

The mysterious Wilson B. Sinclair (1894?–1935): dingo trapper, natural history columnist and discoverer of the Purple-necked Rock-wallaby *Petrogale purpureicollis*

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Abstract

In mid-1924, a trapper, Wilson B. Sinclair (1894?–1935), shot some small wallabies that occupied rocky outcrops near Dajarra in north-west Queensland (21°41'S, 139°31'E). He noted an unusual, very marked, pink colouring on the fur around the neck and donated skulls and skins to A. S. Le Souëf, Director of Taronga Park Zoo, Sydney. It was a new species, the Purple-necked Rock-wallaby (*Petrogale purpureicollis*), but the composition and function of the pigmentation are still not understood. Three museums hold a total of 17 macropod specimens that can be attributed to Sinclair, and he has now been identified as the W.B.S. who was the author of regular *Nature Notes* in the *Cairns Post* newspaper from August 1925–May 1928, the first resident nature columnist in Cairns. Many of his *Notes* included local field observations and he also raised conservation issues, such as the need for reserves and public education on the values of wildlife. Sinclair's field notes from elsewhere in Queensland suggest that while making his living as a trapper, he had the eye and memory of a naturalist for the wildlife he encountered. Sinclair is the only trapper-naturalist known to have extended his role to nature writing for the Queensland public. However, he also made extravagant, unverifiable claims to have had experience collecting overseas (possibly based on information from contacts in zoos), and service in WWI (possibly based on the experiences of another trapper-naturalist, Benjamin Hore). There are clues to Sinclair's life and movements from 1924–1935, including through his association with his partner, Kathleen Finn. During the 1930s depression they moved to New South Wales, where Sinclair was unemployed, was convicted of illegal trapping, and died in November 1935. However, Sinclair's origins (said to be in the USA) and his life prior to 1924 cannot be traced, and his identity remains as mysterious as the pigmentation of the Purple-necked Rock-wallaby.

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Introduction

One hundred years ago, a 'Mr. Wilson B. Sinclair' sent skins and skulls of a remarkable rock-wallaby from Ardmore Station, Dajarra, north-west Queensland (21°41'S, 139°31'E), to Albert Sherbourne Le Souëf, Director of Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney (Le Souëf

1924). The skins showed a purplish-pink colouring on the face, head and neck, and based on the colouring and skull characteristics, Le Souëf described a new species, the Purple-necked Rock-wallaby (*Petrogale purpureicollis*) (PNRW: Fig. 1). Genetic studies have

subsequently confirmed its status as a full species (Eldridge *et al.* 2001; Potter *et al.* 2012). The PNRW is patchily, but fairly widely, distributed on rocky outcrops in north-west Queensland (possibly with small populations in the adjacent Northern Territory), but is now considered 'Near Threatened' globally and 'Vulnerable' in Queensland because of its overall population decline (Burbidge & Woinarski 2016; Queensland Government 2023).

Sinclair noted the fugitive nature of the colouring on the fur: "When I secured the specimen sent along, the pink round the neck was very marked, but after the skin was pegged out and dried it seemed to fade" [letter, cited by Le Souëf (1924: 276)]. It was later established that the colouring is secreted onto the fur from the animals' skin and is water-soluble (transferring to the skin of handlers), but its composition and function are not yet understood (Eldridge 2002; M. Eldridge personal communication 27 November 2023). It varies between seasons and between individuals, even in captive animals, and may be related to camouflage or behaviour and reproduction (Eldridge *et al.* 2001; Eldridge 2002; Johnson & Eldridge 2008).

Le Souëf (1924: 273) quoted Sinclair's "splendid account of the habits and habitat of this new wallaby":

Rock Wallabies are fairly numerous here ... I reside just on the edge of the vast open downs, which stretch for hundreds of miles, extending westward into the Territory ... Here is a great granite intrusion that reaches almost to the edge of the downs, and huge granite boulders are strewn about the surface of the ground everywhere. At intervals, are little round hills, averaging 150 feet above the surrounding level, and appearing as heaps of huge granite boulders which someone had gathered and thrown together. These are the homes of the Rock Wallabies. In the early morning and late in the evening they can be seen sitting about on the rocks everywhere, and climbing about on the little hills. Old skeletons are noticeable in the small caves, crevices, and other places under the rocks.

