

Platypus News & Views



Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 64 – May 2016)

PLATYPUS SCREEN SAVERS NEEDED!

Gunbower Creek is a large anabranch of the Murray River that meanders for more than 100 kilometres on the Victorian side of the river between Torrumbarry and Koondrook townships. Although greatly modified since European settlement, the creek and its associated wetlands and lagoons still support a diverse aquatic fauna. In particular, the Gunbower Creek system is home to the only self-sustaining platypus population known to survive along the Murray River and its side channels downstream of at least Echuca.

The conservation significance of the Gunbower platypus population cannot be overstated, both in its own right and as a source of dispersing juveniles needed to recolonise nearby reaches of the Murray River. In this context, there is an urgent need to stop platypus dying as the result of being accidentally sucked into irrigation pumps located in the Gunbower system. A recent analysis of platypus mortality factors in Victoria (published by the APC in 2010) found that irrigation pumps were responsible for 6% of deaths where the cause could be reliably assigned. The impact in large irrigation districts will of course be much higher than the state average. In the Gunbower system, numerous pump-related platypus mortalities have been reported over time, with two or more animals sometimes killed consecutively at a given site.

To their great credit, many Gunbower irrigators have done their best to exclude platypus and other wildlife from entering pumps by fitting exclusion screens around intake points or installing other protective mechanisms. However, for these devices to work properly, they must remain reasonably free of floating vegetation – if too much material accumulates, water flow can be blocked to the point that pumps stop working.

Unfortunately, the Gunbower district has been plagued for some time by unprecedented growth of an Australian native floating plant known as hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*). Hornwort thrives in warm, slow-flowing, nutrient-rich water and is not eaten much by fish – not even by carp. As a result, it's becoming increasingly difficult (verging on impossible) to maintain wildlife exclusion screens around pumps being used in the Gunbower area.

In response, the North Central Catchment Management Authority (which is responsible for managing environmental values in the Gunbower system) has very commendably investigated whether workable alternatives may exist, and has identified a number of potentially very effective screen designs developed overseas. Some of these designs may also help to solve another conservation problem in irrigation districts, namely loss of native fish from rivers after they enter irrigation channels via one-way flume gates. The challenge now is for the North Central CMA to source enough funds to carry out field trials to test how well these new screen designs perform under Australian conditions.

If you'd like to help, please consider contacting the Hon. Barnaby Joyce (Federal Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources) and the Hon. Lisa Neville (Victorian Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water). Let them know that you believe that limiting the number of platypus deaths in irrigation pumps (and fish deaths in irrigation channels) are important conservation issues that need to be addressed urgently, with the first priority being to fund a pilot program in the Gunbower to test the effectiveness of new technology to help keep wildlife safe. If they could, the animals would thank you.



GOOD SPOTS TO SPOT A PLATYPUS

Winter and spring are great seasons to see a platypus in the wild, especially in the period from approximately July through September. When it is cold, the animals have to work long hours to find enough food to make energetic ends meet. On top of this, adult males become more active in late winter and spring as they check out potential mates and try to drive away other males in preparation for breeding. Although platypus may be seen at any time of day, the best time to go looking for these animals is either very early in the morning or just before dark.

So, where are good places to go platypus-spotting? Below is a list of some locations where platypus have often been seen in recent years by us or others.

In Tasmania, platypus can be spotted at many locations, including Fernglade Reserve in Burnie, the Tasmanian Arboretum near Devonport (Founders Lake), and viewing sites at Geeveston and the Platypus Reserve at Latrobe. Platypus can also be seen on King Island, where several animals are often visible near Grassy township in Upper Grassy Dam.

Queensland offers excellent opportunities to see the species at Eungella National Park, Carnarvon Gorge National Park and the Atherton Tablelands, with sightings often reported from the viewing platform at Yungaburra.

Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve is a great place to observe a platypus in the wild near Canberra (see page 3). In New South Wales, Bombala township has a designated Platypus Reserve with a viewing platform (located a few kilometres from town) and animals are frequently spotted right in the town centre near the Monaro Highway bridge. Tom Grant (a leading platypus biologist with research experience spanning four decades) also recommends Berrima, where platypus can often be seen if one walks along the river from the end of Wingecarribee Street to the scout camp in the evening or early morning. Other good locations for platypus viewing in New South Wales include Jenolan Caves (Blue Lake), Barrington Tops National Park and Dalgety (in and near the Snowy River Holiday Park). A large platypus population also inhabits the Snowy River in the Byadbo Wilderness area of Kosciuszko National Park, most readily accessed via the paddling tours conducted by Alpine River Adventures.

In Victoria, platypus are still found in the Yarra River in Melbourne's middle suburbs. Finns Reserve in Lower Templestowe is especially worth trying, with the Odyssey House footbridge comprising a great vantage point. Farther upstream in the Yarra system, Warburton and Warburton East offer good opportunities for platypus-spotting along an extensive system of walking tracks that follow the main river channel.

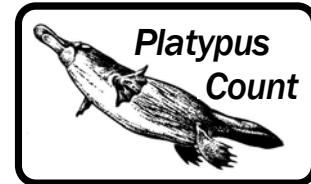
In western Victoria, Lake Elizabeth supports a thriving platypus population, with Otway Eco Tours providing opportunities to see the animals through 'Paddle with the Platypus' canoeing trips near dawn or dusk.

In eastern Victoria, platypus are seen reasonably often in many water bodies. At Buchan, sightings are often made in the pumping station weir pool (located upstream of Bluff Reserve). At Omeo, one or more animals may be observed at dusk in a sizable natural pool located a short distance upstream of the official swimming hole in Livingstone Park.

In South Australia, a small population introduced to Kangaroo Island in the 1940s still survives in Flinders Chase National Park. Animals can potentially be spotted there at the designated platypus pools viewing area.

If you know of other accessible sites where platypus can be seen with a reasonable degree of regularity in the wild, please consider letting us know about them – unless you'd prefer that the details remain confidential, it would be great to be able to share this knowledge with other platypus enthusiasts in future issues of *Platypus News & Views*.

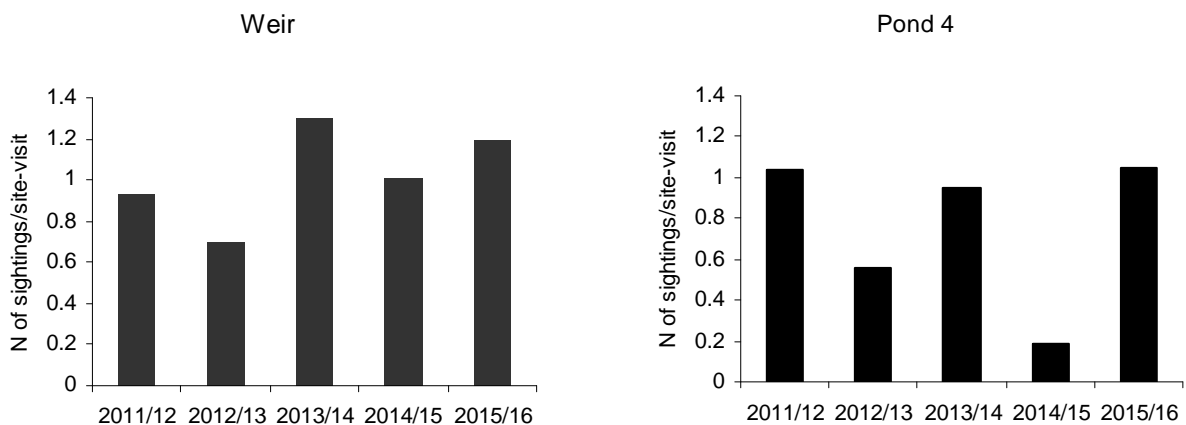
PLATYPUS COUNT UPDATE: TIDBINBILLA



Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve protects more than 50 square kilometres of forest, grassland and wetland habitats at the edge of Namadgi National Park, near Canberra.

