

Heart of the Nation

front

Of all the oddities in Australia's native fauna, none comes close to the platypus. It's not just their bonkers looks (when the first dried specimen was sent to the British Museum in 1799, the Poms at first thought it was a hoax) but their singular behaviour, too. These egg-laying mammals suckle their young not with nipples – they don't have any – but by secreting milk through their skin; they breathe air but live mainly underwater, foraging at night for prey – insect larvae, crustaceans, worms and the like – that they detect with super-sensitive electroreceptors in their bill. It was recently discovered that their fur fluoresces under ultraviolet light, and no one knows why. But the very weirdest thing about them, reckons platypus researcher Josh Griffiths, is something else entirely.

The 43-year-old is pictured with a specimen that he's caught in a net strung across a creek at Warburton in Victoria's Yarra Ranges. He has spent 14 years setting and checking nets to monitor how populations are faring (in a nutshell, not well: they've just been listed as Threatened in the state) but the nature of his fieldwork is changing: his crew at Melbourne firm EnviroDNA is now analysing genetic material in water samples to determine where platypuses are living – a breakthrough that will soon allow for large-scale audits of their populations, he hopes.

Griffiths has a great affection for these animals – witness the touching body language here – and



Warburton 3799

takes care to minimise their stress as he gathers data (measuring, weighing, inserting a microchip, taking a DNA sample) before returning them to the water. This individual is a female. “Cradling a male under the body like that is a big no-no,” he says, by way of

nominating the very weirdest thing about these animals: venomous spurs on the males' hind legs that can inflict an agony that lasts for weeks. “Not even opiates have any effect on the pain,” he says. “I’ve never been spurred, but I’m told it’s so bad you wish you were dead.”