

# Platypus News & Views



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*Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 83 – February 2021)*

## PLATYPUS IN THE GOULBURN

The Goulburn River arises on the slopes of the Victorian Alps and travels west and north for nearly 600 kilometres to join the Murray River near the town of Echuca. On average, it contributes around 3 million megalitres of water annually to the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Goulburn's flow regime is now largely controlled by the rate at which water is released from Eildon Dam and Goulburn Weir to satisfy the needs of irrigators and other water users. Irrigation demand is greatest in summer – the season when natural flow normally drops to its lowest level in Victorian rivers – thereby fundamentally changing the Goulburn's annual flow pattern. For example, before major dams were built its channel typically carried about 52% of annual flow from July to September and just 5% from January to March. These values have since been altered to around 33% from July to September and 23% from January to March.



*The middle reaches of the Goulburn River (not far from Alexandra) in December 2018*

Fortunately, platypus have been able to adapt to these changes and remain widespread and locally abundant, particularly in the reaches upstream of Goulburn Weir. For example, at least one (and up to three) platypus were seen by an APC researcher within five minutes of arriving at ten of 11 sites (sampling 110 km of the Goulburn between Seymour and Thornton) that he surveyed visually in 2019. Around the same time, a very experienced and reliable local platypus observer recorded at least 33 different individuals in a 30-minute census of a 2-kilometre segment of the Goulburn above Alexandra.

The introduction of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan along with new water-trading rules and severe drought conditions in New South Wales created a perfect storm for the Goulburn River in the summers of 2017/18 and 2018/19, driving massive sales of its water to irrigators located far downstream along the Murray. The only feasible way to deliver the water was to increase flow substantially, for weeks on end, above the level expected during a normal irrigation season. From the platypus's perspective, this meant that additional energy had to be used to swim upstream against the current or dive to find food. Platypus habitat quality also suffered due to widespread loss of bank vegetation and associated bank erosion and channel sedimentation, particularly in the Goulburn's lower reaches.

The drought in New South Wales has since ended and a review is now underway to help ensure that future delivery of water from the Goulburn occurs in an environmentally sustainable manner. Meanwhile, these events help to highlight yet once again how much the platypus relies on humans to manage rivers with appropriate care on its behalf.

## ESCAPING THE TRAP

Since 1 July 2019, the Victorian government has banned recreational use of opera house traps and other enclosed nets to capture crayfish or yabbies in all public and private waters throughout the state. The new rule aims to reduce the number of platypus, rakali (or water-rats), turtles and other air-breathing animals drowning as bycatch in enclosed traps (as shown at right). So how successful has this move been in reducing deaths of non-target species?

Based on records collated by Mike Sverns (DELWP Major Operations and Investigations Unit), only one platypus reportedly died in an opera house trap in the first 18 months after the Victorian ban was implemented (in King Parrot Creek in September 2019), with two rakali mortalities reported in the same period (in the Barwon River in April 2020). On average, eight times as many platypus and four times as many rakali reportedly died each year in enclosed traps set in Victorian waters in the 36 months preceding the ban.



*Two platypus that drowned in an opera house trap in 2015*

It's also worth noting that the ban on opera house trap use has been strongly supported by nearly everyone in the Victorian community, including recreational angling groups. To encourage persons to make an early switch to wildlife-friendly open-top yabby nets, the Victorian Fisheries Authority funded a Yabby Net Swap Program, whereby anglers could swap up to three opera house traps for one open-top yabby net (as shown below at left). This program was very successful, with 20,000 open-top yabby nets distributed to persons across the state between December 2018 and February 2019.



Legislation banning use of opera house traps in the Australian Capital Territory came into effect in 2020. The ACT also followed Victoria's lead in announcing that opera house traps could be exchanged for open-top lift nets at participating fishing tackle shops (with a limit of two new free nets per person). Elsewhere in Australia, opera house traps cannot be legally deployed in Tasmania or Western Australia. New South Wales has announced their use will eventually be banned throughout the state but (as far as we know) still hasn't set a date for this to occur.

Even though Victoria's ban has been an unqualified success in many ways, some illegal usage is likely to continue for some time due to the huge numbers of opera house traps that were previously purchased. More than 60 enclosed nets have been seized by Victorian fisheries and wildlife officers since mid-2019, including 23 opera house traps confiscated from a single person, resulting in a substantial fine. Unfortunately, it could be many years before these traps finally disappear from Victorian waters, as illustrated by a drum net being removed from the Goulburn River in May 2020, two decades or more after its use was outlawed.

