

Kangaroos and the California Gold Rush

DURING THE GOLD Rush of the 1850s, gold seekers (or argonauts, as they were known) transported exotic and non-native animals (either living or dead) to Alta California on a regular basis. Argonauts were hungry, and during the early years of the Gold Rush there was simply not enough local food to sustain their massive population.¹ Galápagos tortoises (*Chelonoidis* sp.), sea turtles (Cheloniidae), turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*), and Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*) are only a few documented examples of the broad array of species that were imported as food sources.² However, some exotic animals arrived in Gold Rush-era California for primarily non-subsistence purposes. One example is the importation of domestic cats (*Felis catus*) for pest control. In July 1850, in response to the growing rat infestation in San Francisco, argonauts purchased a shipload of cats from Mexico.³ They correctly assumed that importing a vessel full of cats would help curb the intolerable rat (*Rattus* sp.) population, which was enormous both in number and in terms of the physical size of the creatures.⁴ My article examines the case of a more unusual animal: the Australian kangaroo (Macropodidae)—exotic to California but imported during the Gold Rush era.

KANGAROOS IN ALTA CALIFORNIA

Kangaroos were imported to Gold Rush-era California as both skins and living animals. On September 10, 1850, the merchant vessel *Augustus* arrived in San Francisco with market items for the city: coal, flour, pickles, a horse, and two “bales [of] kangaroo rugs.”⁵ One month later, the British bark *Paragon* arrived in San Francisco and announced a full cargo sale, including four bales of kangaroo rugs.⁶ These shipments continued into 1851, with kangaroo “skins” arriving on the *John Calvin* on May 27.⁷ At the store of McKenzie, Thompson & Co. in downtown San Francisco, merchants sold kangaroo skins alongside “sole leather . . . dressed calf-skins . . . sugar house molasses . . . [and] . . . basils.”⁸ Skins

California History, Vol. 94, Number 3, pp. 62–65, ISSN 0162-2897, electronic ISSN 2327-1485. © 2017 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ch.2017.94.3.62>

and other hide products provided a textile resource for argonauts desperately in need of supplies and clothing.⁹ For many Australians (and others) journeying to California, their drive was economic in nature: either discover riches in the gold fields or sell merchandise to miners.¹⁰ Importing kangaroo skins was one component of this process; importing living kangaroos was a second.

On September 7, 1852, the *Corsair* arrived in San Francisco direct from Sydney, Australia. She carried 25 passengers, 60 tons of coal, 98 windowsills, 15,000 fresh oranges, pigs (*Sus scrofa*), dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*), 6 cases of plants, a cask of arrowroot, and an animal that had never set foot in California prior: a living kangaroo.¹¹ According to archival research, this is the earliest dated evidence for the importation of a living kangaroo into Alta California, but it is not the last. On December 7, 1859, a kangaroo escaped from a menagerie near Visalia,



By the early 1900s Californian zoos exhibited kangaroos to the public. This ca. 1926 photograph shows a woman playing with a young kangaroo at the Luna Park Zoo in Los Angeles.

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California, where a local entrepreneur had been exhibiting the animal at one “bit per sight.”¹² This kangaroo met an unfortunate fate; initially escaping, he was later captured, and in the scuffle a horse “trod upon the end of its tail,” removing three inches. When the kangaroo tried to escape again, a dog caught and killed him.¹³ Only eleven days earlier, on November 26, 1859, the *Visalia Weekly Delta* reported that Mr. T. V. Crane, local owner of the Fashion Saloon, had delighted his guests with delicious peach and honey brandy and, by “day and night, a genuine live Kangaroo.”¹⁴ Finally, in 1861, the bark *Camilla* arrived in San Francisco, carrying with her several cattle, a stallion, a kangaroo, two kangaroo dogs (i.e., dingo [*Canis lupus dingo*]) and four emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*).¹⁵ Local accounts fail to document what became of these exotic animals in California, but they were likely put on display for profit, or perhaps even eaten by hungry argonauts.

Historical and archaeological evidence now provides an intriguing story of animals in Gold Rush–era California. Gold Rush argonauts consumed native wild animals in great abundance, but also imported domesticated animals to introduce and stock herds for food and by-products.¹⁶ Exotic and non-native animals were imported for food, and occasionally for ornaments, but the kangaroo likely constituted a display or exhibition animal. This difference is clear when comparing two exotic species imported into California during the 1850s—kangaroos and Galápagos tortoises. While merchants of Gold Rush maritime vessels imported tortoises in the hundreds (and possibly thousands) to feed the mining population of San Francisco, Sacramento, and many other towns throughout the Sierra Nevada, kangaroos were spared this fate.¹⁷ New evidence suggests that, instead of serving on an epicure’s plate, the few kangaroos imported to California were used by Australians to make a quick profit in the dramatic and turbulent Gold Rush era.

