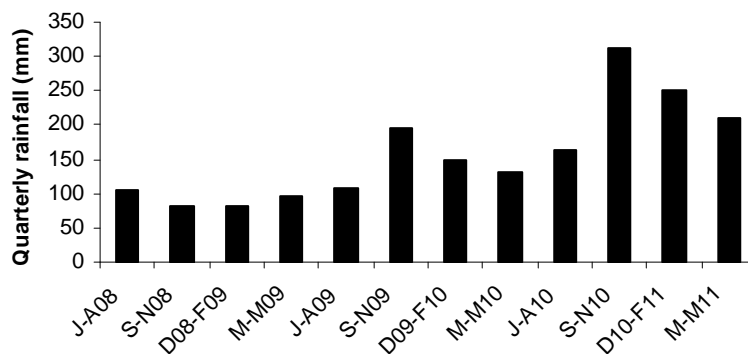


26 August 2011

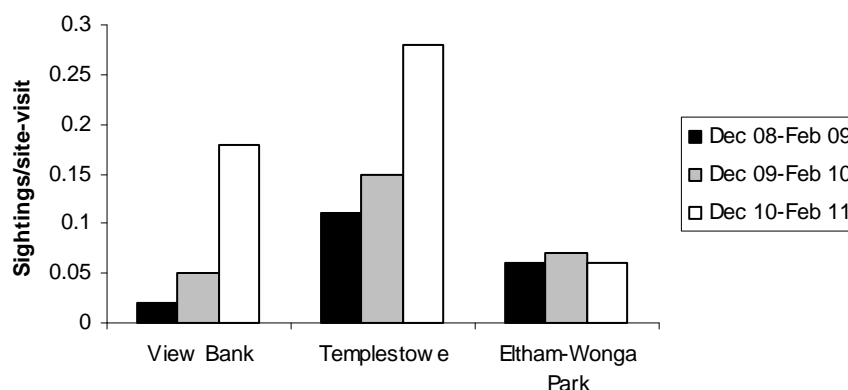
Hello all,

You may recall that a year ago we looked at how the frequency of platypus sightings along three segments of Melbourne’s Yarra River from June 2008-May 2009 compared to frequencies in the previous 12 months. To recap briefly, sightings increased in all three areas from 2008/09 to 2009/10, with by far the greatest amount of change occurring in the segment located farthest downstream (View Bank). The amount of river flow in 2009/10 also increased substantially (by a factor of about 60%) as compared to the previous year. Given that rainfall has continued to increase in 2010/11, I thought it would be interesting to consider how platypus sightings in the three areas have fared in the most recent 12 months.

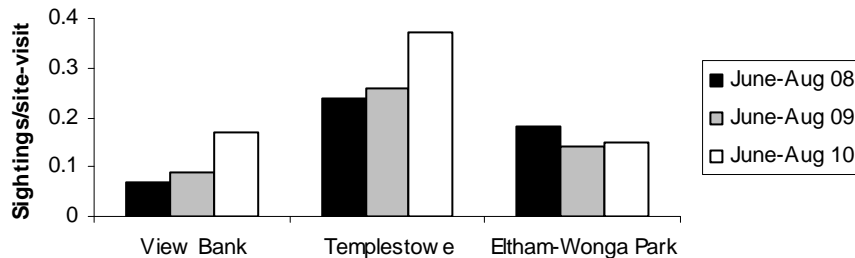
To start off, the graph below summarises how much quarterly rainfall was recorded in Melbourne by the Bureau of Meteorology over the entire three year period from June 2008 to May 2011. In a nutshell, 2008/09 was exceptionally dry (total rainfall = 56% of the long-term average for this area), 2009/10 was slightly on the dry side (total rainfall = 90% of the long-term average), and 2010/2011 was exceptionally wet (total rainfall = 44% above the long-term average).



The graph below shows how platypus sightings within each of the three Yarra segments have varied in three consecutive summers, i.e. the season when breeding females are expected to be most active during the day as they try to keep up with the energy demands of lactation. As you can see, the number of sightings has remained fairly constant over time in the segment located farthest upstream (Eltham-Wonga Park), suggesting that population size has remained reasonably stable in this part of the river. In contrast, the frequency of sightings farther downstream in Templestowe Lower and View Bank has grown dramatically over the three years, increasing by 250% in the case of Templestowe Lower and a massive 900% at View Bank.



A similar (though less extreme) pattern of change has been evident in winter, when breeding males are predicted to become more diurnal as they zoom around just before and at the start of the breeding season. Again, the number of sightings appears to have remained fairly constant over time in the Eltham-Wonga Park area, while growing progressively at both Templestowe Lower (where sightings increased by about 50% from 2008 to 2010) and View Bank (where sightings more than doubled from 2008 to 2010).



The relative constancy of platypus sightings at Eltham-Wonga Park suggests that the amount of environmental flow released in recent years from Upper Yarra Dam has been sufficient to maintain local platypus numbers in times of drought as well as years of average or above average rainfall.

In contrast, the amount of platypus activity at both Templestowe Lower and (especially) View Bank appears to have increased very substantially in response to improved flows in the last two years, supporting the hypothesis that platypus habitats located at the more urbanised (downstream) end of the Yarra may be less resilient when challenged by drought than habitats found farther upstream.

For those of you who have joined *Platypus Count* in the last year it's probably also worth pointing out that the conspicuously high rate of sightings made at Templestowe Lower seems to at least partly reflect the fact that the pedestrian swing bridge at Finn's Reserve provides an exceptionally good vantage point for the species. As discussed in an earlier *Platypus Count* newsletter (February 2010), if one excludes information obtained from the bridge, the sightings rate at Templestowe Lower drops to a value that is more or less in line with its neighbouring suburbs.

The reliability of *Platypus Count* findings for the Yarra and elsewhere is of course integrally linked to the community-based nature of the program – it's hard to see how else it would be possible to maintain sufficient sampling effort through time. For example, a gob-smacking grand total of 8,282 site-visits contributed to the information summarised above.

So on behalf of my favourite species, many thanks to everyone involved in the program in Victoria, New South Wales and the ACT – and happy platypus counting!

**AUSTRALIAN PLATYPUS CONSERVANCY**  
**PO Box 22, Wiseleigh VIC 3885**  
**Tel: (03) 5157 5568 Email: [platypus.apc@westnet.com.au](mailto:platypus.apc@westnet.com.au)**

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