Therefore, please continue to watch for use of illegal yabby traps and nets and report them at once to your state/territory fisheries hotline (13FISH in Victoria). Also, do whatever you can to encourage New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory to take action to ban *all* use of enclosed yabby nets and traps within their respective borders.

## CREATIVE NEW WAYS TO HELP THE PLATYPUS

Donations to the Conservancy from businesses, organisations and interested individuals are used to support activities that are otherwise difficult or impossible to fund, such as administering the Australian Platypus Monitoring Network or providing a service to advise persons who've found an injured or displaced platypus. Here we feature some recent examples of innovative fund-raising to assist platypus welfare and conservation.

### *On ya bike!*

Rivendell Bicycle Works in California is recognised as one of the world's leading producers of high-quality bikes and accessories. The company has recently added a Platypus model to its range of beautifully designed steel bicycles and has generously offered to donate a percentage of sales to the APC. Rivendell has also produced a T-shirt featuring a Platypus Pride o' the Cosmos design and has already contributed funds based on sales of these garments. For more details visit: [www.rivbike.com](http://www.rivbike.com).



### *Miniature Painting Marathon*

Evan Walters is a leading painter of miniature figures used in gaming – check out his work and his edgy platypus avatar at [www.instagram.com/waltersworkshop](https://www.instagram.com/waltersworkshop). On 6 March Evan will be undertaking a 24-hour painting marathon to be live-streamed on [www.twitch.tv/waltersworkshop](https://www.twitch.tv/waltersworkshop), with proceeds going to support the Conservancy.



### *Puddles the Platypus*



Puddles will debut this year just in time for this egg-laying mammal to claim her place as the rightful Aussie replacement for that feral impostor, the Easter Bunny. Created by renowned Melbourne-based confectioner Chocolatier Australia, Puddles will be available from various major retail outlets, including Coles supermarkets, in the lead-up to Easter. Puddles will then become a standard item in the Chocolatier range (see [www.chocolatier.com.au](http://www.chocolatier.com.au)) with 25% of profits to be devoted to platypus conservation.

*Our special thanks to Rivendell, Walters Workshop, Chocolatier and the many others who continue to support the work of the Australian Platypus Conservancy.*

## TEN'S A CROWD

Though sometimes described as a shy and sensitive species, the platypus can become quite habituated to nearby human activity (for example, see *PN&V 82, View from the Bridge*). However, some recent observations by Pete Walsh (a dedicated member of the Australian Platypus Monitoring Network) suggest that congregating humans may sometimes get on the nerves of even a highly urban platypus.



Pete regularly tracks platypus activity in the Hobart Rivulet, not far from the Tasmanian capital's CBD. He recently watched a platypus foraging farther downstream than usual in a very open section of the creek. A crowd gradually gathered along the walking track overlooking the pool where the platypus was busily feeding. The animal initially appeared to be unperturbed but - as the number of excited onlookers increased to ten or so - the animal apparently decided it was time for the show to end and started swimming downstream in a determined manner. Then, after reaching some large rocks that hid it from view, it stopped and waited just long enough for the crowd to disperse before circling back and starting to feed again right in front of Pete! For more of Pete's platypus images and news, visit <https://www.facebook.com/hobartrivuletplatypus>.

## DONATE USING TILTIFFY

A number of persons have recently asked us about the best way to organise a direct donation, either from within Australia or from overseas. After considering a number of options, we believe the best alternative is to use Tiltify, a new online platform assisting more than a thousand charities worldwide. Unlike many other secure-payment systems, a receipt is issued immediately to the donor. In the case of a fund-raising event, the organiser does not need to collect money from participants but can still obtain a tally of exactly how much the campaign has raised. For more information, go to [www.tiltify.com](http://www.tiltify.com) and type 'Australian Platypus Conservancy Incorporated' into the Cause search.

## APC PLATYPUS AND RAKALI TALKS AND WEBINARS

Forthcoming APC information sessions include the following:

- Wednesday March 18 – **North Sydney Council**, Rakali webinar, starting 6.30 pm
- Saturday March 20 – **Dargo Landcare Group**, Platypus talk, starting 2.30 pm
- Sunday March 21 – **Narracan Landcare Group**, Platypus talk, starting 10.00 am
- Sunday March 21 – **Friends of Blackburn Lake**, Rakali talk, starting 2 pm

If your organisation is interested in hosting a webinar, please contact the APC.

Australian Platypus Conservancy



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