

PLATYPUS RESCUE GUIDELINES

Australian Platypus Conservancy



WHY ARE PLATYPUS SOMETIMES IN NEED OF BEING RESCUED?

Platypus may be displaced from their homes by catastrophic droughts and floods, be injured by a predator (such as a fox or wandering dog or cat) or become entangled in litter. Platypus are also occasionally discovered far from the nearest natural water body in a completely inappropriate location. This is most likely to occur in autumn, when dispersing juveniles search far and wide for a home of their own.

Platypus can also be accidentally caught by anglers using baited hooks or artificial lures. The hook typically becomes embedded in either the bill or a front foot. When this occurs, it's essential that the platypus be freed from the hook before it's released. The platypus bill is fleshy and sensitive, packed with thousands of special receptors needed to navigate underwater and capture prey. Simply cutting the line and leaving the hook in the bill is therefore likely to result in the animal eventually dying from malnutrition or infection. Line trailing from an embedded hook can also become tangled in roots or wood in the water so the platypus drowns or dies of exhaustion.

If you do encounter a displaced platypus, keep in mind that it is inappropriate (and illegal) to take one home and try to keep it as a pet - the animal will not survive the experience. Deciding how best to help will depend on the animal's behaviour, physical condition, age class and the circumstances in which it is found, along with any evidence of injury. If an animal appears to be alert, active and otherwise in good shape, the best outcome is likely to be achieved by releasing it immediately in the nearest creek or river. In other cases, consideration should be given to taking the animal to a veterinarian (ideally one with wildlife experience) for assessment and possible treatment. To assist with actual decision making on the day, information is provided below on the following topics:

How to pick up a platypus (knowing that adult males are equipped with venomous spurs)

How to identify adult males

How to transport a platypus safely (and things to consider when holding a platypus overnight)

How to inspect a platypus for litter entanglement

How to assess a platypus's physical condition (fat, thin or medium)

Some practical tips for veterinarians who haven't previously handled a platypus

Organisations to contact for further expert assistance

HOW DO I PICK UP A PLATYPUS?

Take great care when picking up a platypus of unknown age and gender, as adult males have poisonous spurs on their inner hind ankles. While the venom is not considered to be life-threatening to humans, it can cause severe pain and swelling. Unless it's definitely known that a platypus doesn't have spurs, **never** place your hands under the animal or support it from below using your arm or leg. 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).

If it's necessary to provide immediate first aid (for example, to remove a fishing hook from the bill) try to keep the animal's eyes covered (for example, with a folded piece of clothing) to reduce its tendency to struggle. Alternatively, place the platypus in a sturdy bag, exposing only the part of its body that needs to be treated.



HOW CAN I TELL IF A PLATYPUS IS AN ADULT MALE?

A male platypus has a sharp spur (about the size and shape of a dog's canine tooth) on each inner hind ankle. Juvenile male spurs are covered by a whitish outer protective layer (below left) which gradually chips away starting at the tip and disappears entirely by the age of one year. Non-venomous subadult males have a pinkish skin collar around the base of the spur (middle photo) which becomes narrower by the time a male starts to produce venom at the age of about two years and virtually disappears by the age of about four years (below right). Conspicuous spurs do not occur in females of any age.



HOW DO I TRANSPORT A PLATYPUS?

The platypus by nature is a very accomplished escape artist, aided by its extremely strong shoulders and forelegs and streamlined shape. By far the best way to confine a platypus during transport (for example if it's being taken by car to a release site) will be to first place it in a bag (ideally about the size of a pillow case so the animal has room to move around a bit) that is very securely tied at the top with a piece of string or twine. The bag should then be placed in a sturdy plastic or cardboard box, deep enough that its occupant can't easily reach up to the top to get out. Other advantages of placing the bag in a box are that adult males can easily be carried without any risk that spurring could occur, and car seats won't be soiled if an animal urinates or defaecates while it's confined. The top flaps of a cardboard box can be closed to further confine a platypus, as long as the interior of the box remains very well ventilated.

The platypus has a naturally low body temperature and is extremely well insulated by fur. To ensure that a platypus doesn't overheat during transport, make certain that the car's interior remains cool (ideally around 20°C, and *definitely* less than 28°C) and keep the platypus out of direct sunlight at all times (even if it's contained within a box). Also, do your best to avoid loud noises (for example, those caused by slamming a car door or playing loud music on the car radio) that might contribute to the animal's stress.

