

Platypus News & Views



Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 66 – November 2016)

SAFER OPERA HOUSE TRAPS - AN UPDATE

Last year (in *PN&V* 61) we reported on progress that was being made to replace the standard “opera house” yabby traps that are widely sold in shops with a modified design incorporating a circular escape hatch in the roof.

As most readers will be aware, the need for such a change was motivated by the fact that air-breathing aquatic animals, including the platypus, find it extremely difficult to escape from a standard opera house trap and are therefore highly likely to drown when such a trap is set underwater. Although all of the mainland states where platypus occur have taken steps to restrict use of opera house traps in known platypus waters, some persons continue to do the wrong thing - either knowingly or unwittingly – resulting in ongoing mortalities.

In brief, research carried out from 2012 to 2014 by the APC (in Victoria) and Dr Tom Grant (in New South Wales) concluded that a high proportion of platypus (but not all) would be expected to escape from an opera house trap fitted with an escape hatch in the roof. It was also established that yabby catch rates in traps fitted with an escape hatch would be perfectly acceptable for recreational use. We therefore recommended that the standard design should be phased out in favour of the less risky modified design.

By September 2015, Queensland, NSW, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria had all confirmed that the new design was fully compliant with their current fishing regulations. No changes to regulations were proposed - the introduction of a “safer” trap would not alter existing restrictions on the places where enclosed yabby traps can be legally set. Standard opera house traps would not be banned but it was expected that they would be replaced progressively by the modified trap design over time. The Australian Fishing Trades Association subsequently indicated that its members could begin producing and marketing modified opera house traps by as early as mid-2016.

The rollout of modified traps has since stalled, in part reflecting the fact that Fisheries Victoria indicated in early 2016 that it would prefer to have standard opera house traps replaced by a design (still hypothetical in nature) that is 100% wildlife-friendly and could be deployed in all waters throughout the state. The Conservancy shares the view that this would be an ideal outcome in many ways, particularly if it can be adopted more widely in other mainland states and territories. However, we remain concerned that such a change will necessarily result in a vastly increased number of traps being set in waters known to support platypus. Very extensive prior testing will therefore need to be carried out in many different habitats to determine the actual degree of risk that such a design poses to air-breathing aquatic animals generally. Based on our experience to date, this process will (at best) require considerable time and a great deal of effort to achieve. At worst, the holy grail of a completely platypus-friendly opera house trap may be unachievable.

For now, the APC urges that the rollout of modified opera house traps as agreed last year should proceed as soon as possible. While not a perfect solution, this step is expected to lead to a real reduction in the number of animals drowning annually in opera house traps. This would allow time for further possible improvements in trap design to be identified and thoroughly tested before being considered for legal recreational use.

GOOD SPOTS TO SPOT A WATER-RAT

In *PN&V 64*, we listed some promising locations to spot a platypus. In response to growing interest in the Australian water-rat (or rakali), here are some hints about when and where to catch a glimpse of this fascinating native mammal.

But, firstly, here's an explanation as to why we like to refer to this species as the "Aussie otter". The water-rat is a top carnivore in aquatic systems, filling the same ecological niche that is occupied by otters on all other continents except Antarctica. Rakali also has many physical features in common with otters: a relatively blunt head with small ears, powerful jaws and teeth, a fabulous set of whiskers, side-facing nostrils, partly-webbed hind feet, and dense fur that covers the entire body (including the broad tail). Photographic evidence has also recently confirmed that water-rats sometimes indulge in a quintessentially otter-like trait: chewing food held in the front paws while floating on their back – a behaviour most famously associated with sea otters.

So, how do you go about spotting "otters" in Australia? Water-rats can be seen at any time of the day, but – as with the platypus - the best time to go looking for these animals is generally either early in the morning or close to dark. The frequency of rakali sightings also seems to increase in southeastern Australia during the cooler months of the year (from about May through September). This may partly reflect the fact that water-rats become somewhat more diurnal from late autumn to early spring in a bid to avoid swimming in unpleasantly chilly water at night. In addition, young animals from the summer breeding season are likely to start dispersing in autumn – moving away from home and travelling far and wide across the landscape to find a suitable location where they can settle down and breed in turn.



In Victoria, the rocky breakwater located near the St Kilda pier on Port Phillip Bay has traditionally been a great place to observe rakali (as well as little penguins *Eudyptula minor*). Other bayside locations where water-rats are frequently seen include Brighton, Sandringham, Port Melbourne and Williamstown. Elsewhere in metropolitan Melbourne, Sanctuary Lakes at Point Cook appears to support a substantial and highly visible population.

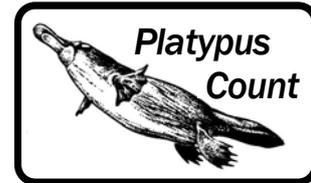
In eastern Victoria, rakali can be seen at several places in the Gippsland Lakes system, including Paynesville, Metung and Lakes Entrance (see *PN&V 58*). Elsewhere along the Victorian coast, the animals are often sighted on Geelong's Eastern Beach Reserve.

