

Television Premiere Thursday 16 July 2009 at 8:30pm on ABC1

FERAL PERIL

Tasmania is one of the world's last great wildlife havens but its struggling native species are under threat from a feral fox invasion. Or are they?

WINNER

*Best Narration Award, Merit Award for Editing & Merit Award for Script
2009 International Wildlife Film Festival, USA*

OFFICIAL SELECTION

2009 Reel Earth - the Aotearoa Environmental Film Festival, New Zealand

OFFICIAL SELECTION

2009 Globians Doc Fest Berlin

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www.screenaustralia.gov.au/showcases/feralperil



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Key Creatives

Director – ANDREW SULLY

Producer – GINA TWYBLE

Executive Producer for Magic|Real Picture Company – IAN WALKER

Executive Producer for Screen Australia – PENNY ROBINS

Writers – ANDREW SULLY, ALEX BARRY, IAN WALKER

Editor – HENRY DANGAR ASE

Director of Photography – JOHN BIGGINS

Composer – CAITLIN YEO

Commissioning Editor for ABC – ALAN ERSON

Narrator – WILLIAM McINNES

Duration – 55 minutes

Website - www.screenaustralia.gov.au/showcases/feralperil

Feral Peril is a Screen Australia National Documentary Program and Magic|Real Picture Company production in association with Screen Tasmania. Made in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. © Screen Australia, Screen Tasmania 2008.

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Synopses

One line

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One paragraph

Tasmania is one of the world's last great wildlife havens but its struggling native species are under threat from a feral fox invasion. Or are they? There's some nasty business going down in Australia's island state. A feral intruder is on the loose. He's cunning, deadly and a master of stealth, so expert at flying under the radar that some believe he doesn't even exist.

One page

Tasmania is one of the world's last great wildlife havens but its struggling native species are under threat from a feral fox invasion. Or are they?

There's some nasty business going down in Australia's island state. A feral intruder is on the loose. He's cunning, deadly and a master of stealth, so expert at flying under the radar that some believe he doesn't even exist.

He's *Vulpes vulpes*, the elusive and adaptable European red fox, and the hunt is on to destroy him before he destroys Tasmania's struggling native fauna.

Feral Peril follows the "Fox Squad", a team employed under the Tasmanian Government's fox eradication program, as they chase down sightings, gather evidence and battle public scepticism in a bid to avert ecological disaster.

The squad draws on the latest technology including DNA sampling, satellite mapping and photography, but it's not enough to convince the "super sceptics", who will be convinced only by the discovery of a fox, dead or alive.

But time is running out. While evidence suggests fox numbers are on the rise, Tasmania's top native predator, the Tasmanian Devil, is being decimated by a mysterious disease. And as Devil numbers decline, foxes are on the rise.

Feral Peril introduces the stakeholders – the Fox Squad, the sceptics, the hunters, the scientists, the zoo-keepers and the graziers – as each battles to solve a problem that threatens not only Tasmania's pristine ecology, but its agriculture, its tourism and the strength of its economy.

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Production Story

Feral Peril was conceived in late 2007 after executive producer Ian Walker and director Andrew Sully saw media reports about the growing fox problem in Tasmania and the government's attempt to tackle it with a well-funded eradication branch or "Fox Squad".

"I was intrigued by the idea that there was a lot of money being spent in Tasmania to set up a very high-tech bunch of people who were dedicated to eradicating foxes, but their dilemma was that they couldn't find one," Walker says. "My instinct was that this was a very funny and curious kind of problem."

But behind this amusing dilemma lay a serious issue – the real and imminent threat to a struggling iconic Australian species, the Tasmanian Devil, by growing numbers of feral foxes.

"I'd never heard the link between foxes and devils. More of one means less of the other. The loss of the Tasmanian Devil would be an absolute tragedy for Tassie, which is one of the last great pristine wilderness areas on the planet and one of Australia's most saleable eco destinations."

Walker, along with Sully and producer Gina Twyble set about telling the story, assembling the characters and making a film, which they hoped would deliver a serious educational message in an entertaining way.

"We were in luck with our timing," Walker says. "We were unsure that we would get an unfolding investigation, but we got a very good sighting by grazier Tina Taylor and then a follow-up investigation that found evidence of a fox. It was one of the days when the documentary goddess smiles upon you."

Twyble concurs. "Our schedule didn't allow us to wait for days for the animals to do what we wanted them to do. Fortunately we *did* find some Tasmanian Devils and we got some extremely good footage of them."

