

Ripples is the quarterly newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy. It provides updates on research in progress and other APC news. Members of *Friends of the Platypus* automatically receive each edition of *Ripples*.

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Newsletter of the **AUSTRALIAN PLATYPUS CONSERVANCY**

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PLATYPUS CARE-A NEW LOOK FOR PLATYPUS

For the past nine years, the APC has been using live-trapping surveys to find out more about the status of platypus populations in different areas and habitats. To date, netting has been undertaken in waterways located in eleven of Victoria's 29 drainage divisions, along with two rivers on Kangaroo Island.

From this work, two important generalisations have emerged. Firstly, while platypus are still doing well in some places, other populations are sparse or fragmented-or even seem to have disappeared. Secondly, live-trapping work is simply too difficult and time-consuming to ever provide, on its own, a comprehensive overview of how platypus are faring across extensive parts of their range.

As an alternative approach, the Conservancy has recently developed a new program-*Platypus Care*-to map where platypus occur based on community sightings of the animals. The idea behind *Platypus Care* is simple. Platypus are one of the most well-known and distinctive animals in eastern Australia, and many people-including anglers, canoeists, bushwalkers, picnickers, and landholders with stream or river frontage-see platypus on an occasional or regular basis.

Furthermore, pilot studies undertaken by the APC in several river catchments have shown that a remarkably good fit exists between where platypus are commonly seen and where they are captured in the course of live-trapping studies.

The records collected through *Platypus Care* will be used to help assess the status of platypus on a catchment-by-catchment basis and identify populations which are small or otherwise may be at risk. The *Platypus Care* database will also assist efforts to map catchment condition, develop effective plans for restoring waterway health, and monitor how the environmental values of streams and rivers improve as a by-product of conservation activities.

Providing feedback to communities about the status of platypus in their region should both promote interest in the natural environment and sharpen public awareness of the need to protect the animals and their habitats.

In the first instance, *Platypus Care* will mainly focus on collecting sightings from waterways in Victoria and adjoining parts of New South Wales. Accordingly, the program was launched in October 2002 at the Eltham Wiregrass Art Gallery (in Melbourne's eastern suburbs) by the Victorian Minister of Environment and Conservation, Sherryl Garbutt.

Platypus Care is being implemented in close co-operation with Catchment Management Authorities in Victoria and Melbourne Water. Funding to offset the costs of *Platypus Care* has been generously provided by all of the following:

State Government of Victoria
Corangamite Catchment Management Authority
Glenelg-Hopkins Catchment Management Authority
Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority
Melbourne Water
North Central Catchment Management Authority
North East Catchment Management Authority
West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
Wimmera Catchment Management Authority

PLATYPUS CARE: THE INSIDE STORY

The success of *Platypus Care* clearly depends on the widespread participation of people willing to share their personal knowledge of platypus. To get the program off to a flying start, *The Weekly Times* newspaper agreed to publicise *Platypus Care* in mid-October. Together with background information about platypus biology and conservation, readers were provided with a special copy of a sightings report form.

Over the next twelve months, stories about how members of the community can assist platypus conservation by reporting sightings of the animals will also appear in local newspapers and a variety of newsletters and magazines, to reach as broad an audience as possible. Printed copies of the *Platypus Care* brochure and reporting form are now available for people to pick up from Catchment Management Authority offices, Information Centres managed by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, and public libraries across Victoria.

For those who would prefer to record the details of their platypus observations on-line, this option is also available by visiting the *Platypus Care* website: www.platypus.asn.au

The *Platypus Care* website is hosted by Vicnet and was designed and developed by John Kent (jekent@optushome.com). The website provides advice about how to go about looking for and identifying a platypus, and describes other species which may potentially be mistaken for a platypus, particularly in low light near dusk or dawn.

In the longer run, it is expected that this website will also be an ideal place to provide students and the wider community with a summary of what has been learned through *Platypus Care*, in the form of maps describing the current distribution of the animals across river catchments.

