

Platypus News & Views



Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 101 – February 2026)

PLATYPUS STILL OCCUR IN SYDNEY'S RIVERS (BUT IT'S NOT ALL GOOD NEWS)

The first preserved platypus skin to reach Europe originated in a lagoon by the Hawkesbury River in what is today Richmond, a suburb located about 50 kilometres northwest of the Sydney city centre. The specimen was obtained in 1798 by Governor John Hunter after he observed an indigenous Australian hunter spearing 'an amphibious animal of the mole kind' through its neck and front leg as the unfortunate mammal swam near the bank.

A recent article published in *Australian Mammalogy* by Michelle Ryan, Katherine Warwick and Tom Grant provides a comprehensive summary of where platypus populations continue to be found in the greater Sydney area (<https://connectsci.au/am/article/47/3/AM25020/265832/>).

This study integrates recent findings from live-trapping surveys, community sightings and platypus environmental DNA studies in Sydney's two principal river systems: the Hawkesbury-Nepean (Dyarubbin-Yandhai) and the Georges (Tucoerah). The Hawkesbury-Nepean encompasses a huge catchment of more than 21,000 km² that basically runs in a big arc around the Sydney basin, from southwest to north of the city centre. By comparison, the Georges River is much smaller, has been more uniformly affected by major urban development, and mainly runs southwest of Sydney's CBD.

Based on evidence from around 200 locations, the Hawkesbury-Nepean system continues to be associated with widespread platypus activity, though the species has certainly declined over time. Across the entire catchment, platypus DNA was detected at 39% of sites sampled since mid-2020, including both large river channels and smaller tributaries.

By comparison, platypus DNA was recorded at just 16% of sites sampled since 2000 in the Georges system, implying that the species persists in much lower numbers there, mainly in the middle reaches.

The ongoing survival of platypus populations in the greater Sydney region – which supports a human population of more than 5 million people – is a tribute to this animal's adaptability and resilience. Specific factors contributing to the platypus's ability to survive in urban waterways include having a fairly broad diet along with its very own superpower: bill electroreceptors that can be used to detect prey with great efficiency at night or in turbid water.

The bad news is that the human population of Greater Sydney is predicted to include an additional three million inhabitants by 2050, with much of this growth concentrated in areas that currently still contain reasonably healthy platypus populations. Research findings are available to help safeguard these populations, including new ways to manage the enormous threat posed by conventional urban stormwater drainage systems (see <https://theconversation.com/how-smart-rainwater-tanks-can-help-keep-platypus-habitat-healthy-269816>).

However, serious challenges remain: to ensure these findings are actually understood by Council planning departments, and that planners in turn demand that new developments consistently incorporate platypus-friendly features in their design.

FOCUS ON PLATYPUS

One excellent outcome of the growing interest in citizen science is that natural animal behaviours are increasingly being documented in photos and videos.

For example, Dennis Illing – who has watched and monitored the platypus population in the Yarra River at Warrandyte township for many years – recorded the remarkable image below near the Warrandyte bakery, about 25 km ENE of Melbourne’s CBD, in mid-September 2025.



It shows an adult female platypus carrying nesting material as she swims towards a burrow where she intends to raise a litter (comprising one to three babies).

Research conducted in captivity by Jessica Thomas at Healesville Sanctuary (published in the *Australian Journal of Zoology* in 2017) has confirmed that a mother platypus constructs a nest about 1-2 weeks after she mates and 3-8 days before her eggs are laid.

A platypus’s front feet are highly specialised to function as paddles while swimming, and therefore can’t be used to grab or hold nesting material. Instead, a female uses her bill to collect floating vegetation, then passes the bundle under her body so it can be held by her tail, which is curled forward to cope with this task. A female may make dozens of trips to collect enough suitable material to build a nest, typically devoting around 8 hours to this activity over 2-5 consecutive days.

Once successfully carried to the nesting chamber, thin materials such as grass leaves and bark strips are woven around each other to form a well-structured hollow sphere or cup, sometimes lined with leaves. Because it’s constructed from wet vegetation, a platypus nest probably mainly serves to maintain reliably humid conditions, so eggs and recently hatched young (which are hairless and initially only about 15 mm long) don’t dry out when their mother has to leave the burrow to forage.

The photo at right was taken by Denise in mid-January 2026, again in the Yarra River at Warrandyte. Strong wind contributed to very choppy water that day – conditions which typically make it very challenging to spot a platypus swimming on the surface.



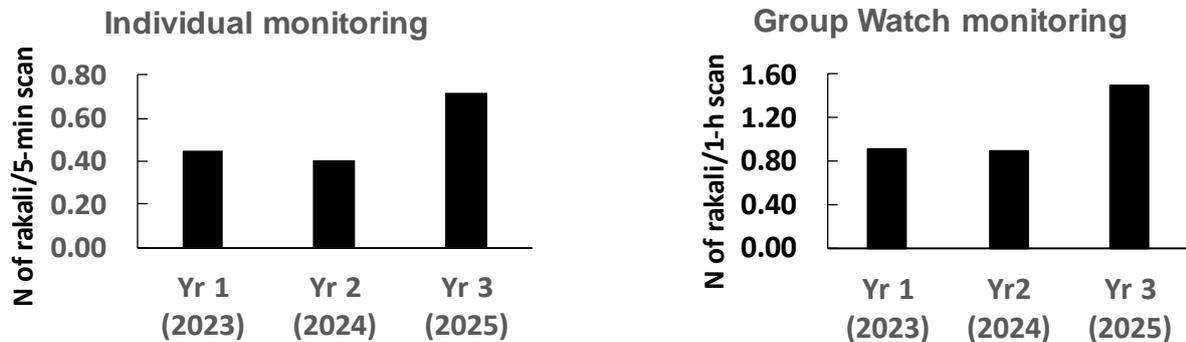
This one stood out due to the unusually steep angle of its bill held high above the water. Was the animal worried that its nostrils might otherwise be flooded while trying to breathe? The animal also seemed to be quite small, so possibly could have been a juvenile still learning how to cope with surface turbulence.