Since early 2011 the Reserve's volunteer guides have been doing a tremendous job keeping track of platypus sightings as part of the *Platypus Count* monitoring program.

The graphs below show the average frequency of platypus sightings recorded in the past five summers at a weir pool located along the Tidbinbilla River and a nearby lake known as Pond 4 (shown at right). Summer is the peak period for platypus lactation, when mothers are particularly likely to be seen as they work long hours to meet their energetic needs.



The number of platypus sightings at Pond 4 and the Weir waxed and waned in synchrony for the first three summers that monitoring occurred. This situation changed quite dramatically in the summer before last: whereas platypus sightings continued to be made regularly at the Weir, the frequency of sightings at Pond 4 plummeted to only one-fifth of that recorded in the previous summer.

As you may recall, this drop was believed to be linked to predatory behaviour by an Australian pelican that on several occasions was seen trying to grab a platypus swimming on Pond 4. Although there was no evidence that this resulted in a platypus actually being killed and eaten, frequent harassment might well have motivated the platypus using Pond 4 to shift their activity elsewhere, especially during daylight hours when pelicans are awake and hungry.

Happily, platypus sightings at Pond 4 have since rebounded, with 1.05 animals observed on average per site-visit in the most recent summer period. This value is very similar to those reported for Pond 4 in the first and third summers of monitoring. By comparison, last summer's average platypus sightings frequency at the Weir was 1.2 animals per site-visit.

Elsewhere in the Reserve, platypus were often seen last summer at Black Flats Dam (average sightings frequency = 0.8 animals per site-visit), and were occasionally seen on Ponds 2, 3 and 5.

ILLUSTRATING THE ANTIQUE PLATYPUS

The platypus first came to the attention of European scientists just over two hundred years ago, arousing great interest and controversy. Scientific illustrators in Britain and on the continent faced a tricky challenge – how to depict this weird animal accurately when all they had for reference purposes were dead specimens and inadequate descriptions of the species' appearance and behaviour.

Sebra Prints in Camberwell, Melbourne has a large selection of platypus-related prints for sale from this fascinating period. To see the items that are currently in stock, go to:

<http://www.sebraprints.com.au/catalogsearch/result/?cat=&q=platypus>

PLATYPUS BOOKLET FROM 1941 FOR SALE

Still on the topic of platypus memorabilia, the APC currently has seven copies of Charles Barrett's 1941 paperback booklet *The Platypus* (62 pages, 28 black and white illustrations) for sale. All copies are in excellent condition for their age. Price is \$15.00 each (including GST and postage) with proceeds going to the APC's research programs.

Sales will be on a "first in, best dressed" basis. If you're interested in purchasing a copy, please email the APC on platypus.apc@westnet.com.au.

APC FACEBOOK PAGE

The **Australian Platypus Conservancy (Official)** Facebook page is an ongoing source of news and information about platypus and rakali, including details of unusual or otherwise remarkable sightings of these species.

Recent sightings have included some fascinating photos of a platypus swimming casually around the legs of an angler standing in the water (which actually occurs more often than one might imagine) and a report of a feisty rakali that terrorised the pet cat of a houseboat owner.

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SUPPORTERS!

The Australian Platypus Conservancy is a non-profit, non-government organisation. The success of the APC's research and conservation programs relies on funding provided by businesses, management agencies and philanthropic trusts.

Donations from individuals and environmental groups also contribute enormously to the Conservancy's work, by supporting platypus population monitoring, public education activities and special studies that can't otherwise be readily funded.

If you would like to help, remember that donations and bequests to the Australian Platypus Conservancy are tax-deductible.

Australian Platypus Conservancy



PO Box 22, Wiseleigh VIC 3885

(03) 5157 5568 platypus.apc@westnet.com.au

www.platypus.asn.au Facebook: Australian Platypus Conservancy (Official)

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