Sinclair's word 'reside' seems to have led Le Souëf (1924) and Eldridge (2002) to assume that he lived at, or owned, Ardmore Station. However, Sinclair described himself as a professional trapper of dingoes (and evidently macropods) who made periodic



Figure 1. Purple-necked Rock-wallaby *Petrogale purpureicollis*, Mt Isa, north-west Queensland, June 2017. David Cook Wildlife Photography (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/kookr/with/40618620843/>), CC BY-NC 2.0.

collecting trips to north-west Queensland (Sinclair 1924). My research has identified him as 'W.B.S.', the earliest resident natural history journalist in Cairns, far north Queensland, who wrote *Nature Notes* columns for the *Cairns Post* between August 1925 and May 1928 (Willey 1926). The letter cited by Le Souëf above is the first known example of Sinclair's writing.

Trappers made their living from the skins of wild animals and needed to understand the "physical structure, homes and habits of fur-bearing animals" (Cartwright & Bailey 1875: Title page) and 'pest' species (Allen & Sparkes 2001). Professional collectors – paid by museums or private patrons to collect wildlife – needed additional skills to prepare specimens and record their physical structure and provenance. Some field workers combined the roles of trapper and collector. Norwegian explorer and zoologist Johan Koren (1879–1919) supplemented his income from museum expeditions with fur-trapping in Siberia, and accumulated his own collection (Thayer *et al.* 1918; Mehlum & Popatov 1995; Follo Museum 2024). In the mid-19th century, in what is now Canada, the Smithsonian Institution gained many thousands of specimens by recruiting indigenous hunters, paying them in trade goods (as paid by the Hudson's Bay Company for furs; Lindsay 1993). The Smithsonian also recruited field managers of the Company as collectors, who received a different range of goods and recognition in scientific circles. Both groups of collectors were trained to prepare and document their specimens (Lindsay 1993).

In Australia, there were many mammal shooters in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Vennard 1928; Hrdina & Gordon 2004) and some shooters gave useful information to museum collectors such as Charles Hoy (1897–1923) about species and changes over time (Short & Calaby 2001). George Hedges (1882–1954), a pastoral station labourer and kangaroo shooter, was engaged as a guide and collector in north-west Queensland by Sir George Hubert Wilkins during his Australian expedition on behalf of the British Museum in 1923–1924 (Wilkins 1928). Apparently, no specimens have been attributed to Hedges (ALA 2023; VertNet 2023), although he collected many for the expedition and Wilkins trained him to prepare even tiny animals (Pike 1954). It was common for professional authors to ignore the achievements of collectors (e.g. Crowley & Garnett 2023) and little else is known about contributions by trappers to natural history collections or knowledge in Australia. This article aims to partly fill this gap by asking who was Sinclair, what were his contributions to north Queensland natural history, and how unusual was his role as a trapper-naturalist?

Methods

I downloaded Sinclair's newspaper columns, and a few letters, from Trove (2020). The Nature Notes were examined to review his personal field observations by species and location; references cited; his comments on conservation, engagement with readers, connections with museums and zoos; and statements about his past life. Sinclair also wrote a few columns on travel, culture and Aboriginal issues, but these are not considered here. Some of Sinclair's statements required significant verification. Further searches were made of newspapers in Trove (2020), the published literature, WWI military records (Dolan 2004; Walsh 2010; NAA 2021) and databases, including state government registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) and Ancestry (2020). I developed a timeline for Sinclair's activities which also incorporated material relating to his partner Catherine (known as Kathleen) Finn (1900–1967).

I also sought information on collectors supplying mammals to Australian museums between 1900–1929 (ALA 2023), and investigated their backgrounds in Ancestry (2020) and the published literature. Specimens collected by Sinclair were identified from online databases (ALA 2023;

VertNet 2023); the Australian Museum (AM; Sydney); and by enquiry at the Queensland Museum (QM; Brisbane). I made the same enquiries about a second trapper-collector identified during this research, Benjamin Hore. The locations of Sinclair's specimen collections and, where possible, his field observations, were mapped in Quantum GIS 3.16.6 (QGIS 2021). Common and scientific names for birds follow the International Ornithological Congress (Gill *et al.* 2023) and other species' names follow the AFD (2023). The terms trapper and shooter are used here interchangeably, as individuals varied their methods according to target species or habitat. Details of unpublished letters are listed after the References.

