

Tigers in Singapore

by *Marsita Omar*

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Tigers in Singapore (*Panthera tigris jacksoni*)¹ were sighted mostly in the forested areas of [Bukit Timah](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_730_2005-01-25.html), [Choa Chu Kang](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_245_2004-12-15.html), [Tampines](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_245_2004-12-15.html)² and [Changi](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_245_2004-12-15.html) during the 19th century until the 1930s. They became a menace to the populace when large swathes of Singapore's forests were cleared for roads and plantations. Subsequently, the intensive hunt for tigers, bolstered by the promise of financial rewards for their capture and killing, led to their diminished numbers and eventually wiping them out from the wild.

Early records

The thick virgin jungles that covered Singapore, home to prey like pigs and deer, were the hunting grounds of tigers.³ Being good swimmers, tigers were known to swim across the [Strait of Johor](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_787_2005-01-24.html) into Singapore, some even getting caught in fishing stakes along the shore.⁴

The earliest newspaper report about the existence of tigers was published on 8 September 1831 in the [Singapore Chronicle](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_513_2005-01-06.html). It was reported that a male Chinese national had been killed by a tiger, and that the same tiger probably had also killed a local shortly after.⁵ In 1835, colonial architect [G. D. Coleman](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_134_2004-12-10.html) and some [convict labourers](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_39_2005-02-02.html) were attacked while they were laying a new road through a swamp in the jungle near town, but no one was killed.⁶ In May 1839, [The Singapore Free Press](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_88_2005-02-03.html) reported that two Chinese had been carried off by tigers near a newly built road called Rangong Road (today's [Serangoon Road](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_24_2005-01-10.html)).⁷

When the cultivation of [gambier](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_337_2005-01-03.html) and pepper took off in Singapore in the 1840s, plantations extended beyond town and encroached on jungle areas. By the late 1840s, the number of plantations had peaked at 600.⁸ Chinese plantation [coolies](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_87_2004-12-15.html) became easy targets for tigers. Reports of encounters with tigers increased in the 1830s and 1840s.⁹

Tiger attacks grew so intense that, by the middle of the 19th century, tigers were rumoured to claim one life every day.¹⁰ Governor of the Straits Settlements William Butterworth, upon being questioned in the House of Commons about the tiger problem, stated that the figure was probably 200 deaths a year due to tiger killings – which was nonetheless alarming in a population of 50,000 people.¹¹ In 1859, one village near Bukit Timah was abandoned due to overwhelming tiger attacks.¹²

It was believed that tigers in Singapore killed 300 humans in 1857, but only seven deaths were reported to the police. The actual figure could be higher as many tiger attacks were unreported. Plantation bosses often did not report the deaths as they did not want to scare away potential workers.¹³ During the 1860s, more than 350 lives were lost because of tigers.¹⁴

Containing the tiger menace

In order to contain the tiger problem, the government initially offered a reward of \$20 for every tiger killed. But the growing number of casualties led to the reward being progressively increased – to \$50, \$100 and \$150.¹⁵ Pits with a depth of 4 to 4.5 m were dug and traps set. Tigers caught were sometimes hauled out alive and put into strong rattan baskets that they could not bite through.¹⁶ Other times, they were shot dead in the pit.¹⁷ Their skin and body parts could also be sold for extra money, up to an additional \$70.¹⁸ Tiger hunting became seen as a rewarding sport that offered money and adventure, and two Europeans even made a living out of tiger hunting.¹⁹

In 1859, in response to the tiger threat, Superintendent of Convicts [J. F. A McNair](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1708_2010-10-10.html) arranged for some convict labourers to patrol the Bukit Timah, Serangoon, Changi and Choa Chu Kang districts. These patrols led to the killing of half a dozen or so tigers within a year.²⁰ Occasional tiger attacks were still reported towards the end of the 19th century: A man was killed by a tiger at Thomson Road in 1890, and two tigers were shot in Bukit Timah in 1896.²¹

In 1902, a tiger wandered from its travelling circus on [Beach Road](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_889_2004-12-23.html) and was shot by the principal of nearby [Raffles Institution](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_17_2004-12-21.html), Charles McGowan Phillips, in the [~ Recommendations ~](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_37_2005-01-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

[Abraham Logan](#)

Abraham Logan (b. 31 August 1816, Hattan Hall, Berwickshire, Scotland–d. 20 December 1873, Penang, Straits Settlements) ...

[Thomas Braddell](#)

Thomas Braddell, C. M. G. (b. 30 January 1823, Rahingrany, Ireland–d. 19 September 1891, London, England) was Crown ...

[Thomas Shelford](#)

Thomas Shelford (b. 23 November 1839, Cosford, Suffolk, England–d. 12 January 1900, Guildford, Surrey, England), CMG, ...

[Raffles Lighthouse](#)

Raffles Lighthouse is located on Pulau Satumu, or "one tree island", 23 km southwest of Singapore, at the western entrance ...

[Joseph Balestier](#)

Joseph Balestier (b. circa 1788, France?–d. 1858, York, Pennsylvania, United States) was the first consul to Singapore ...

[Singapore Library \(1845–1874\)](#)

The Singapore Library, which grew out of the Singapore Institution Library, was established on 22 January 1845 as a ...

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05.html). It had been hiding under the hotel's Bar & Billiard Room, an elevated building.²² The last wild tiger, roaming in Choa Chu Kang, was shot and killed in October 1930.²³

(file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/Siok%20Muoi Sharon Fiona publishing%20articles/Tigers%20in%20Singapore_final.docx#_ftn23). Author

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