A BUMPER YEAR FOR BALLARAT'S 'OTTERS'

A third year of community-based rakali monitoring at Ballarat's Lake Wendouree finished in November 2025. This program uses two complementary visual-survey techniques to track rakali activity at eleven observation sites dotted around this very large urban water body (238 hectares when entirely filled).

In one method, trained individuals record the number of rakali observed at a given site in a 5-minute period. Nearly 2,700 standardised individual scans were completed in 2025, confirming this project's status as a major citizen-science program. The second method consists of morning and afternoon Group Watch sessions in which teams of volunteer observers are posted at each site for one hour on the same given day in each seasonal quarter.

Readers may recall that rakali sightings at Lake Wendouree dropped significantly in the first quarter of 2024 after lighting was installed to illuminate a path around the lake's perimeter (see *PN&V* No. 98). However, activity appeared to recover by the end of that year, with a small year-on-year increase in sightings recorded then. This trend continued in 2025 – as shown below, the mean (or average) number of rakali recorded through individual monitoring increased by 71% this year as compared to combined results for the two previous years, with a 63% increase in rakali sightings recorded for Group Watch sessions.



Numerous factors may potentially influence rakali behaviour, so it would be wrong to infer that nocturnal lighting is directly responsible for the recent uptick in diurnal rakali activity. However, it *can* be fairly concluded that there is at least no evidence that adding lights around the perimeter path has harmed this population.

The APC would like to thank the large (and ever growing) number of volunteers who take time to watch for rakali and record their results at Lake Wendouree, and especially acknowledge countless hours of unpaid work by Lissa Ryan, the program co-ordinator who continues to ensure its success.

ELECTION WIN FOR RAKALI

The Australian Platypus Conservancy began championing the rakali as an important and really interesting native animal in the mid-1990s. Despite the fact that they routinely chewed holes in our platypus survey nets, we very much admired their sleek appearance and clever ways, and thought it altogether fitting to rebrand this species as the 'Aussie otter'. Three decades later, it was wonderful to learn that rakali were declared the winner in the ABC's 'Most Underrated Animal' poll for 2025.

Photo: Lissa Ryan



See: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-15/wildlife-blog-15-august-2025/105651126>

WEBINAR TUESDAY 3 MARCH

The APC will present a webinar on platypus and rakali conservation starting at 6.30 pm on Tuesday 3 March. This free event is hosted by Mitchell Shire Council. For bookings go to: <https://www.mitchellshire.vic.gov.au/discovermitchell/awards-ceremonies-and-events/events/waterway-wonders-platypus-and-rakali-webinar>

WE WELCOME GONDWANA MACADAMIAS AS A SPONSOR

The Australian Platypus Conservancy is a non-profit association that largely relies on support from individuals and responsible businesses to conduct successful research and conservation programs. We are accordingly delighted to welcome Gondwana Macadamias as our latest sponsor.

For every 100 ml bottle of *Ease Joint and Muscle Spray Mist* or 300 g jar of *Macadamia & Mineral Face & Body Scrub* that is sold, 50 cents will go directly to supporting the APC's platypus conservation activities.

Gondwana Macadamias grow their own macadamias using genuinely regenerative farming methods to protect biodiversity and improve soil health. For more information please visit: <https://www.gondwanamacadamias.com.au/blogs/news/platypus-conservation>

DON'T FORGET THE EASTER PLATYPUS!

Pip the Platypus in one of several iconic Australian animals in the Critters Collection produced by artisan chocolatier Koko Black.

Donations by Koko Black help support the work of several reputable wildlife conservation organisations, including the Australian Platypus Conservancy. Pip can be purchased both online and at Koko Black stores across Australia:

<https://www.kokoblack.com/products/pip-platypus>.



So, instead of a feral Easter Bunny, why not give Pip to loved ones this Easter and help conserve our indigenous egg-laying mammal at the same time?

PLATYPUS SCULPTURES CELEBRATION EVENT 14 MARCH

In [PN&V no.100](#) we reported that Taro Iiyama's giant platypus sculptures have found a permanent home in southern Victoria. They can now be seen swimming while suspended from the ceiling of Bacchus Marsh Library, thanks largely to effort by the Bacchus Marsh Platypus Alliance and support from Moorabool Shire Council. The council is currently running a competition to name each of the three fabulous sculpted figures, which are made entirely of recycled cardboard. A community celebration to herald their arrival, including a short talk by the Conservancy, will be held on the morning of Saturday 14 March at the public library located in Main Street, Bacchus Marsh.

Australian Platypus Conservancy



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