australian idioms; singing a song – preferably an Australian bush ballad such as ‘Waltzing Matilda’ or ‘Click go the Shears’; wearing wide brimmed hats; and not pitching a tent under a tree. It has also been suggested that a chemical reaction occurring between the by-products found in vegemite<sup>5</sup> and human sweat may repel drop bears (Janssen, 2012). It has also been proposed that people who have lived in Australia, and consequently experienced frequent vegemite exposure, may naturally secrete these drop bear repelling chemicals (Janssen, 2012). Tourists, who do not have his immunity, are resultantly advised to rub vegemite onto their skin, behind the ears or under the armpits.

<sup>5</sup> Vegemite (/ˈvɛdʒᵻ mɑːt/ VEJ-ə-myɪt) is an Australian food spread made from a unique blend of leftover brewers’ yeast and vegetable extracts and spices. This thick, very dark brown spread was developed by Cyril Percy Callister in Melbourne, Victoria in 1922 to decrease wastage of Australian breweries and to compete with British Marmite imports post WWI. Vegemite is salty, with a malty, slightly bitter taste and is rich in umami (a glutamate with a similar flavor to beef bouillon). Yeast extract is the main ingredient in Vegemite (which due to its high concentration of glutamic acid, is the source of Vegemite’s strong umami flavor). Vegemite does not contain any fat, added sugar or animal content (White, 1994, pp. 19-20).

The dangers posed by drop bears has attracted the attention of specialists in the field of cryptozoology<sup>6</sup>. For example, Ian Coate (a former military artist and intelligence officer, turned folklorist and cryptozoologist) asserts that “[t]he drop bear has long remained undetected in the Australian bush, but over the years many people have become aware of this Aussie predator lurking high in the gum trees” (Coate, n.d.). While the bulk of Coate’s work is aimed at informing and teaching children about Australian folklore, he has also developed a scale ranking the extremity of danger posed by various creatures/threats, from 0 (not dangerous/butterfly) to 100 (extreme danger/military destroyer). The drop bear rates at “Class 78” on this scale and can consequently be considered highly dangerous (Coate, n.d.). Coate (n.d.) also provides photographic evidence of an alleged archaeological excavation of a drop bear skeleton and ‘sighting’ photos (see Plate 1 & 2). He is not alone in exploring links between drop bear urban legends and scientific evidence.

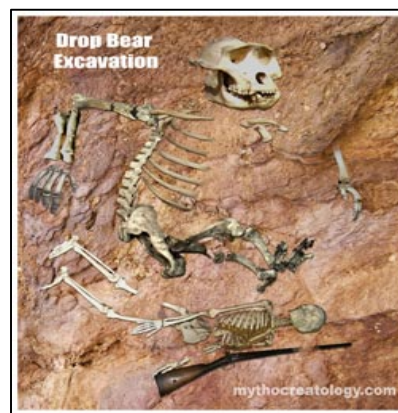


Plate 1. Alleged drop bear excavation (Coate, n.d.)



Plate 2. "Sighting" photographs of Drop bears (Coate, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> The term Cryptozoology has its origins in the ancient Greek words ‘kruptos’ (Κρυπτός) meaning hidden or to hide, ‘zōion’ (ζῷον) meaning animal and logos (λόγος) knowledge/study. Cryptozoology is considered a pseudoscience because it does not follow scientific method (neither a branch of zoology or folkloristics). Its purpose is to prove the existence of folkloric entities, and extinct/undetected animals such as Sasquatch and dinosaurs. Cryptozoology emerged as a field in 1955, originating from the works of Bernard Heuvelmans and Ivan T. Sanderson (Regal, 2011, pp. 7-30).

