

# Platypus News & Views



---

*Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 57 – August 2014)*

## **PLATYPUS EARNS NEW CONSERVATION STATUS**

The conservation status of the platypus has been upgraded to 'near threatened' in the latest edition of *The Action Plan for Australian Mammals*.

Following years of hard work by the authors (John Woinarski, Andrew Burbidge and Peter Harrison), the new *Action Plan* has just been released. It incorporates input from more than 230 biologists with specialist knowledge about mammals found in Australia, including monotremes, marsupials, rodents, bats, seals, dolphins and whales.

The work identifies the conservation status of all recognised species and subspecies (using the same categories and eligibility criteria adopted by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and also provides detailed individual accounts for those species or subspecies classified as extinct, endangered, threatened, near threatened or 'data deficient' (meaning that not enough is known about them to assign their conservation status with any degree of confidence).

In the case of the platypus, the *Action Plan* acknowledges that little information is available on population trends in Queensland or Tasmania. However, based on what is known about recent trends in New South Wales and (particularly) Victoria, it was concluded that the platypus is most appropriately classified as 'near threatened', where this is defined by the potential for a species to decline by 30% or more within three generations.

In our view, this is a highly realistic assessment, which hopefully will help to dispel any remaining official complacency about the species' long-term prospects if positive conservation measures aren't carried out.

In particular, the *Action Plan* highlights the threats posed to platypus by unsustainable surface water extraction, river regulation and habitat degradation, all of which may be exacerbated by an increasing frequency of severe droughts or floods in future. In addition, platypus mortality in traps and nets set for fish or crustaceans has been identified as an important threat operating over a wide geographic area.

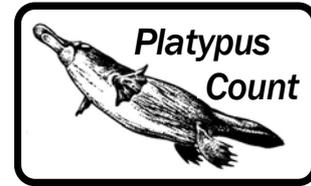
Accordingly, the *Action Plan* places a high priority on working on behalf of platypus to rehabilitate banks and channels plagued by erosion and sedimentation, and ensure that enough flow is released from reservoirs in times of drought to maintain productive feeding habitats and channel connectivity farther downstream.

Additional recommendations include developing an integrated and effective monitoring program for the species, promoting awareness of platypus conservation requirements (especially among the ranks of professional waterway managers, consultants and contractors), reducing the frequency of platypus killed in opera house traps and other fishing gear, and reducing the frequency of platypus killed by foxes (e.g. by undertaking appropriately targeted predator control programs).

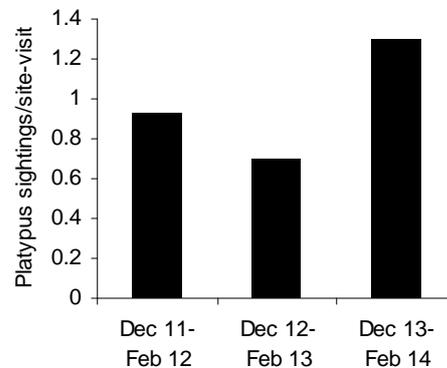
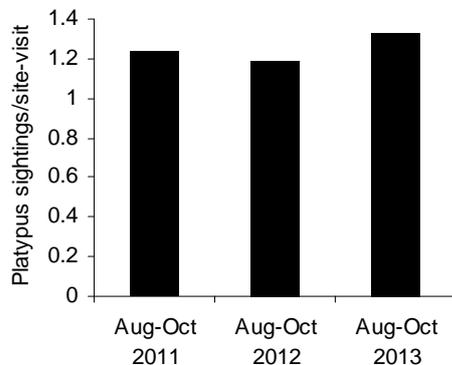
The challenge now is to make these things happen and achieve a genuine benefit for platypus populations across the species' range.

## PLATYPUS COUNT UPDATE: TIDBINBILLA

The volunteer guides at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (located southwest of Canberra) have been contributing data to the *Platypus Count* visual monitoring program since March 2011. The animals are observed with great regularity throughout the year in a weir pool established on the Tidbinbilla River (below left), and also in smaller nearby dams such as Pond 4 (below right).



How has the number of platypus sightings at Tidbinbilla weir varied over the past three years? The graphs below answer that question for two key periods in the platypus reproductive calendar: the mating season in late winter/spring (August-October) and the peak lactational period in summer (December-February).



As you can see, there has been very little difference from 2011 to 2013 in the frequency of platypus sightings made from August to October, when a large proportion of the animals seen during the day are likely to be adult males doing their best to make a favourable impression on prospective mates (while discouraging other males from doing the same). The relatively constant number of sightings in late winter and spring therefore supports the hypothesis that the weir pool has supported a stable population of breeding males over the monitoring period.

By comparison, the frequency of platypus sightings at Tidbinbilla weir in summer – when diurnal activity is likely to be dominated by mothers working hard to keep up with lactational demands - has been much more variable. There is no reason to believe that the number of adult females occupying the weir has been less stable in the last three years than the number of males living there. Instead, it is more likely that year-to-year variation in the frequency of summer sightings reflects differences in the proportion of adult females raising young (which has been found to vary annually from 18% to 80% along the upper Shoalhaven River in New South Wales). If so, this suggests that last summer may have produced a bumper crop of baby platypus at Tidbinbilla!