HOW DO I PROVIDE SHORT-TERM CARE FOR A PLATYPUS?

The platypus is an air-breathing animals that spend up to 17 hours a day sleeping in a burrow. **There is therefore no need to provide a rescued platypus with a place to swim** — instead, help it conserve its energy by keeping it quiet and dry.

The safest way to confine an animal for a relatively short period (for example, if it's absolutely necessary to hold an injured animal overnight before it can be taken to a veterinarian) is inside a strong fabric bag (at least the size of a pillow case, so the animal has some room to move about inside the bag). The top of the bag must be fastened very securely, for example by knotting a piece of twine tightly around the opening. If the animal's fur appears excessively wet, dry it gently with a towel before transferring it to the bag. Place the bag in an uncovered box in a quiet, dark location (such as a closet, with the door closed for extra security) where the animal won't be disturbed by curious pets or children.

The feet and bill of a healthy platypus should feel cool to touch, as its body temperature is naturally lower than a human's. Because platypus are so well insulated by their fur, it is essential that the place where a platypus is being kept should also be reasonably cool (ideally around 20°C, and *definitely* less than 28°C) so the animal isn't at risk of lethal overheating.

HOW SHOULD I CHECK A PLATYPUS FOR LITTER ENTANGLEMENT?

A platypus found lying near the water in a weak condition is quite likely to have one or more items of litter encircling its neck or chest, or wrapped bandolier-fashion from in front of one shoulder to behind the other front leg.

Large items such as plastic rings from food jar lids are normally easily seen. However, narrower items such as elastic hair-ties, rubber bands or loops of nylon fishing line (as shown at right) can be difficult to spot under the animal's thick fur. So, in addition to carrying out a careful visual inspection of the platypus's neck, shoulders and back (looking particularly for any tell-tale lines in the fur that suggest that underlying litter is present), it's a good idea to check these regions using your fingertips.



If litter is detected, remove the item(s) with care using small scissors and get in touch as soon as possible with a veterinarian (ideally one with wildlife experience) for advice about whether it will be better to release the animal back to the wild or arrange for further assessment and treatment.

HOW CAN I ASSESS THE PHYSICAL CONDITION OF A PLATYPUS?

A platypus stores a high percentage of its total body fat (around half) in its tail. A useful way to assess a platypus's physical condition is therefore to apply a gentle 'squeeze test' about halfway along the tail's length.

The tail of a very chubby animal will be packed so firmly with fat that its edges will barely bend inwards when pressed. In contrast, a really thin animal will be so depleted of energy reserves that its tail edges can be bent so they touch each other (as shown at right) or the tail can even be folded in half. The amount of fat stored in the tail of a healthy wild platypus is normally midway between these extremes – the tail edges bend to some extent when pressed, but the middle 30-60% of the tail remains firm and unbending.



SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR VETERINARIANS

A platypus can be sedated using diazepam (0.5–1 mg/kg via intramuscular injection). Anaesthesia normally relies on isoflurane or sevoflurane (5% for induction, 1.5-2% for maintenance, oxygen flow = 1 litre/minute), with either the bill or entire head enclosed in a face mask. Vital signs during anaesthesia should be monitored carefully (normal resting body temperature = 32°C; respiration rate = 20-50 breaths/minute; conscious heart rate = 140-230 beats/minute; stable heart rate under isoflurane anaesthesia = 114-220 beats/minute). Because the platypus is adapted to diving, it can choose to hold its breath for more than two minutes and sudden onset of apnoea/bradycardia often occurs during anaesthetic induction or recovery, with heart rate dropping to as little as 10-12 beats/minute. Though disconcerting, this is unlikely to be life-threatening. Recovery from gaseous anaesthesia is normally rapid (with the righting reflex returning within 3–5 minutes) and a platypus can generally be safely released after about 1 hour.

SOME ORGANISATIONS TO CONTACT FOR EXPERT ADVICE

For help in deciding whether a platypus requires specialised veterinary care, 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 (5416 1478/0419 595 939, usually 24 hours)

Healesville Sanctuary Australian Wildlife Hospital (5957 2829, 8.00 am to 5.00 pm daily;
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)

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