### Drop bears in the Australian archaeological record?

Recent developments in Australian archaeology have fuelled media speculation regarding the possible origins of the drop bear legend in human encounters with prehistoric megafauna. Arman and Prideaux (2016) describe an assemblage of scratch marks found at “Tight Entrance Cave” in Western Australia.<sup>7</sup> The cave is a known site for the prehistoric Marsupial lion (*Thylacoleo carnifex*). The research involved detailed analysis of the size, shape, depth and angle of the claw mark assemblage and established that *T. carnifex* had robust, powerful forearms with large claws and slender hind legs. Faunal remains suggest that the *T. carnifex* also possessed large flesh-stripping incisors (Arman & Prideaux, 2016). Furthermore, the location of the scratch marks indicates that *T. carnifex* likely hunted prey from above, and dragged it back into trees and/or caves for consumption (Arman & Prideaux, 2016). Similarities between these archaeological finds and retellings of the drop bear legend have led to speculation in popular media that fictional tales of drop bears may have factual origins (Hansen, 2016). Similar speculation has arisen in relation to rock art findings from Western Australia (Seidel, 2016).

Rock art depictions of *T. carnifex* have been identified in a shelter at Admiralty Gulf and the Drysdale River region of Western Australia (Ackerman, 2009). The motifs from the Drysdale River depict a large, robust animal, with powerful forearms and slender hindquarters launching itself at a human figure, who is fending it off with a spear (see Plate 3 below). Ackerman (2009, p. 2) states that the position of the penis below the tail, suggests that the animal is a male marsupial rather than a canine or feline. This rock art, in conjunction with the scratch marks and faunal remains of *T. carnifex*, have fuelled speculation regarding the possible origins of drop bear legends in encounters between Indigenous Australians and the marsupial lion (Hansen, 2016; Seidel, 2016). However, without supporting folklore and oral traditions in Australian Aboriginal culture it is not possible to confirm these links. Furthermore, analyses of drop bear tales, in accordance with established folklore typologies, indicate that these narratives are best classified as secular urban legends – a classification that would generally preclude ancient origins.



Plate 3. Drysdale River rock art (Ackerman, 2009).

---

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Samuel D. Arman for correcting this reference, and for notifying that Prideaux et al. (2010) was incorrectly cited as the source for this information. The citation was corrected 7 June 2017.



## **Folklore, folktales, and urban legends! Classifying drop bear narratives**

Accurate classification of drop bear narratives within the context of folklore studies requires us to examine how elements of these stories correspond to established narrative categories such as folklore, folktale and urban legend. The following discussion examines definitions of the terms 'folklore', 'folktales' and 'urban legend' before analysing elements of the drop bear narrative (as presented above) in accordance with these established analytic categories. In doing so, the discussion provides context for further analysis of drop bear narratives in accordance with established frameworks of folklore studies.

### **Folklore**

Bonner (2016, pp.1-15) suggests that the term 'folklore' is used to describe the collection of expressive culture shared by a specific group of people, incorporating all the traditions common to that culture, subculture or group. This includes oral traditions (urban legends, tales, proverbs and jokes), material culture (building styles, tools, and toys), and customary lore (rituals, celebrations, and rites of passage) that are common to the group. This definition builds on Wilson's (2006) classification of each aspect of the folklore oral tradition, material culture or customary lore, either singularly or combined, as a "folklore artefact" (Wilson, 2006, p.85). Additionally, Bonner (2016) explains that the form in which these artefacts of folklore are transmitted from one region, or generation, to the next is just as significant to understandings of folklore as the artefacts themselves. Folklore is unlikely to be taught through formal instruction, instead it is passed along informally from one individual to another through oral tradition, narration, or storytelling.

Transmission is a crucial aspect of the folklore process. Should these beliefs and customs no longer be communicated over space and time, they become nothing more than cultural shards to be relegated to cultural archaeologists. Folklore is as much a verb as a noun; it thus relies the doing, as well as being. As such, folklore artefacts continue to be passed on and performed in multiple variants, often without knowledge of specific origin or authorship. Folk groups are not individualistic, but rather collective communities where specific lore is nurtured and passed on.

In relation to drop bear narratives the process of informal transmission, through storytelling, and appeals to collective dimensions of Australian identity, such as familiarity with scrub-land and vegemite, are apparent. Furthermore, if we consider drop bear yarns in accordance with Bonner's (2016) definition of folklore, as shared cultural expression, they are clearly classifiable within the realm of folklore. Drop bear yarns are a form of expressive culture shared by many Australians, especially around the coastal and tropical regions. As such, drop bear tales constitute a form of contemporary Australian folklore.