The passion with which the subject has been embraced in Tasmania made it easy to assemble the "cast", including sceptic Ian Rist, wildlife biologist Nick Mooney, investigator John McConnell, hunter Peter Darke, environmental philosopher Professor Andrew Brennan and shearer Jacko Flood.

"There's no one in Tasmania who doesn't have an opinion on this, they're really passionate about it," Walker says. "Everyone will tell you a story about someone who knows someone, some other part of the conspiracy that you may not have heard."

When first approached to participate in *Feral Peril*, former Film Australia (now Screen Australia) was looking to increase its collection of science programs under the National Interest Program, says Screen Australia executive producer Penny Robins. Robins was drawn to this contemporary treatment of serious scientific/natural history subject matter, using a hybrid of drama, science and wildlife filmmaking techniques. Here was an opportunity to support a team of filmmakers to break into a new area of filmmaking.

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“It’s an Australian story about an ecosystem under serious threat,” Robins says. “There aren’t many pristine wilderness areas left in the world and this gave us the chance to study the potential impact of the invasion of an intruder into an ecosystem.”

The filmmakers hope their film will make people consider the role that humans play in the environment and to recognise their place in the wider ecosystem.

“*Feral Peril* shows how we’re all connected,” Twyble says. “If you take one piece of the jigsaw away the rest becomes particularly vulnerable.”

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Interview with director Andrew Sully

If – as the old adage goes – you should never work with children or animals, then working with wild animals in the remote Tasmanian wilderness just adds a bit extra to the challenge.

For director Andrew Sully, the month-long film shoot required for *Feral Peril* meant dealing with inclement weather, remote locations and late-night shoots. But the biggest challenge in filming a documentary about the feral fox menace in Tasmania was the absence of the main character – the fox.

“The story is about the threat to Tasmania’s wildlife by the feral fox yet the chance of actually filming a fox, in the low numbers that they are reported to be in Tasmania, was extremely slim,” Sully says.

So slim in fact, that, while fox sightings are common, conspiracy theories abound as to whether they actually exist.

Sully decided the best way to tackle the story was by tapping into the crime elements he continually encountered during his research – accusations of smuggling, allegations of evidence tampering, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, forensic investigators, “crime” scene analysis and, most bizarre, suggestions of fox poo falling from the back of trucks.

“What I love about documentary-making is that you uncover these little worlds of people who you don’t hear about usually,” he says. “This story was full of these animal detectives. The Fox Branch has investigators; they use forensic techniques, they talk about tactical responses. One investigator refers to the fox as a four-legged terrorist.”

The fox itself was the “mysterious and elusive villain”, the endangered Tasmanian Devil, the “damsel in distress” of the story. Then a vocal group of sceptics threw in the requisite red herrings and added to an idiosyncratic cast of characters.

“It presented all the ingredients of a classic detective genre story. The biggest problem for the Fox Branch was, like any murder mystery, no body. Even though the story is serious, we wanted the audience to enjoy the journey. We wanted to find an unusual and unexpected way of presenting a wildlife-ecological documentary.”

But Sully’s biggest wish is that viewers see beneath the light-hearted filmmaking approach to the serious issue it addresses.

“I think people don’t appreciate how much we’ve lost on mainland Australia in terms of species and habitat,” he says.

“Mainland Australia has lost 20 mammal species since white settlers arrived. Tasmania is a unique and rare place with many animal and plant species that are found nowhere else in the world. I hope viewers will appreciate the urgent need and take some action, however small, to protect its biodiversity before it’s too late.”

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Background to Tasmania's Fox Eradication Program

In June 2001, the Tasmanian Government formed the Fox Free Task Force to rid Tasmania of existing foxes and reduce the risk of any future fox incursions.

The elusive and adaptable predator is recognised nationally as the most devastating introduced pest and threat to Australia's native wildlife. Its presence in Tasmania threatens the state's fragile ecology, native wildlife, agriculture, tourism and economy, with a fox outbreak estimated cost to the community of \$20 million a year.

The taskforce was significantly expanded and renamed the Fox Eradication Program in November 2006, with a \$56 million, 10-year strategy to build on work to date, jointly financed by the Australian and Tasmanian Governments.

The branch's objectives are:

- To eradicate foxes from Tasmania by developing a coordinated strategic response, building on the work of the "Fox Task Force".
- To prevent incursions of foxes into Tasmania.
- To gain broad community cooperation and support and to develop a community attitude that actively opposes the presence of foxes in Tasmania.
- To gain a better understanding of population trends of at-risk species.

