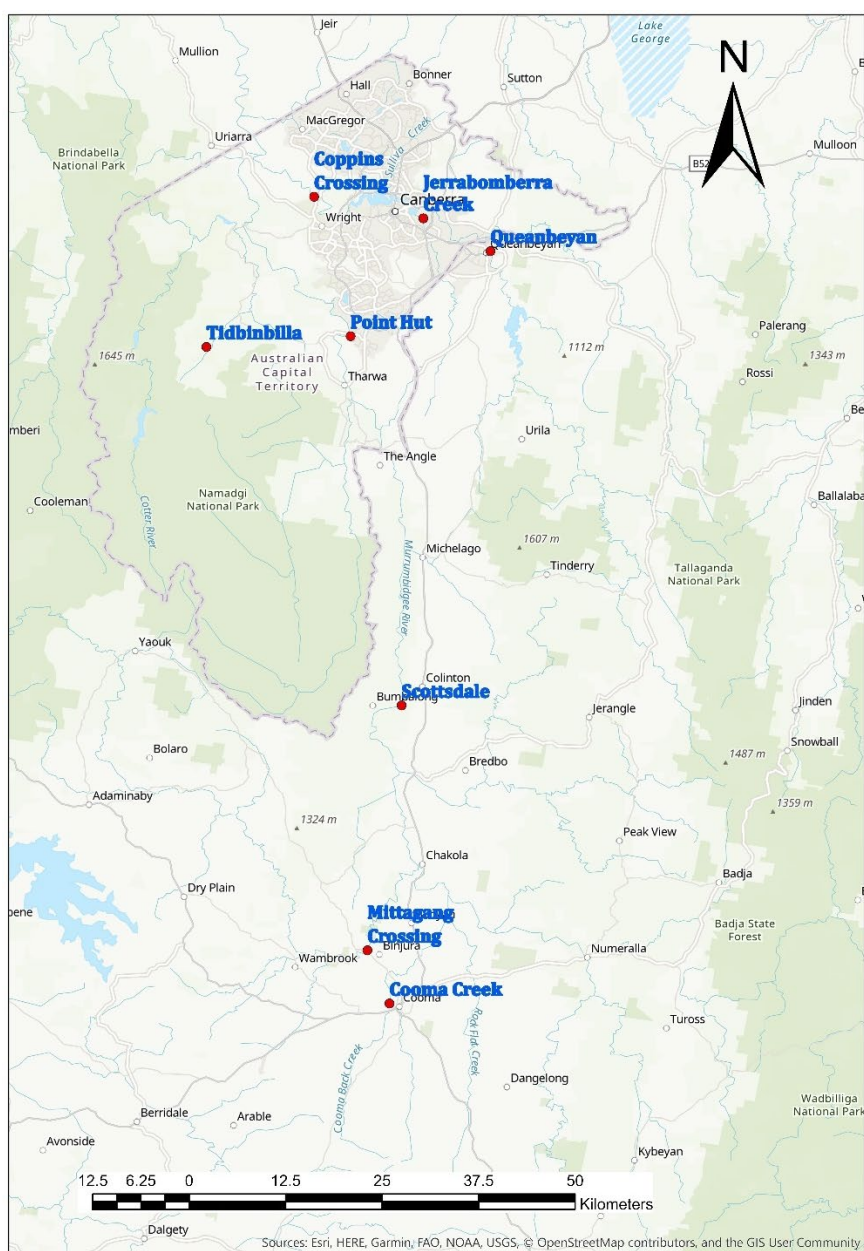


PLATYPUS MONTH 2020

Platypus Month 2020 found Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch monitoring a very different river system to 2019. The record-breaking drought of 2018/2019 saw many of the smaller tributaries (ie. creeks and streams) of the upper Murrumbidgee catchment cease to flow or dry up altogether. For the month of August 2020, 105mm of rain was recorded on top of an already wet year. Waterwatch and its trusty band of volunteers were then met with a different problem with some surveys postponed due to access and potential detectability issues due to high flows.

Of further interest this year are two of our Murrumbidgee River sites (Point Hut and Scottsdale), which were impacted either directly or indirectly by the February 2020 fires. The volumes of sediment and ash that washed into the river from the heavy, post fire rain, smothered much of the river substrate. This is key habitat of waterbugs which are the primary food source of platypus.



Map 1: Thirty-four group surveys were conducted at eight sites across the ACT region.

Fortunately, the wet conditions did not deter the platypus or the volunteers from showing up to the surveys. Over **300 volunteers participated** in the surveys this year and noted **31 individual platypus over eight 'river reach' sites across the ACT region!** The big increase (up from eleven in 2019) was in part due to the additional three sites monitored due to the heightened interest in Platypus Month from the community in 2019. The new sites were the Queanbeyan River, Queanbeyan, Mittagang Crossing on the Murrumbidgee near Cooma and the Sanctuary Wetlands at Tidbinbilla. Four surveys were conducted at each and these three sites combined produced 16 of 31 individual platypus that were detected this year. Tidbinbilla and Queanbeyan in particular, are known platypus hotspots so it was good to see the survey results reflecting this with seven and five individuals recorded respectively (Table 1).



Perfect platypus spotting conditions on the Queanbeyan River.

The Mittagang Crossing site on the Murrumbidgee River near Cooma was originally surveyed back in 2015 but has not been monitored since 2017. We have historically only picked up one individual at this site so it was encouraging to record four platypus on the last survey there. This section of the Murrumbidgee River was not fire affected.

