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\$9 No 582
8-21 Mar 2019

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Special Report

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The State Of Platypus

Once considered a hoax by European naturalists, the enigmatic platypus has long been a mystery. Ecologists are only now discovering what's below the surface.

"PART OF WHAT I enjoy about working with platypuses is that we know so little. So, almost every time I go out in the field we learn new stuff about them," enthuses Dr Josh Griffiths, a wildlife ecologist who's monitoring these nocturnal and notoriously elusive creatures.

It's a long and laborious process, captured by photographer Doug Gimesy, who joined the team on nights-long tracking surveys in Victorian and NSW waterways. The animals are caught, measured and microchipped. "It's a very long night...and I think probably a third of the time we don't catch any platypus," Griffiths explains.

The platypus can be found in fresh waterways along Australia's eastern coastline, from Tasmania to Far North Queensland. But how many you'd find between those two points is anyone's guess. "That's one of the big problems with understanding platypuses, we just can't estimate numbers with any sort of accuracy," Griffiths says.

And that's the platypus paradox: a longheld confidence in the species' stability and security has meant there's

been a lack of research. This has left its population vulnerable.

"Now we're starting to find out that they're not doing as well as we sometimes think," Griffiths says. "The work we have been doing, particularly in Victoria, has shown fairly significant declines over the past 20 years."

The survey results were enough for the International Union for Conservation of Nature to upgrade the platypus' protection status to "near threatened" in 2014. But last November, Professor Richard Kingsford from University of NSW warned they should be listed as "vulnerable", telling the ABC that platypus numbers had dropped by a third in the past 200 years.

Griffiths says the platypus is under constant threat from pollution, dams and the loss of their watery habitat.

"Aquatic ecosystems, at least in southeastern Australia, are going to be drastically impacted by climate change... They *are* being affected by climate change. Waterways that used to be relatively permanent are now dried up for three, four, five months of the

year," he says. On top of that, Griffiths says recreational yabby nets are drowning hundreds of platypuses each year. Banned in Tasmania and Western Australia, the opera house-style nets will be illegal in Victoria from July.

The more researchers know about platypuses and their numbers, the better they are able to protect them. They have started using a new, much quicker and cheaper, technique called environmental DNA, where a water sample is tested to see if there are traces of platypus DNA present.

And they are asking the public to help with their conservation research, by logging any platypus sightings on the PlatypusSPOT website. "[People] are amazed they can find platypuses in their local creek," Griffiths says. "They do live in urban areas quite well, they're very adaptable little critters."

by **Liam Harding**

» *Spotted a platypus recently? Contribute to platypus research and conservation by reporting your sighting at platypusspot.org*
» *More from Doug Gimesy: gimesy.com*



A PLATYPUS IS RELEASED ONTO A LOG IN LITTLE YARRA RIVER, VIC.



TOP: TWO PLATYPUS EGGS DISCOVERED IN THE SNOWY RIVER, NSW.
ABOVE: PLATYPUS RESEARCHER TAMIELLE BRUNT RETURNS AN ANIMAL TO WOORI YALLOCK CREEK, VIC.
TOP RIGHT: JOSH GRIFFITHS AND FARLEY CONNELLY FROM PLATYPUSSPOT TAKE BILL MEASUREMENTS, HEALSVILLE, VIC.
BOTTOM RIGHT: PLATYPUS CONSERVATION INITIATIVE'S GILAD BINO AND TANNEAL HAWKE DOING RESEARCH ON THE SNOWY RIVER, NSW.



RESEARCHER JOSH GRIFFITHS CRADLES A YOUNG FEMALE PLATYPUS AS PART OF A STUDY OF THE PLATYPUS POPULATION IN MELBOURNE'S WATERWAYS.