



Stranger than fiction

A mammal that lays eggs and secretes venom, the peculiar platypus has been fascinating scientists since the 19th century but faces an uncertain future.

A furry animal with a body the size of a hot-water bottle is cavorting through the waters of a clear, blue stream emerging from Jenolan caves, three hours west of Sydney. There is a splash as it dives down, paddling vigorously with its webbed front feet. When it reaches the bottom, the animal begins sweeping its flat, duck-like bill back and forth above the silt. The platypus is using thousands of minute receptors in its bill to detect the electrical fields made by the muscle

movements of its prey – mainly insect larvae, aquatic insects, and sometimes freshwater crayfish and shrimp.

It is relatively easy to spot a platypus in the limpid stream and Blue Lake at Jenolan, but normally they are far harder to detect. Their waterproof brown coats offer good camouflage against the earthy banks of the permanent rivers, creeks, lakes and wetlands they inhabit in eastern Australia.

They're also largely nocturnal, and usually spend the day sleeping in their burrows, which may be up to 30m long, in the river banks. They emerge at dusk to hunt for their ▶

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Photographs *Doug Gimesy*

The semiaquatic platypus has webbed feet and a duck-like bill. When the first dried specimens were brought to Europe, scientists believed they were a hoax.