### **Folktales, myths, legends and drop bears**

Folktales, myths and legends are generally considered to be distinct types of narrative, or folklore artefacts. In accordance with Bascom's (1965) typology of prose narrative, folktales are commonly regarded as fiction and generally not thought to have historical origins; whereas myths are regarded as historically factual and sacred. Legends are also considered factual

and either sacred or secular (Bascom, 1965). As shown in Table 1, both myths and folktales can contain non-human principle characters. Folktales often have a sense of timelessness and placelessness about them, and while generally shared for amusement, they may serve important moral or educational purposes within cultural groups (Bascom, 1965). Through the provision of a method by which to differentiate between myth, legend, and folktale, Bascom's (1965) narrative typology provides guidance for the classification of drop bear yarns.

Table 1. Three forms of prose narratives (Bascom, 1965, p. 5)

Form	Belief	Time	Place	Attitude	Principle characters
Myth	Fact	Remote past	Different world: other or earlier	Sacred	Non-human
Legend	Fact	Recent past	World of today	Secular or sacred	Human
Folktale	Fiction	Any time	Any place	Secular	Human or non-human

The majority of drop bear oralists (any Australian who transmits drop bear yarns) consider the tales to be fictional and secular. This categorisation as secular fictions would generally preclude the classification of these tales as myth. However, linkages between the drop bear and prehistoric marsupial lions posited in some retellings do attempt to attribute a factual origin to the narrative. Drop bear yarns also tend to be presented with a sense of timelessness, they have occurred from the distant past through into contemporary times. However, these yarns are not placeless, but are reflective of a uniquely Australian humour and geography. The drop bear itself is also region-specific, occurring only in the Australian scrub. The focal point of retellings tends to be the animal protagonist, rather than the human victims, and while these yarns tend to be located in the world of today they are not strictly classifiable in accordance with traditional conceptions of legend. Therefore, drop bear yarns fit, however loosely, within the folktale category of Bascom's classical typology. However, there are other, more contemporary folklore artefacts, such as urban legends, that may be better suited when it comes to classifying drop bear narratives.

### Urban legends

Urban legends, like folktales, are mostly orally transmitted. Koven (2003, p. 4) states that the term 'urban legend' is somewhat elusive. The complexity in defining 'urban legends' rests primarily on three key points which are: "...most legends referred to as *urban* rarely occur within an urban diegetic space...nor are they frequently told within urban performative contexts...the term *urban* is understood as referring to Western modernity" (Koven, 2003, p. 4). A defining factor in urban legends centres on belief; "[t]his is not to say...that all legends are believed, either by their tellers or audience..., but [rather] that they negotiate the conceptual space of the possible, of what *could be true*" (Koven, 2003, p.4). Therefore, it seems that urban legends are a form of modern folklore that consist of typically fictitious

stories, containing gruesome and macabre features, which are deeply rooted in local popular culture (Gilding, 2005). Furthermore, Gilding (2005) suggests that these legends are not solely used for entertainment purposes, but often expressed as cautionary tales or offered as explanations for random events, such as disappearances or unexplained deaths.

Key components of urban legends would appear to be the presentation of fictitious stories as if they were fact and deep entrenchment within specific cultural groups. The frequency with which stories of drop bears are presented as fact, and attempts to attribute factual origins to these yarns, means that these narratives conform well to definitions of urban legend. These folktales are deeply embedded within Australian culture; they have become iconic through their inclusion in advertising campaigns<sup>8</sup> and the dissemination of tongue-in-cheek drop bear yarns by legitimate organisations such as wildwalks.com (see Figure 4) and the Australian Museum. Drop bear narratives are frequently used, perhaps jokingly or in a 'tongue-in-cheek' manner, to explain the disappearance of bushwalkers or campers. Stories of drop bears are also retold as cautionary tales, used to scare unsuspecting tourists and children around the campfire or at the local 'watering-hole' (aka pub or bar). As such, it could be argued that drop bear narratives serve the purpose of teaching 'scrub safety' to those unaccustomed to traversing this dangerous terrain. The presentation of fictional drop bear narratives as factual cautionary tales and the iconic positioning of the drop bear within contemporary Australian culture means that this narrative can be readily classified as an urban legend. This legend is now spreading throughout the world by means of collective retellings on the internet.



