

Platypus News & Views



Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 77 – August 2019)

FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON THE PLATYPUS FUR TRADE

A study designed to collect historical information from newspaper articles and other published accounts about the platypus has yielded new insight about the impact of the early trade in platypus pelts.

As part of her PhD studies, Tahneal Hawke from the University of New South Wales systematically sifted through thousands of records from digitised newspaper and journal articles made available through Trove, a specialised search engine hosted by the National Library of Australia. Important sources of information about the platypus fur trade included early issues of the *Sydney Wool and Produce Journal* and the *Sydney Wool and Stock Journal*. A paper featuring her findings has now been accepted for publication.

Harvesting native animal pelts for practical use in European apparel or other goods undoubtedly commenced soon after the first British penal settlement was established at Sydney in 1788.

From a professional furrier's perspective, platypus fur was apparently considered to be by far the hardest-wearing of all Australian animals and was also prized for remaining practically impervious to water even after being processed. However, the fact that platypus hairs are relatively short also limited the scope for early furriers to hide the cuts made when shaping garments. The surprisingly thick nature of platypus skin also meant that finished pelts tended to be rather stiff. In consequence, they were mainly used to make bed covers or lap rugs that served to keep people warm while travelling in horse-drawn buggies and carriages or while sitting at home in winter. A single good quality rug required the use of 40 to 60 platypus skins. In addition, platypus fur cloaks, hats or muffs were sometimes produced.

As an actual example, the photo at right shows a platypus rug made of 42 skins that was offered for sale in London in the 1930s by a young woman from an aristocratic background. The rug had originally been gifted to a British peer when he held a senior government position in Australia in the late 1800s. When the rug was publicly exhibited in London, several Australian newspapers expressed their dismay that it was considered appropriate to display an item incorporating the remains of animals that by then were strictly protected by law in Australia.

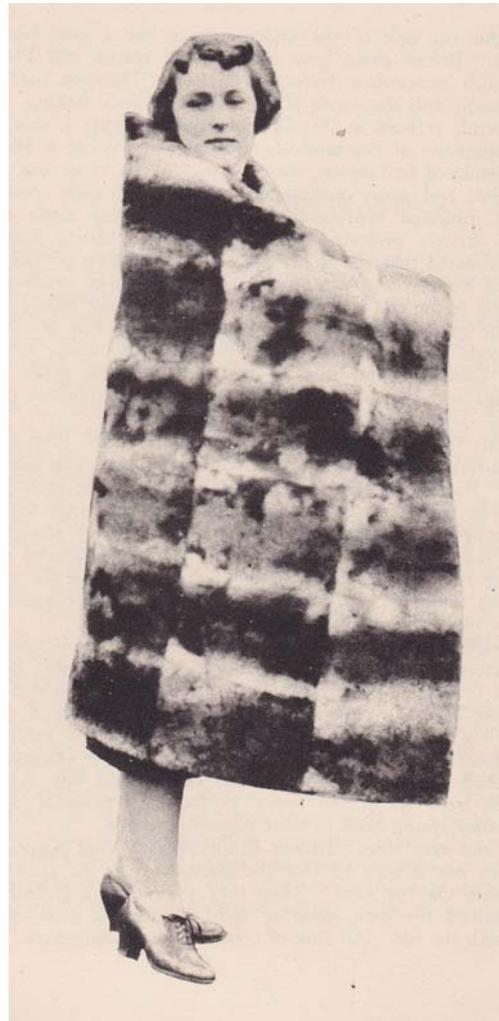


Photo credit: C. Barrett, 1944. The Platypus. (image originally supplied by Planet News Ltd, London).

The earliest commercial trade in platypus skins may date from the Australian goldrush era in the 1850s, when possum and kangaroo fur rugs were apparently often sold by aboriginal people to gold miners. The first published reference to a platypus fur product dates from 1862, when a travel rug made of tanned platypus skins was listed as being part of the New South Wales contribution to the London International Exhibition held in that same year.

In the 1870s, a self-styled 'sportsman-cum-naturalist' named Bob Stuart claimed to make a good living by selling platypus skins obtained from animals trapped and shot in the lower reaches of the Yarra River above Dight's Falls (a low weir built in the 1840s on top of a natural rock bar, which continues to serve as the upstream limit to most tidal flows in this system) and the nearby Darebin and Merri Creeks.

Based on Tahneal's research, more than a thousand platypus skins were sold on average in the Sydney fur markets each year between 1891 and 1899 (range = 754 to 2,356 skins per year). However, the impact of hunting on platypus populations presumably declined early in the twentieth century, as laws officially protecting the platypus on a state-wide basis came into effect in Victoria (1892), New South Wales (1901), Queensland (1906), Tasmania (1907) and South Australia (1912). For example, in Harry Burrell's book *The Platypus* (published in 1927), a professional furrier notes that as an outcome of widespread legal protection, 'One can go for a whole season through all the wholesale stores of Sydney and not see...a single platypus pelt.'

Illegal trade in platypus skins undoubtedly continued for some time after the species became protected by law (for example, 2000 platypus skins apparently destined for overseas export were said to have been seized in Victoria as late as 1931). However, in his booklet *The Platypus* (published in 1944), Charles Barrett expresses his belief that legal protection of the platypus was broadly effective and had reduced hunting pressure to a fairly low level of poaching, mainly in remote areas. He also cites a senior government official who had recently claimed that platypus skins had not been successfully smuggled from Victoria in the previous three decades.

Platypus populations characteristically occur at relatively low density, and there's little doubt that the fur trade is likely to have had a very substantial impact on the species' abundance in many places. However, given that more than a century has passed since the platypus became legally protected across its entire range, it seems unlikely that the effects of hunting on population status will still be evident today.

