Platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*)

*Ornithorhynchus* = bird nosed; *anatinus* = duck-like

**Introduced species**

European colonists first caught and described the platypus in the Hawkesbury River area near Sydney in 1797. Its odd combination of a duck-like bill, webbed feet and fur caused quite a stir. When sent to England for identification it was first thought to be a hoax.

**Platypus habitat shrinks**

The platypus is a semi-aquatic animal that lives in pools of unpolluted rivers and creeks. Its flat streamlined body is covered in dark brown fur. The platypus grows to a size of about 40 centimetres long and weighs approximately 1.5 kilograms.

Platypuses now only occur naturally in the wild in the eastern states of Australia. They were trapped widely for their fur in the 1800s and early 1900s. Clearance of land for agriculture, and subsequent damage to the river systems in which it then lived, caused the platypus to disappear from South Australia many decades ago.

**Introduction to Flinders Chase**

The platypus was introduced to Flinders Chase National Park because of fears that the species might become extinct on the Australian mainland. Fifteen individuals were released between 1928 and 1946.

Today, descendants of these animals have colonised both the Rocky and Breakneck River catchments within the Flinders Chase National Park. Surveys have been carried out to assess the size and range of the platypus population on Kangaroo Island.

**A life up the creek**

The platypus spends at least several hours a day in the water feeding. It has keen eyesight and hearing but when it dives below the surface, its eyes and ears are tightly closed.

The platypus feeds on worms and yabbies, shrimp, tadpoles, shellfish and insects. It snaps up its prey along with sand and mud from the creek bed.

A platypus can consume half its own body weight each day. It grinds the food between horny plates in its jaw, while floating on the surface.

Its bill is soft and rubbery and covered with many sensitive nerves. These are thought to detect electrical impulses emitted by the muscles of moving prey and by water flowing around obstacles.

The broad flat tail stores fat to be used when food is short and also by breeding females confined to their burrows. The tail is used as a stabiliser when swimming and also enables the platypus to dive quickly.

The feet are webbed to form paddles for swimming. On land the webbing folds under the front feet so that the strong claws can be used for digging. Sharp spurs on the hind ankles of the male are connected to poison sacs and can inflict a painful wound. Never handle a platypus.
Eggs in a burrow

After mating in late winter or spring, the female digs a nesting burrow in a creek bank, blocking its entrance. These are complex winding structures up to 20 metres long, which are built and reworked from season to season. The female lays a clutch of one to three tiny leathery eggs and incubates them for about 10 days.

The young platypuses suck milk that oozes from mammary glands into their mother’s underbelly fur. A young platypus has lips rather than a bill, which begins to develop at about five weeks. At four months, the young are about three-quarters grown and ready to venture out from their nesting burrow into the summer sun.

Photo credit: Colin Wilson

Viewing tips for the elusive platypus

Look for platypuses around dawn and dusk. Be very quiet. Concentric rings or bubbles on the water surface may indicate that a platypus has just dived under. You may also hear a loud splash. Platypus sightings are uncommon, so don’t be disappointed if you don’t see one. Instead, enjoy the experience of spending time in river habitats and learning about these secretive animals.

References


For more information

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