Results

Sinclair's specimens in museums and zoos

Although Sinclair was a professional trapper, he donated at least some of his collections to museums (Le Souëf 1924; and see also the original label for the holotype, "Pres. W. B. Sinclair"; Fig. 2). Searches identified 17 macropod specimens (skulls and/or flat skins), 12 of PNRW and five of other species, that can be attributed to W. B. Sinclair. All were taken in 1924 near Dajarra, north-west Queensland (21°41'S, 139°31'E), mostly on Ardmore Station.

The PNRW specimens are held at the AM (seven, including the holotype), at QM (three) and two specimens (a skull and a skin) at the Natural History



Figure 2. Skull of Purple-necked Rock-wallaby (holotype) collected by W.B. Sinclair in June 1924. M.3405, Australian Museum (Sydney). Image courtesy Mark Eldridge, Australian Museum. [Note: "2" in the bottom right of the label is a museum notation, not part of the date].

Museum United Kingdom (NHMUK; App. S1). The specimens at NHMUK were transferred from the AM in 1926 and are registered under one accession number (VertNet 2023), although according to the original AM data they were not associated with each other (Parnaby *et al.* 2017). Databases (ALA 2023; VertNet 2023) attribute a number of Sinclair's PNRW specimens to A. S. Le Souëf as sole or joint collector, even though Le Souëf was in Sydney when they were collected (e.g. Anon. 1924a).

Until now, a collector has not been listed for the three PNRW specimens at QM. However, a schedule dated 15 July 1924 (Fig. 3) shows that they were purchased from Wilson B. Sinclair for an unknown sum, including the first PNRW kept in captivity, albeit briefly. Sinclair's account of the transaction suggests that the museum director, A. H. Longman, had commissioned him to obtain a live specimen: Longman had constructed a special enclosure ready for the wallaby (Sinclair 1925a), but it survived only three days there. It is unknown how long it took Sinclair to bring the live rock-wallaby to Brisbane from Dajarra, or how he maintained it at his temporary address – a boarding house in the Brisbane CBD – before delivery to the museum.

Sinclair (1925b) also reported providing live specimens to zoos, although this could not be verified from available archives. He recounted that

while travelling by camel near the Northern Territory border, he caught live pythons – including a Black-headed Python *Aspidites melanocephalus* – for Le Souëf (Sinclair 1925b: 8):

The chap refused all efforts to induce him to partake of food for five months, so that they were compelled to resort to forcible feeding, a milk diet to commence with. Although the Black-headed Python is common enough in many places, yet when I wrote to Mr. A.S. Le Souëf, describing the habitat of this particular species, he assured me that it was the first time anyone had correctly described its habitat.

Other collectors and specimens

Sinclair was one of only two trappers identified among more than 100 known collectors of mammal specimens for Australian museums between 1900–1929 (ALA 2023). At the AM, 1003 mammals were added in 30 years (Table 1), mainly in the 1920s, an active period for accessions at the museum (Hutchings 2010). Most of these specimens had known collectors whose occupations could be identified, and professionals predominated, contributing 895 specimens (89%). These were staff of the AM, staff of similar institutions contributing to the AM, or 'gentlemen zoologists' – members of other professions with an interest in scientific collecting. Paid collectors supplied 50 specimens (5%). Thomas V. Sherrin (1875–1941), who also collected for NHMUK in Australia during the 1920s (e.g. Thomas 1923) was the most active of these. Details of collectors for other museums are limited, for example Museums Victoria holds over 380 mammal specimens collected between 1900–1929, about two-thirds from unknown collectors (ALA 2023).

Only one other collector listed by AM made his living from trapping or shooting native animals for non-scientific purposes. Benjamin Hore (1871–1925) was a kangaroo shooter at Torrens Creek, north-west Queensland (20o47'S, 145o01'E; Fig. 4), where George Hedges (see Introduction) also lived. Hore enlisted in the 5th Australian Light Horse Regiment in 1916 (NAA 2024a) and after WWI took up a soldier-settler block on Torrens Creek, eight miles north of the railway in what is now part of White Mountains National Park (Anon. 1924b; Wilkins 1928). His grave plaque in the Hughenden cemetery (Plot 1098) states: "Ben Hore - Ever remembered. Soldier, sailor, settler, naturalist & father" (Anon.

Figure 3. Purchase schedule for sale of three PNRW specimens to Queensland Museum, 15 July 1924. Reg. nos. 4102–4104, image courtesy of Queensland Museum Research Library.

