

**ABORIGINAL
DREAMTIME STORY**

DUCK HUNTING—RUN!

THE PEOPLING OF AUSTRALIA

**WHALE'S NOT
SAYING WHEN**

No one knows exactly when Australia was settled. Growing archaeological evidence indicates that the first people arrived more than 40,000 years ago, but how much earlier is a matter of debate.

The true natives of Australia, the Australian Aborigines, hand their ancestors' stories down from one generation to the next. The stories reach all the way back to the Aborigines' origins, a time they call the Dreamtime. One Dreamtime story tells about how the first people came to Australia. It begins as many stories do—long, long ago.

And it was long ago. The first people must have come more than 30,000 years ago, because by then Australia had been settled. Pinpointing exactly when the first people stepped onto Australian soil is not easy. It's not as if archaeologists discovered a headstone marked "I was here first!" The archaeologists aren't sure if the bones that they are finding are bones from the first people to come to Australia or bones from people whose ancestors had come to Australia thousands of years before.

One thing that muddies the picture is that sea levels back then were very low. The water levels had dropped so low that New Guinea and Tasmania, which are now islands off the coast of Australia, were joined to the Australian mainland. What was coastline then is underwater now. And since it is likely that the first people to come to Australia settled along the coast, evidence of them is going to be hard to find.

One Dreamtime story tells how the first people came to Australia from a land beyond the sea. Forty thousand years ago, humans couldn't



During the ice ages, sea levels were lower than they are now, so Australia was joined to New Guinea and Indonesia to the Asian mainland. However, humans must still have ventured across the seas to reach Australia for the first time.

have survived a sea voyage from India, China, or Africa. But they could have island-hopped from Southeast Asia. The earliest people to come to Australia probably used the island pathway like stepping stones, sailing or paddling from one island to the next. According to the Dreamtime story, the first people came looking for better hunting grounds:

They knew the voyage would be a long and dangerous one; storms would sweep across the sea and lash the waves into a white fury; the wind would howl like the evil spirits of the forest, the lightning flash across the sky like writhing golden snakes, and death would hide in waiting for them beneath the brown sea kelp. It was therefore necessary for them to have a very strong canoe for the journey.

The largest and sturdiest canoe belonged to Whale. But Whale was not very generous. He would not let anyone use his giant canoe. No one else had a canoe big enough to make the trip to Australia. They needed Whale's canoe. Koala and Bird began to watch Whale's canoe in the hope that he would leave it long enough for them to steal. But Whale guarded his canoe closely.

As with most legends, truths are buried in the tale. The first Australians would have needed a sturdy boat to survive the 50 or more miles between islands to get to Australia. Flimsy rafts or unstable small canoes would have most likely sunk.

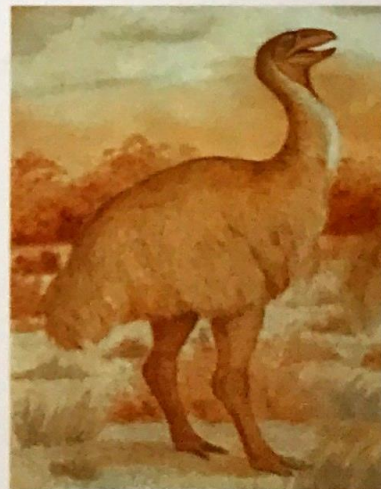
Eventually, thanks to Starfish's devious plan to distract Whale by picking lice from his head, the others were able to snatch the canoe and make for Australia. When Whale found out that Koala and Bird had stolen his canoe he was so mad that he and Starfish had a fight. That's how Starfish got tattered. But Whale didn't get away unharmed. Starfish punched a hole in his head. That's why today you see whales spout through their blowhole—all right, so not everything buried in legends is true.

