Platypus News & Views

Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 102 – May 2026)

SECRETS OF THE PLATYPUS BURROW

A group of bushwalkers in Macquarie Pass National Park received a shock in late 2025 when a walking track gave way beneath their feet to reveal a platypus burrow containing two sleeping juveniles (shown at right). The burrow chamber was located about 8 metres from a creek and covered by not much more than 5 centimetres of soil.

NSW National Parks and Wildlife staff responded quickly, repairing the damage with a plywood sheet topped by a layer of loam (shown below). Barriers were set up to discourage public access, and monitoring cameras were deployed in the vicinity. To further reduce the risk of disturbance by human activity, the park was closed for four days.

Photos: R. Dale/NSW NPWS

These measures were apparently successful: the female continued to attend her twins, who presumably suffered no ill effects from their brief exposure to the outside world.

Platypus nesting burrows provide a home for a mother and her offspring (comprising 1-3 juveniles, though two are most common) for roughly four months, from the time that eggs are laid in spring or (in Tasmania) early summer until the young are weaned.

Externally, a nesting burrow can have one or more platypus-sized entrances, sometimes located underwater though more often found on the adjoining bank face. Inside, the main access tunnel typically follows a winding course past short side passages before reaching the nesting chamber.

A mother platypus routinely blocks the access tunnel with 2-9 (most often three) consolidated soil ‘pugs’ that she breaches and replaces whenever leaving or returning to her offspring.

This behaviour presumably reduces the likelihood that potential predators (such as goannas or large snakes) are able to reach the developing juveniles. It also limits the risk that the nesting chamber becomes flooded if water levels rise in the nearby channel after heavy rainfall. Last but not least, it discourages young juveniles from wandering away from the nesting burrow before they are old enough to survive the experience.

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SECRETS OF THE PLATYPUS BURROW *(cont. from p. 1)*

Platypus nesting burrows are generally located at least 30 cm below the soil surface, so should not normally collapse if a person walks above. However, these burrows can be remodelled and used by successive occupants over many years. It's therefore possible that the burrow at Macquarie Pass was originally excavated some time before the process of path development reduced overlying soil depth and weakened its structure.

More generally, this incident serves as a valuable reminder that caution is warranted whenever capital works are carried out near water courses supporting a breeding platypus population.

Importantly, even platypus burrow entrances that are located above the water surface can be exceedingly difficult to detect. The opening is typically just large enough to accommodate a platypus, and is frequently masked by dense vegetation or other physical features.

Because a nesting burrow is occupied for several months, a well-defined path tends to emerge over time between the most-used entrance and the water. However, this develops gradually and – depending on the type of vegetation growing on the bank – may never be very conspicuous. For example, the entrance shown at right was completely hidden by a tangled mass of grass stems (temporarily pushed aside for the purpose of taking a photo), with a thick mulch of dead leaves and grass carpeting the slope below. The entrance was only identified, and then with some effort, because it was associated with a burrow used by a radio-tagged female.

These and similar findings elsewhere mean that even highly experienced platypus biologists are unlikely to be able to state with complete confidence that no nesting burrows are present in a particular bank segment (at least in the absence of sustained fieldwork).

Accordingly, by far the most effective way to safeguard platypus nesting burrows is to avoid deploying heavy equipment at places where a platypus population is known or likely to occur, particularly in the period when nesting burrows contain eggs or young. Given that the platypus breeding season stretches over several weeks or months at any given location, the most critical period extends from early spring through summer on the Australian mainland, or late spring to autumn in Tasmania.

Based on measurements made by early naturalists who spent time digging up platypus burrows, nesting burrows may occasionally be up to 30 metres in length. However, for the purpose of implementing capital works, most can be safely assumed to be no more than about 10-12 metres long, measured in a straight line from the edge of the water to the nesting chamber.

Even outside the platypus reproductive period, caution is advisable whenever excavating or otherwise severely disturbing the banks of water bodies supporting this species, with thought put into what to do if a platypus is accidentally dug up. As an immediate source of relevant information, *Platypus Contingency Plans for Capital Works Programs* can be downloaded from the APC website at:
https://platypus.asn.au/2023/09/25/platypus-contingency-plans-for-capital-works-2023-09/.
Along with describing how to pick up, confine and transport a displaced animal, it lists contact details for organisations qualified to provide detailed advice on the day.

CURDIES RIVER PLATYPUS BACK FROM THE BRINK

In 2002 the Australian Platypus Conservancy conducted a platypus live-trapping study along the Curdies River, a small coastal water course located in south-western Victoria. The Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (CCMA) commissioned the work to find out if a platypus population was still found in this self-contained system, despite a history of habitat degradation and reduced flow, compounded by drought.