Table 1. Occupations of collectors of mammal specimens for the Australian Museum, Sydney, (AM) between 1900 and 1929, showing their relative contributions.

Occupations	No. of collectors	No. (%) of specimens
Staff of AM and similar organisations; other professionals interested in natural history	40	895 (89)
Paid collectors, taxidermists & a furrier	5	50 (5)
Farmers and graziers	8	34 (4)
Trapper - W.B. Sinclair	1	12 (1)
Farmer, former kangaroo shooter - Benjamin Hore *	1	1 (0)
Others (including unnamed collectors, named collectors with unknown occupations, and sundry occupation)	9	11 (1)
Total	64	1003 (100)

* Collected by Hore for NHMUK and later transferred to AM.

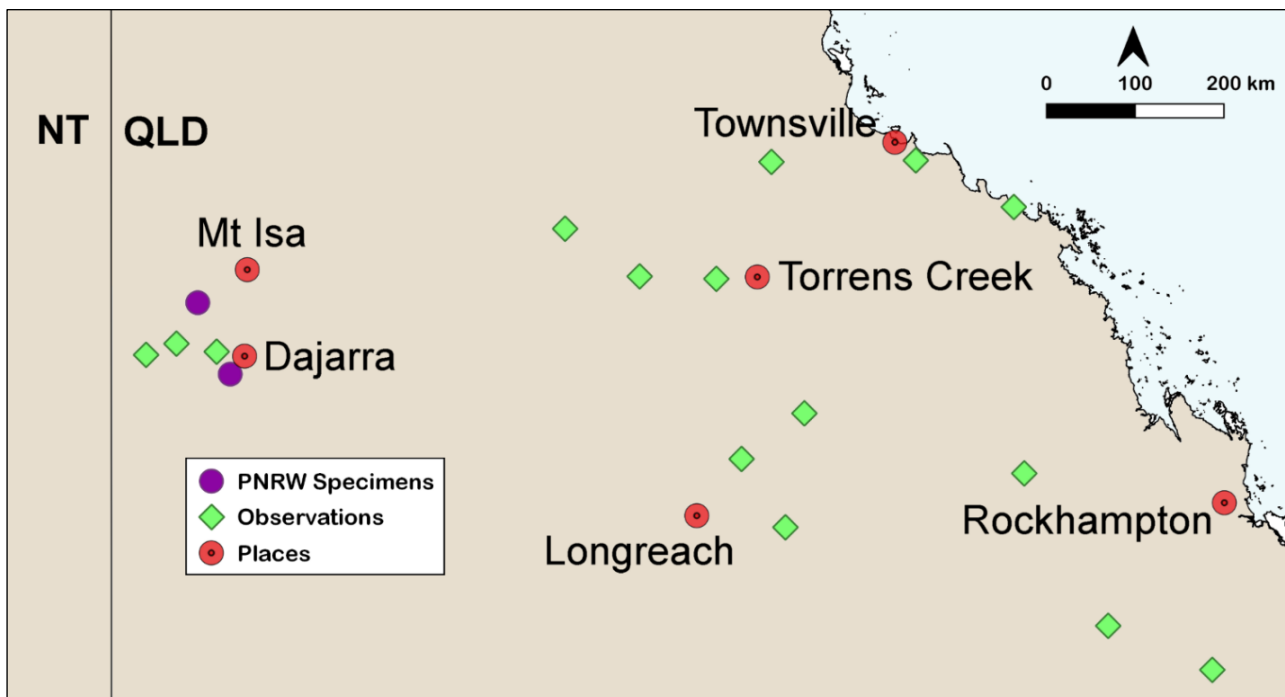


Figure 4. Locations where W. B. Sinclair collected Purple-necked Rock-wallaby (PNRW) specimens and reported observations of other species in Queensland south of Cairns. Ardmore Station homestead is 34 km NW of Dajarra.

