

PLATYPUS MONTH 2019

While these dry times haven't necessarily produced big numbers of platypus in our surveys, they have mobilised a record-breaking number of volunteers to look for them! 2019 Platypus Month census in August was the most popular to date with 158 volunteers signed up to the 22 surveys at five 'river reach' sites across the ACT region.

Waterwatch went with the approach again this year to do more surveys at fewer sites. This is aimed at improving our confidence in the number of platypus and Rakali (water rats) that are detected. The five survey sites (each averaging ten volunteers on a one kilometre transect) were on Cooma Creek, Jerrabomberra Creek within the Nature Reserve, the Molonglo River below Coppins Crossing, and two on the Murrumbidgee River; Bush Heritage Australia's Scottsdale Reserve near Bredbo and Point Hut Crossing in southern Canberra.

A total of eleven individual platypus were sighted over the five reaches which was the same number as last year's census (which was down from 13 in 2017). While these lower numbers once again seem to be reflecting the dry conditions, the results this year were more mixed. The Murrumbidgee River sites appear to be supporting higher numbers with Point Hut Crossing detecting three individuals (possibly four) and Scottsdale conservatively estimating five individuals (possibly as many as seven). In contrast, Cooma and Jerrabomberra Creeks detected low numbers with just one and two individuals respectively.

Location	Surveys	Number Of Individual Rakali (Water Rat)	Number Of Individual Platypus
Molonglo River below Coppins Crossing	4	1	0
Jerrabomberra Creek within Nature Reserve	4	3	2
Murrumbidgee River, Point Hut Crossing	4	2	3
Murrumbidgee River, Scottsdale Bush Heritage Reserve	6	1	5
Cooma Creek, Cooma	4	0	1
Total	22	7	11

Of concern was the zero platypus detected on the Molonglo River below Coppins Crossing, particularly given as many as three individuals have been noted in previous years. This is an area of high development with the new suburbs of Denman Prospect and Whitlam in close proximity. During one morning survey, we experienced the loud noise of rock breaking in the Denman Prospect development. It was noted by volunteers that this action was not only reverberating through the landscape but was sending vibrations through the water. Given the platypus's bill has receptors that make it particularly sensitive to touch or pressure, it is possible that it is moving out of this area of the Molonglo River to avoid disturbance. We have received sightings upstream and downstream of this reach since August and a member of the public observed a platypus below Butters Bridge (ie. in the survey area) over two days in late September. More work is needed in this reach to better understand the platypus population and the pressures that face them.

Rakali (water rat) numbers were slightly up on last year with every site except Cooma Creek recording them. Jerrabomberra Creek hosted the greatest numbers with two/three Rakali sighted at all four surveys. The Coppins Crossing site recorded them for the first time since surveys began there in 2017.

As mentioned earlier, we had an amazing response with nearly 160 people signing up to surveys. And we didn't just see people sign up once, but many people signed up for multiple surveys with a total of **515 volunteer hours going into Platypus Month** this year. With the additional volunteer time, we could have conducted four extra group surveys at an entirely new site – further extending our understanding of platypus numbers in the region.

SO WHAT'S NEXT?

The high interest in Platypus Month in 2019 from both the community and media resulted in some interesting discussions with academics and land managers working in this space. Waterwatch recognise that the methods we use for monitoring can only tell us some of what we need to know to better manage platypus. We are aiming to pursue some great collaborations in 2020 to increase our awareness and understanding of platypus in this region.

One thing we are considering for 2020* is setting up some extra sites given the increased capacity volunteered by your good selves. The Queanbeyan River is a strong contender given it is known for its population of platypus and may be hosting some more formal studies in the near future. We are also talking to our friends at Tidbinbilla who have been doing terrific work on platypus for some years now and hope that we may include The Sanctuary in Platypus Month next year as well.

If you are keen to do more between now and next August, then we have also set up some sites on the Australian Platypus Conservancy's (APC) [Australian Platypus Monitoring Network](#) page. The sites overlap with our survey areas and are aimed at gaining a better understanding of platypus numbers over the course of the year. This suits people who would regularly visit these areas and can look for platypus there preferably once or twice a week (more if you have time) for around ten minutes at a time. The more people signing up to a site the better, as this will increase the number of data points for that site and improve data confidence. The sites are: Butters Bridge below Coppins Crossing, one directly above Point Hut Crossing and one just below, plus one at both Jerrabomberra and Cooma Creeks. Go to 'View Findings' on the APMN homepage to see the sites and feel free to contact [Waterwatch](#) or [Geoff Williams](#) (APC) if you have any questions.

In these dry, challenging times, your contribution to help conserve platypus is more appreciated than ever. Here's hoping for some rain and more hospitable conditions for our monotreme mates in 2020.

BELOW: Only hardy volunteers need apply for Cooma platypus surveys. The first survey of Platypus Month saw the Cooma Creek partially frozen over! No ice-skating platypus were sited.



* Waterwatch is currently only funded up to 30 June 2020 so any future plans are subject to a successful funding bid.