NOTES

1. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, vol. 6, 1848–1859 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1888); Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1854). Thank you to Emily Jones, Jim Delgado, Hannah Van Vlack and Mark Williams for reviewing this manuscript and providing invaluable feedback. I also appreciate the assistance provided by Terri Garst and the Los Angeles Public Library. This research would not have been possible without the California Digital Newspaper Collection managed by the Center for Bibliographic Studies and Research, University of California, Riverside – thank you.
2. William Heath Davis, *Sixty Years in California* (San Francisco: A. J. Leary, 1889); Soulé, Gihon, and Nisbet, *Annals of San Francisco*; Bancroft, *History of California*; Cyler Conrad and Allen Pastron, “Galapagos Tortoises and Sea Turtles in Gold Rush–Era California,” *California History* 91, no. 2 (2014): 20–39; Cyler Conrad, Kenneth W. Gobalet, Kale Bruner, and Allen G. Pastron, “Hide, Tallow and Terrapin: Gold Rush–Era Zooarchaeology at Thompson’s Cove (CA-SFR-186H), San Francisco, California,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 19 (2015): 502–551; Cyler Conrad, Kale Bruner, and Allen G. Pastron, “Anthropogenic Contamination in Gold Rush–Era Native Pacific Oysters (*Ostrea lurida* Carpenter 1864) from Thompson’s Cove (CA-SFR-186H), San Francisco, California,” *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 3 (2015): 188–193.
3. J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1981), 413.
4. Soulé, Gihon, and Nisbet, *Annals of San Francisco*; Bancroft, *History of California*, 236.
5. “Importations,” *Daily Alta California*, September 10, 1850.
6. “Cargo Sale,” *Daily Alta California*, October 12, 1850.
7. “Importations,” *Sacramento Transcript*, May 27, 1851.
8. “Sugar House Molasses,” *Daily Alta California*, January 11, 1852.
9. Bancroft, *History of California*; Soulé, Gihon, and Nisbet, *Annals of San Francisco*.
10. Jay Monaghan, *Australians and the Gold Rush: California and Down Under, 1849–1854* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); James Delgado, *To California by Sea: A Maritime History of the California Gold Rush* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); H. W. Brands, *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush*

and the New American Dream (New York: Anchor, 2003). James Delgado, *Gold Rush Port: The Maritime Archaeology of San Francisco's Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). The California Gold Rush spurred global maritime commerce through San Francisco. Movement of people and goods quickly connected California and Australia, and several other regions throughout the Pacific (e.g. Oregon, Hawaii, Mexico, Central America, Chile). These new trading connections resulted in many new exotic and luxury goods arriving in Alta Californian markets during the Gold Rush-era. Kangaroos are one example of this process.

11. "Importations," *Daily Alta California*, September 8, 1852.
12. "Taking Liberties," *Sacramento Daily Union*, December 7, 1859.
13. Ibid.
14. "Thanks," *Visalia Weekly Delta*, November 26, 1859.
15. "Arrival from Melbourne," *Daily Alta California*, September 18, 1861; "Australian Stock," *Sacramento Daily Union*, September 21, 1861; "For Sale," *Daily Alta California*, November 6, 1850.
16. Davis, *Sixty Years in California*; Soulé, Gihon, and Nisbet, *Annals of San Francisco*; Bancroft, *History of California*; Conrad and Pastron, "Galapagos Tortoises"; Conrad et al., "Hide, Tallow and Terrapin"; Conrad et al., "Anthropogenic Contamination."
17. A review of Gold Rush-era archaeological sites with animal bones indicates that there are no identified and confirmed kangaroo specimens in San Francisco, California. This contrasts with the bone record for Galápagos tortoises and sea turtles, which is present at Thompson's Cove (see Conrad et al., "Hide, Tallow and Terrapin"), and 110 Embarcadero Street (see Praetzellis, Mary, *Final Archaeological Resources Report and Data Recovery for 110 The Embarcadero, San Francisco, California* (Rohnert Park: Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University, 2017)).