2008: 5). In 1921, James Robertson Chisholm (1855–1927), author of the Along the Line columns for Queensland newspapers, lived at Prairie, near Torrens Creek, and wrote to Hore asking if he could provide kangaroo skulls for the QM. Hore responded, listing marsupial specimens already in his possession (including some scientific names; Letter 1) and agreed to obtain additional species. Chisholm

forwarded this reply to A.H. Longman at QM (Letter 2). Hore provided a total of 16 specimens of 12 different mammal species to the museum, mostly in 1921 (App. S4). In 1923, Hore supplied a specimen of Allied Rock-wallaby (*P. assimilis*) from Torrens Creek to Sir George Wilkins’ expedition, later exchanged to the AM (App. S4). Wilkins (1928: 78) described Hore as a war veteran “who takes a

keen interest in natural history". Interestingly, Wilkins' (1928) description of the behaviour of the Spectacled Hare-wallaby (*Lagorchestes conspicillatus*) is almost identical to Hore's account in Letter 1, received by Longman in 1921.

In June 1922, Longman wrote to QM contacts in outback Queensland – including Hore – seeking their opinions on the danger of kangaroo and wallaroo extinction and the benefit of establishing protective reserves (Letter 3). Longman's subsequent article 'Is the kangaroo doomed?' was published in the *Australian Zoologist* (Longman 1923a) and widely reported in newspapers (e.g. Longman 1923b). Longman's article included most of Hore's lengthy response (Letter 4) about marsupial habitats, behaviour and numbers. QM had earlier paid rail freight for Hore's specimens but later added an honorarium of £2, for the specimens he had specifically collected for QM (Letters 4, 5). Hore also informed A. S. Le Souëf about the 'swarming' of thousands of Long-haired Rats (*Rattus villosissimus*) in north-west Queensland in 1907 (Le Souëf et al. 1926), but the date of their correspondence is unknown. A possible connection between Sinclair and Hore is discussed below.

'Nature Notes', August 1925 – May 1928

Between August 1925 and May 1928, Sinclair published 159 editions of *Nature Notes*, with an average length of 780 words. The first few appeared in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, but most were in the *Cairns Post*, with 103 reprints in the associated *Northern Herald*. The *Cairns Post* held functions to welcome or farewell members of the 'literary staff' (e.g. Anon. 1927a) but this apparently did not occur for Sinclair, implying that he was a freelance columnist only. More than half his articles discussed birds, but mammals, reptiles, insects and marine life were also covered. The conservation issues most frequently raised were the creation of reserves and sanctuaries; 'useful birds'; indiscriminate shooting by picnickers and youths with pea rifles; introduced species; and clearing. Sinclair also commented on scientific debates (e.g. in support of the theory of evolution) and community issues, particularly education about nature and the value of natural history. He enthusiastically reported a conversation with a naturalist returned from Willis Island (in the Coral Sea, 450 km east of Cairns; Sinclair 1925c), but was disappointed in most encounters with the public in Cairns, who seemed uninterested in

wildlife (e.g. Sinclair 1926a). In December 1926 he instigated a children's essay competition "to promote observations at first-hand and a love of the birds of our bush" (Sinclair 1927a: 8), in collaboration with the *Cairns Post* children's editor 'Rosemary' (Marion Willey), a keen supporter of bird conservation (Scambler & Grant 2022). Sinclair funded the prizes, totalling £1/1/- (Willey 1926).

Sinclair was interested in captive animals; he regretted that Brisbane had no zoo and devoted a whole article to recent acquisitions at Taronga Park in Sydney (Sinclair 1927b,c). He also cited an early interest in collecting, recounting that in 1913 (aged 19?) he visited an American ship docked at Melbourne, Victoria, "to see if they had any interesting specimens" from Bass Strait (Sinclair 1926b: 12).

Sinclair appealed for input from readers (e.g. Sinclair 1926c), and a few responses were reported, including some he referred to museums. Many articles included his own field observations (see below), and he also discussed overseas species, using written sources. Some references Sinclair mentioned cannot be identified, but he frequently referred to Leach's (1923) book on Australian birds, a book on Australasian mammals (Le Souëf et al. 1926), and articles from the *Australian Zoologist*. One *Nature Notes* column included an observation of Hore's, from Longman's (1923) article on kangaroos (Sinclair 1928a). Sinclair also had access to either *Emu* (journal of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union), or a source of regular reports taken from *Emu* articles; and nature-related newspaper articles, some earlier than 1925.