Males and females can both breed when two years old and the average platypus litter size is 1.9 juveniles (based on information obtained from very long-term field studies carried out by Dr Tom Grant along the upper Shoalhaven River, along with records of the number of eggs found in burrows that were dug up historically). Although on average only around 40% of mature females raise babies in any given year (at least in the Shoalhaven system), adults can live a long time (up to at least 21 years in the wild) and a female can apparently continue to produce young through her entire life.

These parameters suggest that a depleted platypus population should in fact be capable of expanding quite rapidly to repopulate suitable vacant habitat. As an interesting possible example of how well this can work in practice, one of the early newspaper articles cited in Tahneal Hawke's paper indicates that a very abundant platypus population was established in the Yarra River near Princes Bridge in Melbourne in 1908, just 16 years after the platypus became legally protected in Victoria.

TASMANIAN CARERS WORKSHOP – HOBART 26 OCTOBER

The APC will be presenting a specialist workshop about the conservation requirements of both the platypus and water-rat/rakali and the procedures needed to deal with injured or displaced individuals on Saturday 26 October in Hobart. This event is open to interested members of the public - for registration details, please contact Tasmanian Wildlife Rehabilitation on twrc@taswildlife.org.

FRESH LOOK FOR THE APC WEBSITE

The Australian Platypus Conservancy website has been popular since it was first set up more than 20 years ago, and currently receives around 10,000 or more views each month.

To ensure that the website continues to be as up-to-date and relevant as possible for its users, we've devoted quite a lot of time over the past three months to restructuring and refurbishing its content, both text and photos.

The information that is most likely to be of interest to students is now organised into four sections (Platypus Biology, Ecology & Behaviour, Distribution & Numbers, Evolution & Names) and is much more lavishly illustrated than previously. A section on FAQs has also been added to cover all those burning questions about the species that can't be easily addressed elsewhere on the site: What is the correct term for a baby platypus? Is the platypus good to eat? Can a platypus jump? A section on Australia's other charismatic freshwater mammal (the Australian water-rat or rakali) has also been substantially revised, including a lot of new photos of this very attractive native animal.

We've also developed an updated section on Conservation Issues to describe what is known about the effects of a wide range of factors on platypus populations, including habitat and water quality, droughts and floods, litter, dams and weirs, instream structures such as pumps and culverts, urban development, inappropriate angling practices (including use of nets and traps that cause platypus to drown) and predators and disease.



For the first time, the APC website also contains a section devoted to Platypus Survey & Monitoring. This aims particularly to provide useful background information for environmental managers, biological consultants, and members of community-based environmental organisations who would like to learn more about the options for mapping and monitoring the status of platypus populations.

This section begins with an overview of current pros and cons of various major survey methods. Detailed information is also provided about issues that need to be considered when setting survey nets, choosing a metric to report abundance or making decisions about the best way to structure visual surveys or report sightings information. The section also discusses why counting burrow entrances is a notably poor technique for platypus population assessment, and provides some information about use of environmental DNA (or eDNA) and automatic cameras for platypus survey purposes.



Websites are by their nature destined to be works in progress. In the case of the APC website, we plan to tackle two remaining tasks in the next three months, namely updating the section on Platypus Management Guidelines to reflect the latest research findings, and providing a more user-friendly option to record platypus and water-rat/rakali sightings that incorporates a mapping interface.

Meanwhile, we encourage anyone who hasn't visited the APC website recently to see what the revamped site has to offer, at www.platypus.asn.au.

MORE OPERA HOUSE TRAP DEATHS – IT'S TIME TO ACT NOW

In July, four dead platypus were found in an opera house trap in the Shoalhaven River near Farrington, NSW. How many more platypus, rakali and turtles have to die in this senseless manner before New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory start banning the use of enclosed yabby and cray traps?

Victoria has banned recreational use of enclosed traps from 1 July 2019 and now only allows open-top lift traps and other equally wildlife-friendly methods to be used for yabbing. Introduction of the new regulations has been almost universally applauded, including by recreational angling bodies. The Australian Capital Territory is expected to follow Victoria's lead shortly and Tasmania and Western Australia already prohibit use of enclosed traps. Come on, NSW, Queensland, SA and NT politicians – this is a complete no-brainer!



FORTHCOMING EVENTS ABOUT MONITORING

The APC is presenting a number of information sessions and training workshops as part of the ongoing regional roll-out of the community-based Australian Platypus Monitoring Network (APMN).

Forthcoming talks being presented in partnership with the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority in Victoria are scheduled as follows:

- Wednesday September 4 – **Nagambie**, CFA Station, starting 6 pm
- Thursday September 5 – **Murchison**, CFA Station, starting 6 pm
- Friday September 6 – **Shepparton**, GBCMA office, 168 Welsford St, starting 6 pm
- Saturday September 7 – **Nathalia**, Barmah Heritage Centre, starting 3 pm
- Friday September 20 – **Mansfield**, Buckland Centre, starting 7 pm
- Saturday September 21 – **Euroa**, Seven Creeks Hotel, starting 4 pm

The APC and GBCMA will also be conducting more training activities about platypus monitoring at **Flowerdale, Seymour, Yea, Alexandra, Thornton/Eildon, and Benalla** in mid-September. For more details, contact the APC at platypus.apc@westnet.com.au.

The roll-out of APMN will soon be extended to Tasmania, with a workshop and training session to be held in **Deloraine** on Sunday 27 October, followed by events in **Mole Creek, Devonport, Launceston** and possibly other locations. Full details will be posted on the APC Facebook page nearer the time. Other regional events are also in the pipeline. Meanwhile, you can always consult the APMN website directly at www.platypusnetwork.org.au for information about how to become involved in monitoring your local platypus population.

Australian Platypus Conservancy



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