Figure 4. Satirical notice of bushwalking tracks closure (Wildwalks.com, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> A 1994 commercial for Bundaberg Rum featured a retelling of the drop bear narrative directed at a group of female tourists camping under a tree in bushland.

## Drop bears and the digital legend cycle

The rise of the internet and mobile communications technologies have spread drop bear legends beyond the confines of oral narrative to the online realm, where they exist today as a uniquely Australian dimension of digital folk practice. The original online retellings are likely lost in the archives of now defunct message boards and online chat rooms, however, early iterations of the drop bear narrative are still visible through sites such as *Urban Dictionary* and *Wikipedia*. Archives of discussion forums, and image or video hosting sites, also maintain digital drop bear narratives for posterity; while contemporary communicative conventions such as hashtags enable easy tracking of drop bear related media. Through this multitude of posts, threads, definitions, videos, and images the drop bear has become part of the digital legend cycle (Peck, 2015). This cycle combines features of urban legend, such as the presentation of fact as fiction, with the specificities of networked communications, such as asynchronous interaction and iterative, collective, textual and audio-visual storytelling.

The earliest online definition of the drop bear is arguably the original *Wikipedia* entry created in June 2003 as a means of disseminating this Australian urban legend to the rest of the world. This entry provides a traditionalist retelling of the drop bear narrative, featuring many of the characteristics of urban legends outlined above. The article's revision history records the entry as follows:

In one telling, this [creature (the drop bear)] is a much like the koala but perhaps three times larger [*sic*]. It has distinctive large gripping talons and forearms and is very sensitive to sound. Drop Bears are named for their propensity to become disoriented and fall on parties of noisy unsuspecting tourists. The injuries caused as Drop Bears frantically attempt to secure a hold on the torsos of their victims are quite horrific and their images have been suppressed by the Australian Government. Tourists are advised to wear crash-helmets when in the vicinity [*sic*] of eucalypts. They are known to be particularly aggravated by the tones and cadence of the North American accent. Other tellings vary a great deal, but the essentials of a large, heavy animal that falls out of gum trees remain (Drop bear, 2003).

The revision history of the *Wikipedia* page documents the development of the online legend cycle through the lens of multi-user co-writing. Reviews of the page history demonstrate a back and forth between fact and fiction as individual editors add and remove qualifications, such as 'mythical' and 'hoax' from the article. At the time of writing, the page describes the Drop bear as follows: "A drop bear (sometimes dropbear) is a hoax in contemporary Australian folklore featuring a predatory, carnivorous version of the koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*)" (Drop bear, 2017, para. 1). The initial *Wikipedia* page was shortly followed by two *Urban Dictionary* entries alluding to the 'truth' of the narrative.

The urban dictionary definitions and the original *Wikipedia* entry exemplify the blurring of boundaries between factual and fictional information common to both online spaces and urban legend. The revision history of the *Wikipedia* page also reveals how this blurring of fact and fiction has developed overtime through the integration of digital imagery and 'sources' such as Janssen's (2012) article for *Australian Geographer*. Janssen's (2012) article in particular, along with the Australian Museum's drop bear's webpage (see Figure 5) and the *Australian Geographic* article on drop bears targeting tourists (Middleton, 2013), play on the inherent



'truth-value' associated with specific types of online sources such as academic articles or factual websites. These particular sources emerge frequently on forums, discussion threads, and social media posts as a favoured means of spreading the legend.



Figure 5. Tweet featuring a link to the Australian Museum's drop bear page (irisherself, 2017)

The dissemination of these sources, and their mobilisation in 'appeals to authority', or presentation as supporting evidence in digital yarns, serves as a cautionary example of the importance of information literacy (JISC, 2015) and fact checking in the digital age. The role that tales of drop bears serve, as lessons in the necessity of critically evaluating online sources, is not dissimilar to the ways in which the original legend serves to warn tourists to be mindful of the dangers of the Australian bush. The ambiguity of the information provided in these seemingly 'factual' sources is enhanced through the provision of video evidence. For example, *dropbearaware's* (2009) video of an attack on a group of New Zealand tourists provides a reminder of the importance of scepticism when viewing 'video evidence' online. The video, which was uploaded to *YouTube* in 2009, is now the most viewed drop bear video on the site with over 548508 views and 739 comments. The comments provided on this and similar videos exemplify how drop bear narratives are co-constructed online through processes of asynchronous communication. Similarly, discussion threads and forum posts provide spaces where users co-construct and negotiate details and motifs of the narrative in a process that Peck (2015) refers to as the digital legend cycle.

