

1

A tree-climbing kangaroo?

Some years ago, in a very useful little dictionary of mammal names, Ronald Strahan of the Australian Museum observed that the scientific names of most Australian mammals were derived from either Latin or Greek roots and, assuming one could understand them, these often conveyed useful information about the species. For example, *Dendrolagus*, the name given to the tree-kangaroo genus, is derived from two Greek words – *dendron*, meaning tree, and *lagos*, meaning hare. Strahan mused that while the first part of this name obviously referred to the arboreal lifestyle of the members of the genus, he had no idea why these ‘remarkable short-eared, long tailed animals should be compared to hares’.

To understand why, we need to go back to 1826. In that year the Natural History Commission of the Netherlands Indies began sending scientists to the Dutch East Indies to collect natural history specimens, an initiative largely due to Coenraad Temminck, the son of the Treasurer of the Dutch East India Company. He was a wealthy man with an interest in natural history. The East Indies (now Indonesia) comprises thousands of tropical islands and the first group of Dutch scientists to arrive there used a small sailing vessel, *The Triton*, to travel around. When they visited Lobo, on the north-west coastline of New Guinea, they collected four individuals of a mammal that was new to science. According to the local people these animals lived in the trees and were