## **OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND**

Drop a piece of litter on the ground and (quite rightly) you can expect to be fined. Release a balloon at a wedding, birthday party or public event and the fact that the balloon and its attached string inevitably fall to the ground as litter appears to cause no legal concerns.

Over the years, Australian Platypus Conservancy biologists have found numerous deflated balloons littering waterways, often in remote areas. Given that platypus easily become entangled in all sorts of litter, the APC has long argued that balloons pose a risk and their release should be banned. However, approaches to the Victorian Environmental Protection Authority to take appropriate action have to date received no positive response.



Unfortunately, the recent discovery of a dead platypus at Ruffey Creek in Melbourne with a balloon string around its neck has confirmed the APC's worst fears (see photo, courtesy of Sharon Mason). Mass release of balloons is already banned in NSW and restricted by some local councils, such as the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. The APC is renewing its call to ban balloon releases across Australia on the grounds that they pollute the environment. If you support this view, then please make your feelings known to your state or territory EPA, local council and relevant politicians.

## **ON THE ROAD**

The Australian Platypus Conservancy has a long-standing commitment to community education as a natural extension of its research and conservation efforts. In addition to disseminating platypus-related facts and advice via printed and electronic media, face-to-face events such as school visits, public talks and technical workshops are organised regularly. These activities are perhaps most effectively packaged as a 'Platypus Roadshow' which tours a region over several days.

For example, a Platypus Roadshow visited Echuca, Rochester, Goornong and Axedale in July as part of the North Central Catchment Management Authority's 'Caring for the Campaspe' project. More than 650 adults and students (at six schools) were involved in talks and lessons over 3 days. The star of the show was undoubtedly Patrick - a young adult male platypus who died in an opera house yabby trap in 1997. After being preserved by a taxidermist, Patrick has become a very well-travelled and popular ambassador for platypus conservation.



The July Roadshow concluded with a short talk at Axedale, celebrating the unveiling of a platypus sculpture on the Campaspe River banks. The work, created by Yvonne George, draws its inspiration from the bow wave formed when a platypus swims on the surface.

In August, a second Roadshow rolled into Albury-Wodonga, where events included a technical briefing for regional land and water management staff hosted by North East Water, a community talk and associated platypus-spotting sessions, and presentations at the North East Victoria Schools Environment Day. These activities were sponsored by Norske Skog's Albury paper mill, as an educational component of the APC's Murray River Platypus Study.

## **MORE NEWS ON FACEBOOK**

You can find more news and articles about platypus and Australian water-rats on the **Australian Platypus Conservancy (Official)** Facebook page. The page also highlights a 'Sighting of the Week' chosen from the many platypus and water-rat records sent to the APC by persons in the wide community. These most typically serve to highlight important ecological, conservation and research issues or other points of interest relating to these two species.

Facebook articles in the last three months have dealt with platypus use of man-made irrigation channels and salt-water environments, the challenge of protecting platypus in relation to proposed fracking (or other) development projects, reports of platypus mating behaviour, and recent incidents involving the deaths of platypus and water-rats in opera house yabby traps.

## **MISSED AN EDITION OF PLATYPUS NEWS & VIEWS?**

Previous issues of *Platypus News & Views* (formerly *Ripples*) can be found on the APC website ([www.platypus.asn.au](http://www.platypus.asn.au)), starting with Issue no. 14.

## **WATER-RAT PUBLIC TALK**

The next community talk by Australian Platypus Conservancy staff will be about Australian water-rats (a.k.a. rakali). It will take place on Tuesday 2 September starting at 7 pm at Nicholson Community Hall, east of Bairnsdale. The event is hosted by Nicholson Landcare Group and admission is free.

The talk is part of the Gippsland Lakes water-rat community awareness project, supported by the Gippsland Lakes Ministerial Advisory Committee.

## ***SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SUPPORTERS!***

*The Australian Platypus Conservancy is a non-profit research and conservation organisation. The success of the APC's programs relies on the support of businesses, management agencies and individuals sharing our interest in one of the world's most fascinating animals. We gratefully acknowledge recent help by the following supporters:*

East Gippsland Shire ■ Diana Gibson ■ Friends of the Earth Melbourne ■  
Gippsland Lakes Environment Fund ■ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management  
Authority ■ Betty Lynch OAM ■ Norske Skog ■ North Central Catchment  
Management Authority ■ Parks Victoria ■ Platypus Outdoors ■ Taronga  
Conservation Society ■

**Australian Platypus Conservancy**



**PO Box 22, Wiseleigh VIC 3885**

**(03) 5157 5568 [platypus.apc@westnet.com.au](mailto:platypus.apc@westnet.com.au)**

**[www.platypus.asn.au](http://www.platypus.asn.au) Facebook: Australian Platypus Conservancy (Official)**