The results were not encouraging. No animals were recorded in two nights of fieldwork sampling 11 sites distributed across 32 kilometres of the Curdies River and its tributaries. A concurrent effort to elicit local sighting reports concluded that platypus had not been regularly observed anywhere in the system since the 1950s, with none seen at all since the mid-1990s. Accordingly, there seemed to be a strong likelihood that platypus numbers had dwindled over time to the point that the population was now extinct or effectively so.

It was therefore extremely exciting to learn in November 2025 that a local resident, Catherine McPherson, had not only spotted but managed to record on video a platypus swimming in the Curdies River near the Timboon Trestle Bridge (one of the sites where survey nets had been set in 2002 - see an image from Catherine's video at right).

So how did the Curdies River platypus population manage to survive, particularly given that Victoria was in the grip of one of the worst droughts on record (the so-called Millennium Drought) from 2001 to 2009?

Soon after the Timboon sighting, a CCMA publicity campaign led to Conservancy staff hearing from another person living in the Curdies area. He reported having often seen a platypus in recent years in A'becketts Creek, which joins the Curdies River about 13 km downstream of the Trestle Bridge.

He also suggested that a spring-fed section of A'becketts Creek may have provided a reliable refuge habitat where a few animals were able to survive the Millennium Drought.

The time required for a platypus population to recover after being severely depleted will be limited by the fact that both sexes take two years to mature, that litter size is quite low, and that it is by no means uncommon for a female to fail to breed in consecutive years.

In the case of the Curdies, platypus population growth may also have been constrained by the number of years needed for habitat restoration activities by the CCMA and local Landcare groups to contribute to a more productive river environment (for example, as native plantings mature).

The really good news is that the platypus filmed in the Curdies appears to be part of a broader pattern of post-drought platypus population recovery seen in Victoria since 2009. Locations of platypus sighting reports sent to the APC after a long period when none were received include Bruthen Creek in 2023 (20 years since previous report), the lower reaches of the Campaspe River at Rochester in 2025 (18 years), Bet Bet Creek in 2021 (18 years) and the Lang Lang River near Yannathan in 2023 (18 years), as well as many other named waterways where the interval between recent reports has exceeded 10 years.

More generally, it's important that everyone remain aware that platypus may pop up nearly anywhere in Tasmania or along the east coast of Australia south of Cooktown - even in places where the species has not been known to occur for years - and keep this fact in mind when engaged in activities that could potentially impinge on platypus welfare and survival.

PLATYPUS IN THE SURF

The platypus is fundamentally adapted to live in fresh water, though individuals are occasionally observed swimming in brackish estuaries.

A rare sighting of a wild platypus attempting to swim in ocean water was recently captured on video at Sisters Beach in northern Tasmania. Immediately after reaching the mouth of Sisters Creek, the animal veered right with the apparent intention of continuing to swim parallel to the edge of the beach. He or she spent about a minute seeking to make headway in the surf. After being ignominiously upended by two consecutive breaking waves (neither of which was particularly large from a human's point of view), the animal clearly decided enough was enough, turned around, and began swimming back up Sisters Creek. So, why did this particular platypus try to enter the ocean in the first place?

The most likely explanation is that the animal was a dispersing juvenile who had travelled down Sisters Creek searching without success for a bit of vacant habitat in which to settle. If the sea had been calmer, who knows – perhaps the animal would have continued swimming along the coastline and eventually managed to reach the mouth of the Inglis River, about 30 kilometres to the east. Alternatively, we can only hope that he or she hadn't yet fully explored the entire Sisters Creek catchment and eventually managed to find a suitable home there.

HOW TO REPORT A SIGHTING

On page 3 we highlight the important role played by sightings in describing how the status of platypus populations can change over time. If you do happen to spot a platypus (or rakali) in the wild, the APC website provides a user-friendly platform to report the salient details: https://platypus.asn.au/report-a-sighting/. All confirmed reports are then shared with the Atlas of Living Australia, so they can be used for research and conservation purposes and also be viewed by interested members of the wider community.

OUR THANKS TO SARA HALVEDENE

Most of the Australian Platypus Conservancy's larger research and conservation projects are funded by specific sponsors or commissioned by management agencies. However, some smaller projects end up being supported, somewhat precariously, solely out of general revenue.

In this context we gratefully acknowledge a recent generous grant from the Sara Halvedene Foundation that will enable a number of new initiatives to proceed in a fully funded manner.

Over the years Sara Halvedene has been an outstanding supporter of Conservancy activities and we thank all those associated with this far-sighted environmental charitable trust, both past and present, for their backing.

MISSED AN EDITION OF *PLATYPUS NEWS & VIEWS*?

Previous issues of *Platypus News & Views,* starting with no. 14 (autumn 1999), are available on the APC website: https://platypus.asn.au/apc-newsletter/

Australian Platypus Conservancy

PO Box 115, Campbells Creek VIC 3451
(03) 5416 1478 platypus.apc@westnet.com.au
www.platypus.asn.au

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