Natural history observations

Sinclair reported field observations from the Cairns region in more than a third of his articles (36%), and notes on overseas species likewise (35%). His other natural history observations (in 47% of columns) were from central and north-west Queensland north of 25°30'S and south of 19°22'S, mostly inland (Fig. 4), including the Torrens Creek district. The estimates Sinclair gave for distances between places mentioned in his writings were accurate. Many of his field notes were realistic, particularly about bird behaviour and habitats, but he also made errors. There were thousands of Brolgas (*Antigone rubicunda*) in swamps south of Townsville (e.g. Anon. 1922), but Sinclair estimated

the numbers seen there in “a day’s ride” as 250,000 (Sinclair 1925d: 7) – even though the estimated global population is currently 100,000 (Mirande & Harris 2019). He combined accurate descriptions of foraging habitats of the Australian Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) with the statement that it nests on precipitous cliffs and coastal islands, clearly gleaned from literature about the (New World) Brown Pelican (*P. occidentalis*; Sinclair 1926d). Nevertheless, he correctly contradicted widely-syndicated nature columnist James Devaney (‘Fabian’) on the diet of the Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachii*; Sinclair 1926e).

Several of Sinclair’s writings indicate that he trapped possums as well as macropods for the skin market, including in the 1926 open season while working as a journalist. He commented on government regulations and fees, on trapping methods and the viability of the possum industry, and reported observations of possum behaviour (Sinclair 1926f). Presumably to support his new role as a nature writer, he presented some experiences as though he were an observer. For example, he gave a graphic account of kookaburras scavenging scraps of possum meat when he ‘camped beside’ a trapper for some time (Sinclair 1926e: 7): “During the past Opossum season I erected my calico mansion close by an Opossum trapper’s camp, and was much interested in the daily life of the birds ...” Conversely, his notes on the koala (‘native bear’, *Phascolarctos cinereus*) were mostly on habitat, and suggest that he was an observer only; he proposed that the koala should be protected for the next ten years (e.g. Sinclair 1926g).

Who was “Wilson Byron Sinclair”?

Sinclair’s life (App. S2) is sparsely documented. Notably, despite extensive searches, none of the vital details on his death certificate (NSW BDM 1935: App. S3) can be verified. The first occurrences of his name in any source relate to specimens collected in 1924, together with a letter to the press about dingo trapping methods and non-payment of bounties by the Boulia Dingo Board (Sinclair 1924). The next verifiable event was in October 1924, when Thuringowa Shire Council (since incorporated into Townsville City Council) rejected a tender from Wilson Byron Sinclair for removal of night soil (Anon. 1924c). This was the first record of the second name ‘Byron’. Documents relating to his partner Kathleen Finn, a

dance teacher originally from Townsville (also known as Lloyd Dalton Le Strange: App. S2), reveal that he directed a dance and music show she designed for her students and other performers in Cairns (Anon. 1927b). Sinclair claimed to be an American, but Finn – an Australian citizen – was required to register on the electoral roll and vote from age 21, in 1921 (John & De Bats 2014). No evidence can be found that she ever enrolled (as Finn, Le Strange, or Sinclair). In 1927 Sinclair joined the Royal Zoological Society of NSW (Anon. 1927c) giving his address as C/- the *Cairns Post*.

Sinclair’s final column in May 1928 (Sinclair 1928b) outlined plans for future articles, but these never eventuated. Once his nature columns ended, Sinclair appears to have had no income. In January 1928 he (presumably with Finn) drove through south-west Queensland apparently looking for work, noting drought and high unemployment (Sinclair 1928c). Legal trapping was increasingly restricted (e.g. Hrdina & Gordon 2004) and by 1931, with national unemployment as high as 30% (Jonson & Stevens 1983), the couple was destitute (Anon. 1931). In June of that year Sinclair – described as an unemployed Queensland journalist, aged 37 – was convicted in Grafton Police Court, NSW, of being in possession of 26 skins of protected animals (‘opossums’) without a permit and driving an unregistered vehicle (Anon. 1931). In his defence he referred to his connection with Le Souëf, membership of the Zoological Society and his discovery of the PNRW. He also cited membership of ‘literary societies’, which cannot be traced. Police and their families generously supported Finn (who was accepted as Sinclair’s wife) and helped to repair the vehicle, but it is unknown whether Sinclair was able to pay the fines imposed or had to undergo a term of imprisonment.

