

The Mirror Wed Jun 2, 2021

# All things Platypus

PROM Area Climate Action, the local group of the Australian Conservation Foundation, holds a monthly webinar with speakers focussing on biodiversity and climate. Our speaker this month was Geoff Williams, a founder of the Australian Platypus Conservancy, speaking about all things platypus. Geoff used to live in East Gippsland and knows our area well. He said we have smaller rivers that make it harder for platypus to find alternate places to live if there is damage to rivers from logging, wildfire, floods or farming. This could be the spur to our group to start a platypus monitoring programme.

Platypus developed at the time mammals and reptiles evolved, 120 million years ago, so they know how to survive. They are tough little animals, very energetic and require a lot of food, eating up between 20% - 40% of their body weight each day. They have no teeth and almost no stomach, using instead a tough palate in their bill with which to grind up the bugs, insects, worms and yabbies they thrive on. The bill is both nose and mouth and has an 'electro reception system' which allows them to pick up tiny electric signals from their prey. They hunt with their eyes and ears closed. Only one other animal uses this system, a river dolphin. They survive in cold water with a covering of dense fur, denser than that of polar bears.

They have a home range of between 1-7 km so live semi-solitary lives. They live for up to 25 years, have 1-3 juveniles per year although fewer than half females breed each season. The females have small soft eggs, like snakes, and tuck them under their tail. Only 1 out of 5 juveniles grow to adulthood.

Their front feet are webbed for swimming. The long claws are for digging burrows, and digging out dinner. Their back feet have sharp small claws, which they use like a comb for grooming to keep their fur waterproof and in good condition. The males have a spur on each of their back legs, with a poison they use when fighting other males for dominance during the breeding season. The poison causes extreme pain to humans, but not death. So it is best to leave them alone if you are lucky enough to see one.

Platypus live in rivers, creeks, drains, dams, billabongs, whether still or flowing water, and their presence is a good indicator of the health of the water. River banks provide places to burrow and are critical to platypus survival. It is important to keep stock fenced off from creeks, rivers and dams so the water remains unpolluted and the banks are safe for platypus and other creatures such as Rakali. Erosion, sedimentation, introduced weeds, and clearing of vegetation prevents them from digging burrows, while sedimentation makes the water unsuitable for insects they live on.

Platypus spend as much time on land as on water. They are not shy and may live close to people, so keep in mind that our actions around waterways will affect them. They will cross land to find a new range if they have to and are vulnerable to predation by foxes and cats at this time, and overheating. They have evolved to be resilient to bushfires, floods and drought. However climate heating is making natural disasters more frequent and closer together, affecting their ability to recover.

The range where platypus live covers Eastern Australia, from Cooktown to Tasmania. There is only a small population now in the Wimmera. They are listed as 'near threatened' in Australia, and 'vulnerable' in Victoria. Most are killed by fishing, illegal use of nets, traps and discarded fishing lines. Opera nets and gill nets were banned in 2019 but can still be found in rivers. If you see a trap remove it and report it to Fisheries. Litter is also a major threat.

Human intervention has seen massive changes in river flow from dams, drainage

channels, over harvesting of water, creating muddy puddles out of our large rivers where platypus cannot survive. Habitat can be restored by fencing off and replanting creeks and rivers, protecting refuge pools and creating wetlands.

It is important that we monitor populations, especially in Gippsland where populations are small and at risk.

The Australian Platypus Monitoring Network works with volunteers and sightings can be reported to [www.platypus.asn.au](http://www.platypus.asn.au) or iNaturalist.

Prom Area Climate Action is considering setting up a monitoring group. If you would like to be part of this write to us at [promareaclimateaction@gmail.com](mailto:promareaclimateaction@gmail.com).

Jo Wainer