A thread posted on the website *Reddit* demonstrates the ways in which online narratives are co-constructed through comments, replies, and shares that simultaneously contribute to the development, dissemination, reaffirmation, and/or debunking of the drop bear legend. A 2015 post on *r/Australia* (a 'subreddit' populated primarily by Australians) from a sceptical Canadian user poses the question of the drop bear's existence in the context of story from a friend who returned from Australia "convinced that these things called drop bears exist ... She told me to go talk to some Australians about it then to come back to her" (u/Rik0204, 2015, n.p.). In the replies that followed a series of presumably Australian contributors spin a collaborative drop bear yarn through posts and replies, ranging from a few words to entire paragraphs. One particular comment thread is characterised by a series of posts reminiscing about a supposed government awareness campaign (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. r/Australia thread on Drop bears (reddit.com)

Throughout the thread, users describe their childhood fears of camping in known drop bear areas, while others express indignation at the danger posed by the inclusion of drop bears on the 'Museum of hoaxes' webpage. During this conversation, readers are reminded that *Wiki's* are editable and therefore their supposed debunking of the drop bear legend is unreliable. The stories are backed up by multi-media sources, including a video produced to educate new migrants on the dangers of drop bear encounters (Drop bears, 2014). In this thread, performances of the narrative emerge as interactions between users, content creators, and digital artefacts (such as images, video, and websites). Through performance and discussion users develop the details of the legend in a process of collective and collaborative imagining (Peck, 2015).

The international user-bases of websites, such as Wikipedia, Urban Dictionary, YouTube, Twitter and Reddit, in conjunction with the global nature of the internet, mean that these online retellings of the drop bear narrative exemplify notions of the internet as a "folkloric conduit" (Blank, 2009, p. 7). These websites facilitate the spread of the drop bear urban legend beyond the confines of geography and time by enabling the performance of collective yarns in a liminal space where meanings are co-created, negotiated, archived, and spread across national borders. As such, the threads and articles outlined above illustrate how the internet has contributed to the dissemination and development of the drop bear legend. According to Peck (2015) "understanding contemporary legends on the Internet relies on understanding the underlying social process of negotiation that circulates them, defines them, and makes them meaningful" (p. 346). In the context of the drop bear tale these processes of negotiation and the creation of meaning have their roots in an Australian yarn that predates many of communications technologies used in contemporary retellings. However, through the performance of narrative via digital and social media the drop bear has acquired a place within

the digital legend cycle and the internet has arguably become one of the most popular domains for the dissemination of this urban legend.

## Conclusion

The drop bear urban legend represents a uniquely Australian iteration of the vampire motif. This narrative occupies a conceptual space of possibility; infused with humour and ambiguity, and located somewhere between truth, lie, joke, fact, and fiction. When viewed in accordance with Bascom's (1965) typology of narrative prose the drop bear could be classified as a folktale, although the narrative is more accurately defined as urban legend in accordance with Koven's (2003) use of the term. Western Australian rock art depictions of carnivorous marsupials, in conjunction with the scratch marks found at Tight Entrance Cave and similarities between descriptions of drop bears and the faunal remains of marsupial lions, have led some to speculate about the possible factual origins of this urban legend. Concurrently, tales of smearing vegemite on oneself reinforce the sense of parody associated with drop bear yarns. Yet regardless of whether it is presented as truth, fiction, cautionary tale, or satire, this urban legend serves to solidify a sense of shared Australian identity among orators in both physical and virtual spaces. The transition of this folklore artefact into the online realm has opened an aspect of Australian expressive culture to the wider world. Online iterations of the narrative now express conventions of urban legend through tenets of networked communications, such as asynchronous interaction and collective multi-media story-telling. The position of the drop bear within the online legend cycle is established; although the mysterious origins of this macabre tale still warrant further investigation.