In 1932, they were living in Warialda, 80 km east of Moree, NSW, which was the last address known to Finn’s siblings (Anon. 1937). In 1933, a small property in Townsville that Finn had inherited from her mother was compulsorily sold for non-payment of rates, her last known address (probably in 1930) being C/- W. B. Sinclair at a boarding house in Brisbane (Townsville City Council 1933). In August 1934, Sinclair, of Biniguy (between Warialda and Moree), was admitted to Moree District Hospital (Anon. 1934) with terminal aortitis (severe aortic inflammation associated with syphilis). He was released from hospital at the end of October 1935

and died on 5 November, at the presumed age of 41. A letter in which he thanked the hospital for his care was read out at the Board meeting of 25 November (Anon. 1935a). Kathleen Finn was not listed in notices relating to the deaths of her siblings (e.g. McKimmins Pty Ltd 1944). The only record for her after 1935 was a death certificate issued for Lloyd Dalton Sinclair, widow, at Morisset (Mental) Hospital, NSW, in October 1967 (BDM NSW 1967; Lake Macquarie Libraries 2024).

Sinclair gave no supporting evidence for claims that he had been a professional hunter and collector in many parts of the world, collected in the Mandated Territories of New Guinea, seen an albino kangaroo in the Calcutta Zoo, hunted and collected in German West Africa under the leadership of a noted German professor, and travelled thousands of miles by camel from Wyndham in north-west WA via Alexandria Station, NT, to Dajarra (Sinclair 1924; 1925c,e,f,g). All W. Sinclairs recorded as arriving in Australia by ship between 1913 and 1930 had come from London; and there is no record of a Sinclair arriving from either Calcutta or Bombay during this period (NAA 2024b).

In his published writings, Sinclair made no reference to serving in WWI. However, multiple obituaries (e.g. Anon. 1935b) reported not only service in the 5th Australian Light Horse Regiment, but also that he had been promoted to Captain 'from the ranks'. He was given a military funeral by the Moree sub-branch of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia, and a witness of the burial was the sub-branch President, E. B. W. Daniel, a Moree Alderman (Anon. 1935b; NSW BDM 1935). However, the only 'Sinclair' recorded as serving in the 5th Light Horse was Leslie Duncan Sinclair (1892–1959), a mercantile clerk of Brisbane, who was promoted to Lieutenant from the ranks (NAA 2021). No person with the initials W. B. S. served in the regiment and no person could be found who was promoted to Captain from the ranks while serving in the regiment (Dolan 2004; Walsh 2010; NAA 2021). Place of birth was not always registered for recruits in WWI, but Dolan (2004) gave name and address of next of kin for all but 120 of ~2,300 recruits to the 5th Light Horse between 1914–1919. None were listed as being born in the USA. Two servicemen (both Canadians) who cited next of kin in the USA were still living after 1935 (Ancestry 2020; NAA 2021).

Intriguingly, Cairns Historical Society holds a photograph (CHS P27730) of the *Cairns Post* staff picnic in 1925, but no names are inscribed and, as of April 2024, no other photographs of Sinclair or Finn can be found for comparison.

Discussion

Natural history columns were popular reading in north Queensland newspapers in the first half of the 20th century (Ryan 1991). Until Sinclair's arrival, the *Cairns Post* republished some nature columns from other regions, occasional features such as an article on butterflies by F.P. Dodd of Kuranda, and Queensland government articles promoting the Great Barrier Reef as a tourist destination (Dodd 1922; Anon. 1923). Local natural history was represented by 'bush yarns', particularly by 'Coyyan' (Michael O'Leary), a prospector who published notes of his long-term connections with Aboriginal communities and some wildlife observations (Borland 1940). Sinclair's text could be verbose or laboured, but his regular inclusion of local natural history observations was a precursor to Dr Hugo Flecker's proposal "That the local Press be requested to establish a column for nature notes of special local interest" (Anon. 1932: 4). This was part of Flecker's 'manifesto' which led to the founding of the North Queensland Naturalists Club (NQNC) in 1932, but his long series of *Current Nature Topics* in the *Post* did not begin until 1935 (Scambler & Grant 2022). Drayson (1997) proposed a distinction between natural history writers (who presented their own field notes or contributions from correspondents), and writers using secondary sources such as books or other articles. He called the latter writing 'popular science'. Far north Queensland nature writers, however, combined both. Sinclair tried to link local material to wider scientific knowledge and highlighted current scientific or conservation issues, and this was also the practice of Flecker and his successor in *Current Nature Topics*, John Orrell (Orrell 1963; Scambler & Grant 2022).