The Dreamtime stories that come from ancient memories tell tales of rising seas, of climate change that turned lush land to desert, and of a time when giant beasts roamed Australia. You might hear an Australian say he is Kangaroo

TRACKING TRADE

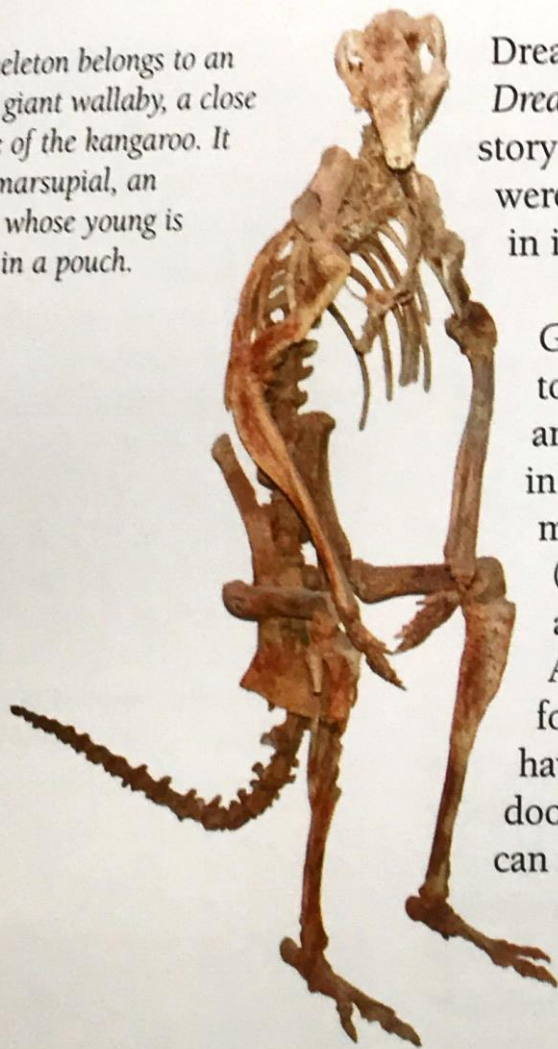
Early people exchanged toolmaking materials. One valued stone—obsidian—has been found on many islands in the Pacific. Because obsidian can only be gathered from a very few locations, it is clear that it was traded throughout the Solomon Islands.

W Aboriginal Dreamtime story, Australia, date unknown



"Demon ducks of doom," the giant flightless birds *Genyornis newtoni* lived in Australia when humans arrived. They stood more than six feet tall. Look at that huge, powerful beak in this artist's reconstruction; *Genyornis* means "jaw bird."

This skeleton belongs to an extinct giant wallaby, a close relative of the kangaroo. It was a marsupial, an animal whose young is nursed in a pouch.



mega + *fauna* = “large” + “all the animals in one region or period of time”

The megafauna are all the large animals in one area, in this case Australia.

ISLAND HOPPING

The Solomon Islands were settled by people who went on a long sea voyage 30,000 years ago. The only way people could have arrived on these islands was by some sort of watercraft.

Dreaming or Wombat Dreaming... or *Giant Duck Dreaming*? This is a case where we know the Dreamtime story is true. When the first people paddled ashore, they were met by strange animals—animals that had evolved in isolation for millions of years.

Australia had once been home to giant beasts—GIANT beasts. There were kangaroos as big as houses, tortoises the size of cars, snakes twenty-five feet long and three feet around, and lizards that would barely fit in your classroom. But without a doubt, the scariest, most ferocious of all was the giant man-eating duck (well, it could have hunted humans, it ate meat and hunted large mammals). The scientists at the Australian museum studying a duck skull that was found in the Northern Territory at Bullock Creek have nicknamed the giant bird “the demon duck of doom.” With a beak the size and shape of an ax, you can understand how it got that name.

By the time the first Australians arrived on the scene, the animals may have downsized a bit, but they were still freakishly gigantic. So what happened to these giant beasts? That’s a good question. Scientists don’t know if they disappeared because humans arrived or because the climate changed. It would help if scientists knew how long ago humans came to Australia and when the **megafauna** left. Until they know for sure, scientists will argue: Did the early settlers hunt the giant beasts into extinction? Did they set fires to promote plant growth for their own food only to burn off everyone else’s dinner? Or when the climate changed and Australia dried up, did the land stop supporting dino-sized ducks? Maybe it was a bit of all three?

As for the ending of the Dreamtime story about the first people to arrive in Australia, it goes like this: when Whale’s canoe got to Australia, Bird was so excited that he jumped up and down punching two holes in the bottom of the bark canoe. It sank. Whale was furious. He can still be seen swimming back and forth offshore, spouting through his blowhole. Maybe he’s not angry. Maybe he’s afraid of the duck.