

Platypus Contingency Plans for Capital Works Programs

A platypus's daylight hours are most typically spent resting in an underground burrow located next to a water body in a consolidated soil bank (normally rising more or less vertically for a distance of 1 metre or more above the water's surface, so the nest chamber can be located well above water level). Burrow entrances are generally oval in cross-section and just large enough to allow a platypus to enter. Some entrances are located underwater, with most of the remainder very well hidden by overhanging vegetation, undercut tree roots, etc. In consequence, it is normally not feasible to identify active platypus burrows in a section of bank habitat that is due to be excavated or otherwise substantially modified by heavy equipment.

As a workable alternative, we believe the best strategy to protect platypus in such an area is as follows:

- Limit as much as possible the amount of severe bank disturbance or compaction occurring along water bodies where substantial numbers of platypus are known to occur, particularly in the period when females are likely to be raising dependent young (from mid-spring through summer). Although some platypus burrows may be very long (up to 30 and possibly even 55 metres), the majority appear to be less than 10 metres in length, measured from the edge of the bank to the burrow chamber.
- Use caution whenever excavating the banks of natural or manmade water bodies and ensure that contingency plans are in place to deal with any platypus that may be accidentally dug up. In particular, we advise the following:

Contingency plans for displaced platypus

When picking up an injured or displaced platypus, take great care to avoid the poisonous spurs of adult males. These structures are located on the inner ankle of the hind legs and resemble the canine teeth of a medium-sized dog in terms of their length (around 15 mm), shape (slightly curved) and colour (off-white, often stained brownish at the base). Although platypus venom is not considered to be life-threatening to humans, it can cause excruciating pain and spectacular swelling. When being handled by a human, males will typically be much more focused on trying to escape than acting aggressively, but it would be extremely foolish to ever grab or hold an adult male (or an animal of unknown age/sex) from below.



Unless it is definitely known that a platypus is *not* equipped with spurs, do *not* place your hands or fingers under the animal's belly or use your legs or arms to support it from below. Instead, lift the platypus by gripping it firmly around the end half of the tail (but not the tail base, which a male can reach with his spurs) – see diagram above.

While holding a platypus in this way, it should also be easy to see if it has spurs. Note that juvenile males have non-venomous spurs that are typically around 10 mm long, more or less cone-shaped, and whiter than those of adults. Females (both adults and juveniles) lack conspicuous spurs.

Keep at least two clean cotton bags (about the size of a pillow case or a little longer) on hand in which to confine displaced animals (with only one animal at a time held in a given bag, apart from small siblings). If a bag becomes very wet or soiled, the animal inside should ideally be transferred to a fresh dry bag to try to keep it comfortable. A piece of twine or the equivalent will be needed to secure the top of a bag, unless a knot can easily be tied in the neck of the bag itself.

To avoid having the bag and its occupant walk away unexpectedly (or become lodged under the seat of a vehicle), each bag should be placed inside a sturdy but well-ventilated cardboard box or the equivalent.

Common sense needs to be applied when deciding whether or not to take a displaced platypus to a veterinarian for examination/treatment before releasing it back to the wild. Platypus are highly susceptible to both stress and overheating – for example, holding an animal in a bag in the sun for more than a few minutes when the air temperature is above 28°C is likely to be lethal. Accordingly, the best strategy may be to release the animal immediately back to the wild after moving it approximately 150-200 metres upstream or downstream of the works site (ideally to a location providing plenty of natural cover in the form of shrubs or grasses overhanging the water, etc.). Immediate release is particularly likely to be the recommended course of action if the following conditions apply:

- The animal appears to be alert and active and seems old enough to both be familiar with the local water body and a reasonably accomplished swimmer.
- The day is forecast to be warm (over 25°C) and/or it's likely to take more than an hour or so to convey the platypus to a veterinarian.

Alternatively, if an animal is clearly injured and/or seems abnormally sluggish (i.e. may have suffered a concussion or internal injuries) and/or appears to be so young that it should still be confined to a nursery burrow, arrangements should be made to transport it without delay to a suitably experienced veterinarian for assessment.

To minimise stress during transport, try to speak quietly, close car doors as quietly as possible and turn off the car radio. Keep the car cool and well ventilated. Make certain that the box containing the platypus is stored securely inside the vehicle, i.e. so that it doesn't tip over or rattle around.

More generally, try to respect the fact that the platypus in your care is a wild animal that may be experiencing pain and will certainly feel threatened by close contact with humans – avoid the temptation to handle the animal unnecessarily or show it off to interested bystanders.

For additional advice about what to do on the day, try contacting the following organisations:

Tasmania

- Bonorong Wildlife Rescue (0447 264 625, 24 hours)
- Tasmanian Wildlife Rescue Service (6165 4305 during business hours)

Victoria

- Australian Platypus Conservancy (0419 595 939, 24 hours)
- Healesville Sanctuary Australian Wildlife Hospital Centre (5957 2829; animals needing care can be dropped off between 9.00 am and 4.00 pm daily)
- Wildlife Victoria (8400 7300, 6.40 am to 8.30 pm daily)

New South Wales

- WIRES Wildlife Rescue Organisation (1300 094 737, 24 hours)
- Taronga Zoo Sydney, Rescue Hotline (9969 2777)
- Taronga Western Plains Zoo, Wildlife Hospital (6881 1461)

Queensland

- Australian Wildlife Hospital, Emergency Hotline (1300 369 652)
- RSPCA Queensland (1300 264 625)
- Wildcare (Brisbane, Gympie, Toowoomba & Gold Coast: 5527 2444, 24 hours)
- BARN (Brisbane Area Rescue Network: 0405 056 066)
- Tablelands Wildlife Rescue (Cairns and Atherton Tablelands: 4091 7767)