

Platypus News & Views



Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 86 – November 2021)

GREAT AUSTRALIAN PLATYPUS SEARCH – SOME CAVEATS

A number of organisations have contacted us in the past few months to find out if we're affiliated with the Great Australian Platypus Search (or GAPS) - an ambitious project that aims to map where platypus occur throughout their range by determining whether or not traces of platypus DNA can be detected in samples of river or creek water.

To set the record straight, GAPS was launched in early 2018 by cesar Australia (a company supplying services to assist agricultural pest management and wildlife conservation) and the University of Melbourne, and was initially funded by San Diego Zoo Global as part of a deal authorising a pair of platypus to be transferred from Taronga Zoo in Sydney to the San Diego Zoo Safari Park in California.

Fast forward to 2021 and GAPS is now being funded through the efforts of a not-for-profit group (Odonata), with DNA analyses conducted by EnviroDNA (a sister company to cesar Australia). The focus this year has been to analyse water samples from those Victorian waterways that haven't been surveyed in previous years. Sampling has been limited to the months from late winter through spring, when natural flow typically peaks in Victoria.

Our curiosity was aroused when we had a quick look at the map on the GAPS website that showed the actual sites that had been nominated for sampling this year. A large proportion seemed to be located either on small tributary streams that were likely to dry up on a fairly regular basis, or at the upper end of larger creeks and rivers where the same might also be expected to apply – thereby reducing the likelihood that platypus would be routinely present.

After further investigation, we learned that the study design has aimed to ensure that representative sampling occurs across Victoria (apart from the Mallee region in Victoria's exceptionally dry and hot north-western corner) with nearly all named creeks and rivers reportedly being included in the study. However, site selection was based solely on a desktop analysis – although the project administrators hoped that all sites would hold reliable surface water (the most basic requirement for a platypus to be able to find food and survive), it was considered likely that exceptions would sometimes occur. Persons encountering a totally dry site were therefore directed to sample water at a different site of their own choosing located on the same named waterway (within about 5 km of the original site).

To see for ourselves what sort of sites were being included in this study, we decided to visit a representative set of the GAPS sites nominated for platypus DNA analysis in 2021.

We selected locations in early September (when a lot of candidate sites were listed on the GAPS website) by randomly choosing an area that encompassed 16 sites on 9 named waterways, located about an hour's drive from where we're based in central Victoria. We'd never previously visited any of these creeks and had an entirely open mind about what they would look like. The sites were all visited on the same day in early October (about midway through the official GAPS sampling period), following a wet week in which 32 mm of rain were recorded at the nearest Bureau of Meteorology weather station. *(Continued on next page)*

PEOPLE POWER - WATCHING OUT FOR PLATYPUS

We've frequently had cause to describe how the Australian Platypus Monitoring Network (APMN) is helping to harness volunteer energy and enthusiasm on behalf of platypus conservation. APMN participants have to date conducted over 43,000 standardised scans and recorded nearly 12,000 platypus sightings that are summarised online.

An alternative approach to platypus visual monitoring known as Platypus Group Watch is another great way for citizen scientists to contribute to tracking the status of local platypus (and also rakali) populations.

Platypus Group Watch relies on small teams of observers, armed with binoculars and stationed in pairs at points distributed more or less evenly along a section of a river, creek or lake. Each monitoring session normally lasts for one hour in the early morning or late afternoon, and ideally is repeated on two or more occasions through the year. The results provide an interesting snapshot of platypus and rakali numbers, and can be used to help measure whether the number of animals active in the monitoring area changes over time.

Platypus Group Watch sessions have been conducted successfully by many different organisations, including Landcare groups, Field Naturalists Clubs, students from TAFE colleges and scouting bodies.

In the greater Canberra and Cooma regions, more than 300 volunteers braved heavy frosts in 2020 to participate in 34 Platypus Group Watch sessions organised by Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch in August, the peak period for spotting platypus in that area. The Group Watch methodology has also been adapted by Wildlife Queensland for a community-based platypus survey program conducted at numerous sites across that state.

Group Watch sessions are much more cost-effective than platypus live-trapping studies and do not entail any risk or disturbance to study animals. Compared to analysis of DNA in water samples, they generate a standardised numerical estimate of minimum abundance as opposed to simply presence/absence data.

In the case of the sessions conducted in and near Canberra last year, a grand total of 31 platypus and 9 rakali were recorded across 8 sites located along the Queanbeyan, Molonglo and Murrumbidgee Rivers, Jerrabomberra and Cooma Creeks, and the wetlands found at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. Participants were particularly pleased to record a number of platypus feeding at two sites along the Murrumbidgee River that had been badly degraded by sediment and ash following the Black Summer bushfires. Unfortunately, covid lockdown measures disrupted the 2021 platypus monitoring effort, but the program is expected to resume early next year.



Platypus Group Watch volunteers brave the cold to detect animals in the Murrumbidgee River (photo courtesy of Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch)

Groups interested in developing a Platypus Group Watch monitoring program in their own area are encouraged to contact the APC for a free information kit containing data sheets, along with advice about how to get started.

Development and initial testing of the Platypus Group Watch protocol has been made possible through generous support provided by the Sara Halvedene Foundation.

LITTER IS A THREAT TO COUNTRY PLATYPUS

In *PN&V No. 84* we highlighted the unacceptable impact of litter entanglement on platypus in the wild. Although this issue arises most often along metropolitan creeks and rivers, animals occupying rural waterways are also at risk (for example, see *PN&V No. 78* for details about a horrific incident involving a juvenile female platypus that died after becoming entangled in elastic hair-ties at Bright township in north-eastern Victoria).

More examples confirming the widespread nature of this problem were reported recently in Kilmore Creek at Kilmore township, about 70 km north of Melbourne, where two different platypus were observed to be tangled in litter. One animal was spotted with what appeared to be an orange plastic ring encircling the back of its head, while the second had apparently become entangled in a loop attached to a length of fabric or old carpet (see photo at right, courtesy of Kerry De Gabrielle).



The APC was contacted to try to net these platypus with a view to removing the problematic items. Unfortunately, this did not result in either entangled animal being captured, though two adult males and an adult/subadult female entered nets in the same area where the entangled individuals had been seen a couple of days earlier. Given that the entangled animals were not spotted in the days immediately following net-setting, it's possible that both animals managed to remove the offending items on their own. Alternatively, they may have become less active and mobile due to being entangled, or possibly even have died.

The Kilmore community is now working to make life safer for their platypus neighbours, with a major creek clean-up recently organised and carried out by volunteers. Several residents have also started monitoring this species by joining the Australian Platypus Monitoring Network (www.platypusnetwork.org.au), providing yet more positive action on behalf of the species.

ONLINE PLATYPUS ART CLASS

In an exciting new collaboration, the APC is working with UK-based group Wildlife Drawing to present an online platypus drawing class (led by wildlife artist Jennie Webber) on Wednesday 12 January at 6.30 am Australian Eastern Daylight time (or Tues 11 Jan at 7.30 pm Greenwich Mean Time). For more details, visit: <https://wildlifedrawing.co.uk/classes/>

FAWNLEE PLATYPUS ITEMS

Madelynn Fawn (aka Fawnlee) is a Beechworth-based illustrator who has teamed up with the APC to raise funds for platypus conservation. She will be donating 15% of profits from all of her platypus-themed feature items, including a great sticker, wheat bag and tote bag. To see Fawnlee's full range, go to: <https://www.etsy.com/au/shop/fawnleestudios>

Australian Platypus Conservancy



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