

# Platypus News & Views



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*Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 69 – August 2017)*

## **IT'S TIME TO BAN DEATH-TRAPS NOW!**

The deaths last May of five platypus in opera house yabby traps set in a dam connected to Labertouche Creek near Melbourne quite rightly horrified most people. Since then, three more incidents have been reported in which six additional platypus are known to have died in opera house traps in Victoria.

What is even more depressing is that these mortalities almost certainly represent just the tip of the iceberg. Most deaths of platypus, rakali and turtles in enclosed yabby traps don't get officially reported for obvious reasons. Opera house traps, in particular, are sold in their thousands, often at a cost of just a few dollars each. As a result, illegal deployment is widespread, often by persons who aren't even aware that they're doing the wrong thing. The resulting death of wildlife in traps is a significant animal welfare issue. In cases where this causes a sizeable proportion of an already small population to be wiped out – as was true along Labertouche Creek – it also has genuine conservation implications.

The Australian Platypus Conservancy has been working for many years to address the issue of trap-related mortality, both through community education and by carrying out studies to identify safer yabby trap designs. For example, field trials conducted by the APC and Dr Tom Grant have shown that adding a circular 'escape hatch' to a trap's roof allows most platypus to escape before drowning. However, some trial subjects failed to locate the escape hatch in a timely manner and had to be released by researchers (see *PN&V* 55 and 61 for more details).

Earlier this year, the APC carried out trials of additional modified designs in hopes of identifying a truly safe trap. Although one design in particular (incorporating a narrow rectangular opening along the entire length of the roof) showed some improvement on previous results, the spread of times required by animals to escape meant that it couldn't be said to be completely platypus-safe. Given that variation in platypus behaviour plays an important part in how long it takes an animal to find an exit – and that not much time may be available for a platypus to escape before it drowns, particularly in relatively deep water – we conclude that the objective of a 100% safe trap is unlikely to ever be achieved.

The APC therefore believes that mandating a total ban on use of opera house traps and other enclosed yabby trap designs will be the best way to minimise risk that wildlife is harmed as a by-product of recreational yabbing. Such a ban will require fishing regulations to be amended in all states and territories apart from Western Australia and Tasmania. Interestingly, both VRFish (the peak representative body for recreational anglers in Victoria) and the Recreational Fishing New South Wales Advisory Council (RFNSW) have now called for such a ban, and we understand that steps are now being taken in New South Wales to consider regulatory action in response to RFNSW's position.

The APC acknowledges that there are many highly responsible users of enclosed yabby traps, including landholders who have been yabbing for generations in farm dams without causing any harm to non-target species. However, it should also be recognised that alternative methods for recreational yabbing exist that are both productive and quite safe for air-breathing wildlife. Accordingly, we urge everyone to support the banning of enclosed yabby traps in the interests of Australia's much-loved platypus.

## **MYTHS ABOUT YABBY TRAPS AND PLATYPUS DEATHS**

In light of the APC's call for an Australia-wide ban on use of enclosed yabby traps (such as opera house traps) we'd like to try to clarify some of the facts surrounding five common myths about these traps.

**MYTH 1.** *If a platypus can get into a trap, it must be able to get out again.*

Research has shown that a platypus held inside an opera house trap consistently (and quite logically) searches for an opening in the trap's outer surface. It doesn't look in the middle of a trap (where the exits are effectively located at the end of inward-pointing funnels) and so realistically doesn't have a chance of finding its way out before drowning (in less than 3 minutes).



**MYTH 2.** *Current fishing regulations protect the platypus.*

Fishing regulations generally restrict the use of enclosed yabby traps to private waters, such as farm dams, where platypus are not expected to occur. However, this doesn't protect the animals because many traps are set illegally in public waters where platypus are found. Except for Tasmania and Western Australia, fishing regulations also allow enclosed traps to be set legally in places where other air-breathing animals (such as freshwater turtles and water-rats/rakali) often live.

**MYTH 3.** *Platypus can be kept out of traps by making the entrance holes smaller.*

A platypus's streamlined shape means that it is very good at finding its way through small openings. Research by Dr Tom Grant has shown that adults weighing up to about 1 kilogram can travel through a rigid 55-millimetre square grid (equating to a 7-centimetre ring in terms of its perimeter). Much smaller grids or rings are needed to reliably exclude juvenile platypus (which can weigh as little as 300-400 grams). It's hard to see how a trap can be designed that will both reliably exclude platypus throughout their range and encourage large yabbies to enter. This will be particularly difficult to achieve in Queensland, where red-claw yabbies often grow to 300 grams and can weigh as much as 600 grams.

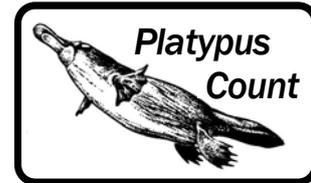
**MYTH 4.** *Opera house traps that have a ring fitted around the entrance are safe for platypus.*

Most opera house traps are fitted with a metal ring (typically measuring 7.5 to 10 cm in diameter) around each entrance – unlike older versions that had a flexible cord around the entrance. However, the size of these rings still allows a platypus to enter easily (see above), so the rigid ring doesn't make the trap platypus-safe.

**MYTH 5.** *The opera house trap problem can be solved through public education.*

Well, yes... and no. Deaths of non-target animals could undoubtedly be reduced through better public awareness of the risk that enclosed yabby traps pose to wildlife, along with improved knowledge about where traps can and can't be legally set. At the same time, it's important to recognise that community education is never going to be a complete solution. Some persons (such as children) may not even know that fishing regulations apply, other persons may have heard about the issue but fail to understand the practical detail, and still others may choose to always put their own interests above those of wildlife.