Under the program, a well-resourced "fox squad" identifies areas of fox activity and develops ways to detect them. Using the latest technology, investigators follow up fox sightings and gather evidence of fox activity, including unusual footprints, possible den sites and suspicious stock kills.

It is not easy. Much of Tasmania's 60,000 square kilometres remains unpopulated and covered by large tracts of wilderness. Add to this the foxes' elusive nature and ability to avoid people or situations that threaten them.

According to information gathered by the squad, the density of a Tasmanian fox population may be as low as one fox per 500 square kilometres. Research in other parts of the world suggests that even at a density of one per 25 square kilometres, finding evidence of foxes is almost impossible.

But evidence of the fox presence in Tasmania has been building with scientists confirming that 26 scats collected over the past year originated from foxes.

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About the Filmmakers

Andrew Sully — writer/director

Andrew Sully is an award-winning writer and director, working in both drama and documentary. Andrew began working in Tasmania in 2005 while filming a four-part ABC series, *The Shearers*. *Suspicious Minds*, an eight-part documentary series for the Nine Network based around Victoria's Institute of Forensic Medicine, was a comprehensive study of the cutting-edge work of forensic scientists. Andrew's recent credits include an episode of the *Two of Us* for SBS Television, while his earlier documentary work includes the Film Australia and ABC TV series *East Timor - Birth of a Nation*, *Once Were Monks* (Film Australia/SBS TV) and *Hell Bento!!* (SBS TV). *Black Dogs*, his graduating film at the Victorian College of the Arts, won numerous local and international awards. He is currently directing *Anatomy of a Massacre: Uncovering the Truth of Santa Cruz* for ABC TV.

Gina Twyble — producer

Gina Twyble has had an extensive career in the production of documentaries and drama. After completing a communications degree majoring in writing and radio production, she spent five years working as a scriptwriter and producer across a range of genres. In 1993 Gina began working as a production manager and production supervisor at Film Australia, overseeing the production of more than 40 documentaries made by some of Australia's finest directors and producers. Since then, she has worked in feature film, TV drama and documentary. Her work has been screened at festivals around the world, and has been nominated for awards, including the Dendy EAC Award (winner 1999) and IF Award Best Documentary (nominee 2007). As a documentary producer, her credits include *Steel City* (co-producer with Denise Haslem); *Our Drowned Town*; *Flour, Sugar, Tea*; *Chasing Birds* and *The Long Goodbye*.

Ian Walker — writer/executive producer for Magic|Real Picture Company

Ian Walker has dedicated his filmmaking career to making the "ordinary" extraordinary and the "real" surreal, a genre he describes as "magic realist" documentary through his boutique factual production house Magic|Real Picture Company. His first film as producer was the Dendy Award-nominated documentary *Naked on the Inside* for SBS Television. As a writer and director, Ian's major works include the recently-completed *I, Psychopath*, last year's *Over My Dead Body* and *The Hacktivists*, all for ABC Television. He was co-director on the six-part ABC series *Dust to Dust* and part of the team behind the series *A Case for the Coroner*. Other credits including the SBS series *Two of Us* and *Men & Their Sheds: A Love Story*, for ABC Australia and Channel 4 UK.

Penny Robins — executive producer for Screen Australia

Penny Robins has been an executive producer with Screen Australia (formerly Film Australia) since mid-2003 and works with production teams across the country to deliver a slate of productions. Penny was formerly an independent producer and has extensive experience in documentary and factual-program making. She has been executive producer of a varied production slate, including science, history and contemporary

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programming. Her credits as executive producer include: *Bombora*, a two-part series on the history of Australian surfing for ABC Television, a six-part Australian series *Who Do You Think You Are?* for SBS; the Logie-nominated cross-platform longitudinal *Life Series*; *Nerves of Steel* (winner Mention D'Honneur Olympic Spirit category at the Sport Movies & TV 22nd International Festival 2006); *Troubled Minds – the Lithium Revolution* (winner Main Prize Vega Science Awards for Excellence in Scientific Broadcasting); the Logie-nominated series *Divorce Stories* (winner of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Couch Potato Awards); the four-part series *Policing The Pacific* and *Mr Patterns* (winner Hawaii International film festival Golden Maile Award, Best Documentary Film Critics Circle of Australia Awards).

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