Large ornamental lakes located in Victoria's regional centres provide some really excellent opportunities to spot water-rats. These include Lake Wendouree in Ballarat, Lake Weeroona in Bendigo, Victoria Park Lake near Shepparton, Daylesford Lake in Daylesford township and Lake Hamilton in Hamilton township. The animals are also often seen near the edge of two large water bodies located in the Australian Capital Territory, namely Lake Burley Griffin and Lake Ginninderra. Lastly, water-rats can be observed just outside Canberra, though not in extremely high numbers, in the river at Queanbeyan.

Water-rats have been reported in recent years from several locations around Sydney Harbour (see *PN&V 60*). They can also be spotted in a number of suburbs along the Brisbane River (including New Farm, South Bank and Kanagaroo Point) and along the Torrens River in Adelaide.

If you happen to know of any other public locations where "Aussie otters" can be viewed with a reasonable degree of regularity, please consider sending us the details so the information can be shared with other persons interested in this species.

PLATYPUS COUNT: LAKE BENALLA



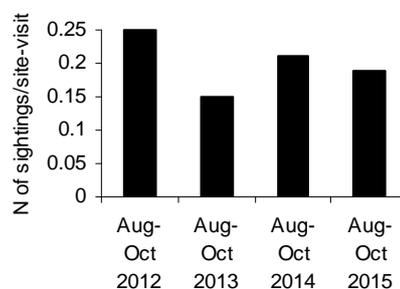
Lake Benalla is a large (17 hectare) lake created in 1973 at the confluence of Holland Creek and the Broken River in north central Victoria. The lake and its adjoining parklands were primarily developed to provide recreational opportunities for people living in Benalla township, and continue to be widely used for fishing, swimming, boating and walking. Maximum lake depth is around 3.3 metres, so this entire water body could in theory be used by a foraging platypus. However, although platypus are sometimes observed in Lake Benalla, most sightings occur a bit farther upstream, where water has backed up along meandering channels carrying water from Holland Creek and the Broken River (as shown in the photo below).



In early February 2012, Lake Benalla was drained in hopes that stands of a highly invasive aquatic weed known as cabomba (*Cabomba caroliniana*) would dry out and be eliminated before the plant had a chance to spread to other parts of the catchment. Visual surveys commissioned by the Goulburn Broken CMA and carried out by APC staff earlier in the summer had confirmed that the lake supported some platypus usage. However, animals were mainly active upstream of the area to be drained and, in particular, there was no reason to believe that young platypus were being raised anywhere along the lake perimeter.

Happily, a very capable and energetic woman living in Benalla offered to monitor subsequent platypus activity in and near the lake by tracking sightings through *Platypus Count*. The post-draining recovery process was complicated by the fact that the lake refilled prematurely in late February following unseasonably heavy rainfall, so a second water drawdown was attempted (though it failed to drain the lake entirely) from mid-April through early May.

Tricia Veale's observations indicate that platypus activity plummeted in the lake and adjoining upstream channels when the lake was drained in February, with the first subsequent sighting recorded on 7 April, at a site located about one kilometre upstream of the main body of the lake. The first platypus sighting noted in the main body of the lake after it had been drained and refilled occurred on 15 June. As shown in the graph below, the mean (or average) frequency of sightings in and near Lake Benalla in the 2012 breeding season (August to October) was actually a bit higher than those recorded in the next three breeding seasons, suggesting that platypus usage in 2012 was more or less back to normal by late winter.



In turn, these observations are consistent with findings from studies previously conducted by the APC near Melbourne to monitor platypus activity as stream channels were being substantially remodelled by heavy equipment to repair erosion. Although animals had the behavioural flexibility to shift their foraging to other nearby areas when prey became scarce due to habitat disturbance, they invariably chose to return home once conditions had settled down and food was again available.

BACK ISSUES OF PLATYPUS NEWS & VIEWS

If you're interested in reading previously published articles in *PN&V* (formerly *Ripples*), they're available (starting with Issue 14) on the Australian Platypus Conservancy web-site at www.platypus.asn.au.

DALGETY GROUP WATCHERS SCORE A HIGH TALLY

We recently included Dalgety on our list of top spots where platypus can be seen in the wild (see *PNV* 64). This status was confirmed by a Platypus Group Watch session organised in September 2016 by Sue Winchester of the Snowy River Holiday Park. The enthusiastic Dalgety Spotters (see photo at right) confirmed that at least one platypus was active at each of six sites located along a one-kilometre section of river in the 40-minute morning session. The group plans to hold its next session in early 2017.



VICTORIAN RAKALI SURVEY RADIO INTERVIEW

As part of our ongoing community-based survey of water-rats in Victoria (see *PN&V* 65), the APC recently organised a "rakali roadshow" to highlight this species' interesting biology and major conservation needs in public talks and school sessions held at 16 places across the state. You can catch up on some of the main points of interest in an interview recorded by Main FM Radio, now available at <https://soundcloud.com/mainfm-1/daa-australianotter>.

HELP US TO HELP THE PLATYPUS

The Australian Platypus Conservancy is a non-profit, non-government organisation.

Many of the Conservancy's projects are funded by grants from management agencies, philanthropic trusts or corporate sponsors. Donations from individuals and environmental groups also contribute enormously to the APC's work, by supporting platypus population monitoring, education programs and special studies that can't otherwise be readily funded.

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

Australian Platypus Conservancy



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