SPONSOR A PLATYPUS

In the course of an APC live-trapping survey undertaken in April 1999 as part of Melbourne Water's Urban Platypus Program, a juvenile male platypus was captured with a metal band (possibly scrap originating from a nearby light industrial area) tightly encircling his throat. Fortunately, Conservancy staff were able to cut through and remove this item. Otherwise, as the young animal grew bigger, the band would slowly but surely have strangled him.

Although officially identified by his Trovan microchip transponder tag as 01F022BF, the young male was nicknamed "Lucky" before being released back to the wild. Lucky has now been recaptured on several occasions, confirming that he is alive and well and occupies an area extending several kilometres upstream from where he was first captured along Diamond Creek. Most recently, in October 2002, Lucky was found to be a robust as well as fully mature animal, weighing a respectable 1820 grams as compared to only 1215 grams when he was first examined. Lucky is one of four animals that can be selected by people wanting to sponsor an individual platypus identified through the Conservancy's research and conservation programs.

For each sponsored platypus you will receive:

- A certificate bearing your name (or the name of a person you designate, if the sponsorship is intended as a gift), a scanned picture and description of the platypus, and information about the area in which he or she lives.
- A blank platypus greetings card.

The cost of sponsorship (Aus. \$) is as follows:

1 platypus only: \$10.00; 2 platypus: \$18.00; 3 platypus: \$25.00; All four: \$30.00.

Sponsorship application forms can be obtained from the [Sponsor a Platypus](#) section of the APC website or by contacting the Conservancy directly.

PRIMARY PLATYPUS RESEARCHERS

Students from Darraweit Guim Primary School have recently been learning about the specialised craft of platypus research.

As part of the Victorian Government's Scientists and Engineers in Schools Project, biologists from the Australian Platypus Conservancy have been working with twenty-two students from Grades 4-6 to develop their understanding of how scientists go about studying nature.

By anyone's reckoning, the platypus is a difficult species to study in the wild. The animals are mainly active at night and spend nearly all of their time feeding underwater or resting underground in a burrow. They are not prone to congregate or vocalise, blend in well with their surroundings, and rarely leave any evidence of their activities in the form of tracks, scats or food scraps. Even the entrances to platypus burrows are typically very well hidden and hard for humans to detect.

However, it is precisely this degree of difficulty that makes the platypus an ideal subject for encouraging young students to think about the challenges involved in working as a field scientist and organising a research project.

Because the Conservancy is working with the Upper Maribyrnong Catchment Landcare group at Darraweit Guim to determine how best to conserve the platypus living in Deep Creek, the students also have had a special opportunity to see science being linked to practical environmental action in their own backyard.

The students have been involved in a number of research tasks, including helping to set nets for a platypus live-trapping survey and then watching Conservancy staff as they measured and assessed the condition of captured animals.

The results of the Darraweit Guim survey were interesting in that no fewer than thirteen of the fifteen individuals that were captured proved to be males.

This highly skewed sex ratio (which paralleled the findings of a previous survey undertaken in the area) suggests that some habitat problems may need to be addressed specifically to make the upper reaches of Deep Creek more productive of aquatic invertebrates (the basis of the platypus food supply) and hence more attractive to breeding females.

The students also received instruction and first-hand experience in the fine arts of observing platypus in the wild and describing the quality of habitat along the section of Deep Creek running behind the school.

School Principal Rob Rindzevicius said that the students will build on their lessons with Australian Platypus Conservancy researchers by developing a multi-disciplinary project entitled "Deep Creek Platypus: Now and Forever". They will generate a report on their local platypus population which will form the basis of a public presentation to the Darraweit Guim community. A group from the school also plans to present a paper on their platypus work at the 2003 student conference on river management issues in Mildura.

Did You Know That....

When juvenile platypus emerge from their nursery burrow for the first time in summer, they are fully furred, well co-ordinated, and nearly (80-90%) as long as adult animals. Accordingly, there is no special term in the English language for a young platypus-though Conservancy biologists sometimes refer to such individuals as "platypups".