Sinclair's disappointment with public indifference to the wonders of north Queensland wildlife recurred as a key factor in the later founding of the NQNC (Francis 1932), and the conservation issues he had raised persisted, to the concern of later writers in Cairns. For example, Devaney (1924: 19), based in Brisbane, wrote that the nature studies movement in schools had made "the pea rifle a

thing of the past". The regions were clearly different: Sinclair regularly raised reckless shooting as an issue, as did Flecker in the 1930s, and it only declined near Cairns in the 1940s because of wartime restrictions on firearms and travel (Scambler & Grant 2022).

The difficulty of verifying details listed on Sinclair's death certificate, and the lack of any documentation prior to 1924, suggest a change of identity. Sinclair often referred to his field observations as 'several years ago', and his records from central and north-west Queensland support the assumption that, before emerging as discoverer of the PNRW in 1924, he had spent several years moving between pastoral properties, presumably trapping dingoes for bounty and shooting marsupials for skins. During this time – like Benjamin Hore – he clearly had the outlook of a naturalist, taking an interest in wildlife distribution and behaviour.

Dingo bounty payments were unreliable and although the skin market was variable, it was more profitable (Sinclair 1924; Hrdina & Gordon 2004). Skins were thus probably Sinclair's main source of income, supplemented by casual labouring and occasional collections of live animals. The rates for freelance columns at the *Cairns Post* are unknown, but were probably low (J. Wegner personal communication 28 November 2023). Nevertheless – augmented by trapping income, at least in 1926 – journalism enabled Sinclair to flourish as a local nature writer. He watched and photographed birds, bought books and subscriptions, read as widely as possible, and funded the children's essay prize. He also engaged in theatrical activities and possibly a literary circle. The regional recession that affected Queensland in the late 1920s (Costar 1981) may have led to Sinclair's termination from the *Cairns Post*. The *Post* then had no regular natural history columnist until 1935, although the masthead still had an interest in promoting wildlife issues. For example, Marion Willey organised another children's essay competition in 1929, judged (and the prizes funded) by Edmund Jarvis, Government Entomologist at the Meringa Research Station, Gordonvale (Anon. 1929).

As for Sinclair's wilder claims, given his presumed age of 20 in 1914, there hardly seems time for him to have travelled and collected widely around the world, as well as serving in WWI. Perhaps he did neither. Although there *was* an albino kangaroo in the Calcutta Zoo (Flower 1914), and although

Sinclair correctly reported that illegal bird of paradise plumes were smuggled out of the Mandated Territories of New Guinea (under Australian jurisdiction) and exported through Dutch territory (Sinclair 1925c; Swadling 2019), this information could have been acquired through zoo contacts such as Le Souëf. Sinclair's claim of military service is problematic – either he served in a different capacity, under a different name, or this claim was false 'stolen valour'. Perhaps when dying in Moree he felt the need to create a past that would win the respect of the local community, but to convince genuine veterans he would have needed knowledge of life on overseas military service. His specification of the 5th Light Horse Regiment and his work history in central and north-west Queensland, including Torrens Creek, suggest that this military knowledge was gained from kangaroo-shooter and naturalist Benjamin Hore. As professional trappers of native animals, Sinclair and Hore were unusual – they shared a wide interest in natural history, contacts with Le Souëf and Longman, and some collecting for museums. A connection between them could also illuminate Sinclair's real disappointment with the indifference of Cairns residents to wildlife.

Benjamin Hore and George Hedges gave valuable natural history information to museums, but their contributions are known only from fragments in publications by museum professionals. Sinclair, however, extended his role into natural history writing for the public. While his *Nature Notes* had local significance in the development of nature writing in far north Queensland, Sinclair's major achievement was that at the presumed age of 30, he appreciated that the rock-wallabies he was trapping near Dajarra were different from any others he had encountered, and that he decided to send specimens to experts for investigation. Regrettably, his background and early life remain as mysterious as the pigmentation of the Purple-necked Rock-wallaby.

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Supplementary files

A supplementary Excel file accompanies this paper. It contains four worksheets:

- Appendix S1: Specimens collected by Wilson B. Sinclair;
- Appendix S2: Events in the life of Wilson B. Sinclair;
- Appendix S3: Death certificate, Wilson Byron Sinclair; and
- Appendix S4: Specimens collected by Benjamin Hore.

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