## References

- Ackerman, K. (2009). Interaction between humans and megafauna depicted in Australian rock art? *Antiquity*, 83(322). Retrieved from: <http://www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/akerman322/>
- Ackerman, K. & Willing, T. (2009). An ancient rock painting of a marsupial lion, *Thylacoleo carnifex*, from the Kimberley, Western Australia. *Antiquity*, 83(319). Retrieved from <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/akerman319/>
- Arman, S. D., & Prideaux, G. J. (2016). Behaviour of the Pleistocene marsupial lion deduced from claw marks in a southwestern Australian cave. *Scientific Reports*, 6. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4753435/>
- Australian Museum (2015). *Drop Bear* [Web page]. Retrieved from <https://australianmuseum.net.au/drop-bear>
- Bascom, W. (1965). The forms of folklore: Prose narratives. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 78(307), 3-20.
- Blank, T. J. (2009). *Folklore and the internet: Vernacular expression in a digital world*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Bonner, S. J. (2016). *Folklore: The basics*. Florence: Taylor and Francis.
- Borgia, D. (2016). Nonnormative sexualities in contemporary vampire novels of Mexico. In D. Fischer-Hornung & M. Mueller (Eds.), *Vampires and zombies: Transcultural migrations and transnational Interpretations* (pp. 110-129). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

- Clary, R., & Wandersee, J. (2011). A coprolite mystery: Who dung it? *Science Scope*, 34(7), 32-42.
- Coate, I. (n.d.). *About Australian Drop Bears* [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.mythocreatology.com/dropbear.html>
- Coate, I. (n.d.). *Danger Rating Scale*. [Digital image]. Retrieved from <http://www.mythocreatology.com/Mythocreates.html>
- Dropbearaware (2009). Drop bear attack caught on film. New Zealander mauled [Online video]. Retrieved from *YouTube*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WD\\_Nh\\_rboQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WD_Nh_rboQ)
- Dropbearaware.com (n.d.). Dropbears are little bastards: Here's how to avoid them [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.dropbearaware.com>
- Drop bear (2003). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved February 24, 2017 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Drop\\_bear&oldid=991682](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Drop_bear&oldid=991682)
- Drop bear (2017). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved February 24, 2017, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drop\\_bear](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drop_bear)
- Drop bears (2014). Drop bear warning uncovered in archives [Online video]. Retrieved from *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kev9VNGCLdc&list=UUeKBLiGM7SR0hVVTiy6YxvQ&feature=share&index=1>
- Dundes, A. (1969). The devolutionary premise in folklore theory. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 6(1), 5-19.
- Erehgafsua. (2014). *Dear America, we heard you couldn't sleep. Love, Australia* [Digital image]. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/1jqlgv/dear\\_america\\_we\\_heard\\_you\\_couldnt\\_sleep\\_love/](https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/1jqlgv/dear_america_we_heard_you_couldnt_sleep_love/)
- Fabre, F. (2002). *La bête du Gévaudan. Editions De Borée*. (Original work published in 1901).
- Gilding, M. (2005). Rampant misattributed paternity: the creation of an urban myth. *People and Place*, 13(12), 1–11.
- Hansen, H. (2016). Menacing koalas known as 'drop bears' aren't totally a myth. *Huffington Post Australia*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/drop-bears-discovery\\_us\\_56e1c5b6e4b0b25c91811ec4](http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/drop-bears-discovery_us_56e1c5b6e4b0b25c91811ec4)
- Irisherself (2017, January 18). Drop bears: Australian Museum link [Twitter post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/irisherself/status/821987076455284736>
- Janssen, V. (2012). Indirect tracking of drop bears using GNSS technology. *Australian Geographer*, 43(4), 445-452.
- JISC (2015). Digital capabilities: The 6 elements defined. Retrieved from <http://digitalcapability.jiscinvolve.org/wp/files/2015/06/1.-Digital-capabilities-6-elements.pdf>
- Johansen, L. (1996). *The Penguin book of Australian slang: A dinkum guide to Oz English*. Sydney: Penguin.
- Koven, M. J. (2003). The terror tale: Urban legends and the slasher film. *Scope: An online journal of film studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2003/may-2003/koven.pdf>
- Koven, M. J. (2006, August, 27). Urban legends how they start and how they persist (H. Whipps, Interviewer) Retrieved from [http://www.btbores.org/Downloads/3\\_Urban%20Legends%20How%20They%20Start%20and%20Why%20They%20Persist%20by%20Heather%20Whipps.pdf](http://www.btbores.org/Downloads/3_Urban%20Legends%20How%20They%20Start%20and%20Why%20They%20Persist%20by%20Heather%20Whipps.pdf)
- Middleton, A. (2013, April 1). *Drop bears target tourists, study says* [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/news/2013/04/drop-bears-target-tourists,-study-says/>
- Melton, G. & Hornick, A. (2015). *The vampire in folklore, history, literature, film and television: A comprehensive bibliography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc.