## **PLATYPUS COUNT UPDATE: WHEN IT'S BEST TO WATCH**

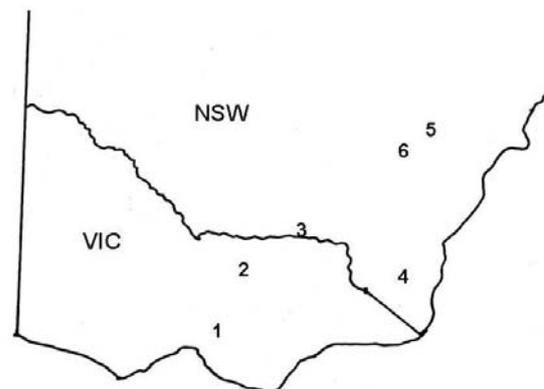


Say you've never observed a platypus in the wild but would really like to do so. What is the best time (both during the day and during the year) to go looking for this elusive species?

The first thing to keep in mind is that a platypus generally prefers to feed at night, as this reduces the likelihood of its being noticed and taken by a predator (such as a fox or sea eagle). Though there are many reasons why a platypus may choose to be active during daylight hours, it's much more likely that you'll see one feeding near dawn or dusk than in the middle of the day.

Secondly, the likelihood of seeing a platypus often varies enormously through the year. To support our recommendation about when animals are most likely to be spotted, we thought it would be useful to identify the two months when platypus have been observed most frequently in six different rivers monitored by *Platypus Count* volunteers for periods of five or more years.

The locations of these rivers are shown on the map at right. They include the Yarra River in the Melbourne suburbs of View Bank and Lower Templestowe (1), the Broken River just upstream of Lake Benalla (2), the Murray River at East Albury (3), the Bombala River at Bombala township (4), the Queanbeyan River at Queanbeyan township (5), and the Tidbinbilla River weir pool in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (6).



A table describing the months when the highest and second highest frequencies of platypus sightings were recorded in these six water bodies is provided below.

<b>River</b>	<b>Monitoring period</b>	<b>Best month</b>	<b>Next best month</b>
Yarra	2008-2016	August	September
Broken	2011-2016	September	August
Murray	2010-2016	September	October
Bombala	2008-2012	August	September
Queanbeyan	2009-2016	August	July
Tidbinbilla	2011-2016	September	August

Late winter and early spring consistently appear to be the best seasons for platypus-spotting: August and September were identified to be the top two months in four areas (Yarra River, Broken River, Bombala River and Tidbinbilla River), whereas the best platypus viewing period appeared to peak a little earlier at Queanbeyan (July-August) and a little later in the Murray River at Albury (September-October).

As many readers will be aware, late winter and spring mark the onset of the platypus breeding season in southeastern mainland Australia: adult males are full of testosterone and zooming around as they seek to set up breeding territories, keep tabs on females and exclude rivals. Meanwhile, adult females are also under pressure to accumulate substantial fat reserves before incubating eggs and raising young. All of this activity in turn appears to contribute to animals being out and about during the day.

Elsewhere in the platypus's range, the peak period for sightings is predicted to vary with the onset of spring: up to several weeks later in chilly Tasmania, and possibly up to several weeks earlier in the warmer parts of Queensland.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION ON PLATYPUS DEATHS IN YABBY TRAPS**

On page 1 we highlight the APC's call for a total ban on the use of enclosed yabby traps. You can also access a more detailed information paper (in PDF format) about the problem of bycatch mortalities on the APC website, at [www.platypus.asn.au](http://www.platypus.asn.au).

Also on our website you can find galleries of images – of a somewhat confronting nature – showing some of the many animals found dead in opera house nets and other forms of enclosed traps in recent years.

You can also find a more comprehensive list of 'Myths about yabby traps and platypus deaths', as featured on page 2, by going to the article posted on 5 June 2017 on our Facebook page, at Australian Platypus Conservancy (Official).

## **HOW YOU CAN HELP TO BAN PLATYPUS DEATH-TRAPS**

You can support the APC's call for a ban on enclosed yabby traps by contacting the relevant minister responsible for fisheries in your state or territory. For the jurisdictions where platypus mainly occur, their details are as follows:

NSW: Niall Blair, Minister for Primary Industries (Fisheries)  
Victoria: Jaala Pulford, Minister for Fisheries  
ACT: Mick Gentleman, Minister for Environment  
Queensland: Bill Byrne, Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries  
Tasmania: The use (but not sale) of enclosed yabby traps is already prohibited.

Please remember that Australian water-rats/rakali and freshwater turtles are also at risk from enclosed yabby traps, particularly in South Australia and Northern Territory where they can be set in all waters, both public and private. The relevant ministers to contact are:

SA: Leon Bignell, Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries  
NT: Ken Vowles, Minister for Fisheries  
WA: The use (but not sale) of enclosed yabby traps is already prohibited.

In theory the Commonwealth has no direct responsibility for inland waters. However, a National Fisheries Bycatch Policy covering marine species has already been formulated by the Commonwealth and the states. It seems only logical that a parallel policy to protect freshwater wildlife including platypus and rakali populations should be adopted.

There is also no reason why the Commonwealth could not take the initiative to encourage states and territories to address this issue. There is even an established inter-governmental body with state and territory representative where this matter could appropriately be raised, namely the Australian Fisheries Management Forum. If you believe that the federal government should take positive action to protect a national icon, then you can express your opinion to Anne Ruston, the Commonwealth Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources.

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