- Meredith, R. W., Westerman, M., & Springer, M. S. (2009). A phylogeny of Diprotodontia (Marsupialia) based on sequences for five nuclear genes. *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution*, 51, 554–571. doi:10.1016/j.ympev.2009.02.009
- Peck, A. (2015). Tall, dark, and loathsome: The emergence of a legend cycle in the digital age. *Journal of American Folklore*, 128(509), 333–348.
- Perilli, M. L. L., Lima, F., Rodrigues, F. H. G., & Cavalcanti, S. M. C. (2016). Can scat analysis describe the feeding habits of big cats? A case study with jaguars (*Panthera onca*) in Southern Pantanal, Brazil. *PLoS One*, 11(3), 1-12. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0151814
- Pratt, M. (2014). What is a riparian area? [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://articles.extension.org/pages/62490/what-is-a-riparian-area>
- Prideaux, G. J., Gully, G. A., Couzens, A. M. C., Ayliffe, L. K., Jankowski, N. R., Jacobs, Z.,... Hatcher, L. M. (2010). Timing and dynamics of late Pleistocene mammal extinctions in southwestern Australia. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 107(51), 22157–22162. doi:10.1073/pnas.1011073107.
- Regal, B. (2011). Crackpots and eggheads. In *Searching for sasquatch: Crackpots, eggheads, and cryptozoology* (pp. 7-30). New York, NY: Springer.
- Ryan, J. S. (1998). Australian folklore yesterday and today: Definitions and practices. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 8, 127-134.
- Scat (2017). In *Oxford Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/scat>
- Scott, B. (1996). *Pelicans and chihuahuas and other urban legends*. St Lucia: The University of Queensland Press.
- Seidel, J. (2016). Scratch marks in a WA cave show the 'drop bear' (*Thylacoleo carnifex*) could climb particularly well. Retrieved from <http://www.news.com.au/technology/science/scratch-marks-in-a-wa-cave-show-the-drop-bear-thylacoleo-carnifex-could-climb-particularly-well/news-story/5f6af36d077aa792e55239c41a814ecd>
- Seal, G. (1994). Folklore (Australia). In E. Benson and L. W. Conolly (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of post-colonial literatures in English* (Vol. 1). New York, NY: Routledge.
- u/Rik0204, (2015). Drop Bear [Web page]. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/australia/comments/21p42a/drop\\_bear/](https://www.reddit.com/r/australia/comments/21p42a/drop_bear/)
- Un-Woob (2005). *An adorable baby drop bear* [Digital image]. Retrieved from [http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/File:Drop\\_bear.JPG](http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/File:Drop_bear.JPG)
- White, L. (2000). *Speaking with vampires: Rumor and history in colonial Africa*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- White, R. (1994). A brief cultural history of vegemite. In I. Craven, M. Gray & G. Stoneham (Eds.), *Australian popular culture* (pp. 19-20). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, W. (2006). *The marrow of human experience: Essays on folklore*, J.T., Rudy and D. Call (Eds.). Colorado, CA: University Press of Colorado.
- Wildwalks.com (2017). Notice of bushwalking tracks closure [Digital image]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/Wildwalkscom>