Even without these additional three sites in the mix, volunteers still detected more platypus at the five sites that were surveyed last year, with fifteen individual platypus detected. Jerrabomberra Creek saw one additional platypus and the Molonglo River below Coppins Crossing recorded two platypus after not detecting a single individual last year.

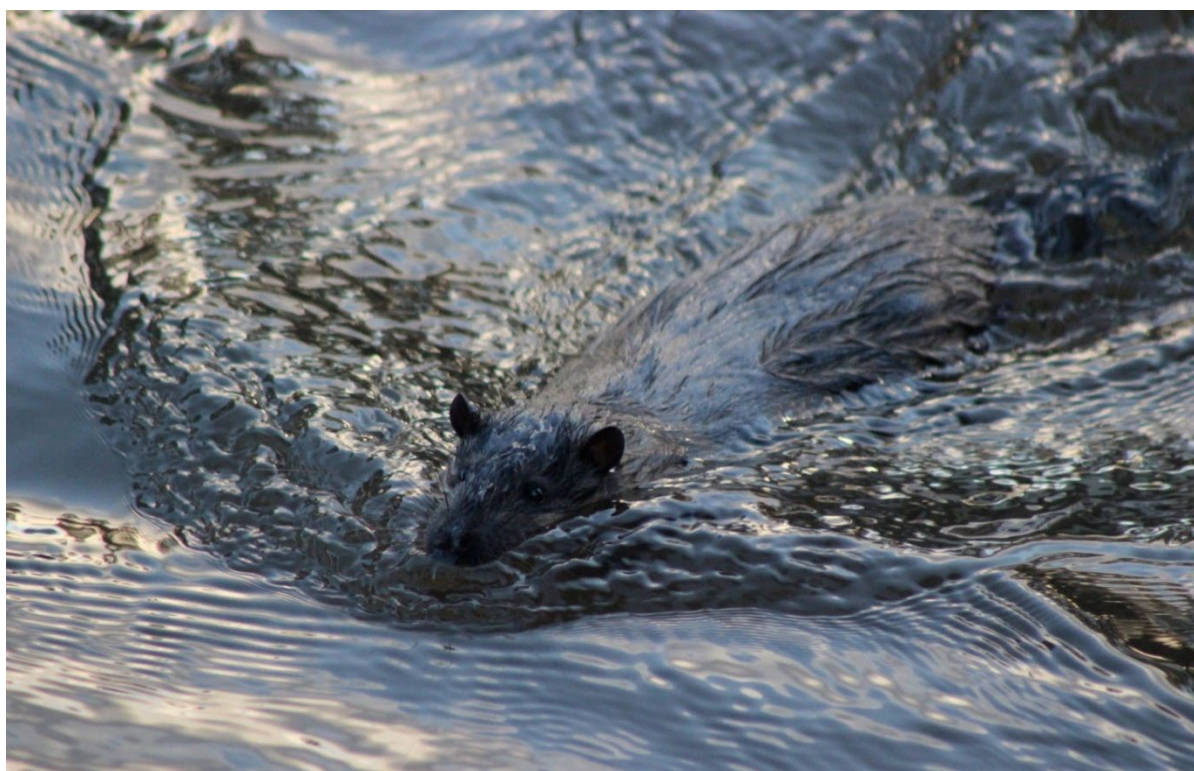
Point Hut Crossing on the Murrumbidgee River had high volumes of ash and sediment deposited at the site from the February fires. This was due to flows coming down the Murrumbidgee River from NSW and outflows from the Gudgenby River, which flow out of Namadgi National Park. Thus, it was pleasing that four individual platypus were detected at Point Hut crossing which was up from three in 2019. The Murrumbidgee River at Scottsdale Bush Heritage Reserve experienced fire both close to the river edge as well as impacts from fires upstream. It was a relief for volunteers to detect up to five individual platypus during the surveys which was the same number as last year.

Location	Surveys	Number of Individual Rakali (Water Rat)	Number of Individual Platypus
Molonglo River below Coppins Crossing	4	2	2
Jerrabomberra Creek within Nature Reserve	4	2	3
The Sanctuary, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve	4	0	7
Queanbeyan River, Queanbeyan	4	3	5
Murrumbidgee River, Point Hut Crossing	4	2	4
Murrumbidgee River, Scottsdale Bush Heritage Reserve	6	0	5
Murrumbidgee River, Mittagang Crossing (Near Cooma)	4	0	4
Cooma Creek, Cooma	4	0	1
Total	34	9	31

Table 1: number of Rakali and platypus detected during Platypus Month 2020 surveys.

Finally, one platypus was detected at three out of the four surveys at Cooma Creek located in Cooma township. The volunteers said there was a distinct difference in size between the ones seen so it may be that the Cooma creek still has the pair of platypus which diligent Cooma residents have recorded in previous years. While the Cooma creek was not fire affected *per se*, the creek experienced very low water levels and turned black during January after people washed off the ash from the New Years Eve firestorms off their houses and cars. This area continues to get attention from some dedicated locals who conduct litter removal and habitat restoration works aimed at improving this creek for platypus.

Of note was the **complete absence of Rakali at half of the sites surveyed**. While historically they have not been sighted at Tidbinbilla, they have been previously recorded during Platypus Month at the three Cooma-Monaro sites (Cooma, Mittagang Crossing and Scottsdale) so further monitoring in these areas is warranted. On a positive note, Phil Palmer (Reserve Manager at Scottsdale) has since seen some Rakali tracks along the river since the surveys. Rakali do seem to be faring better in the ACT riverine sites (two detected at each) as well as on the Queanbeyan River where up the three individuals were spotted.



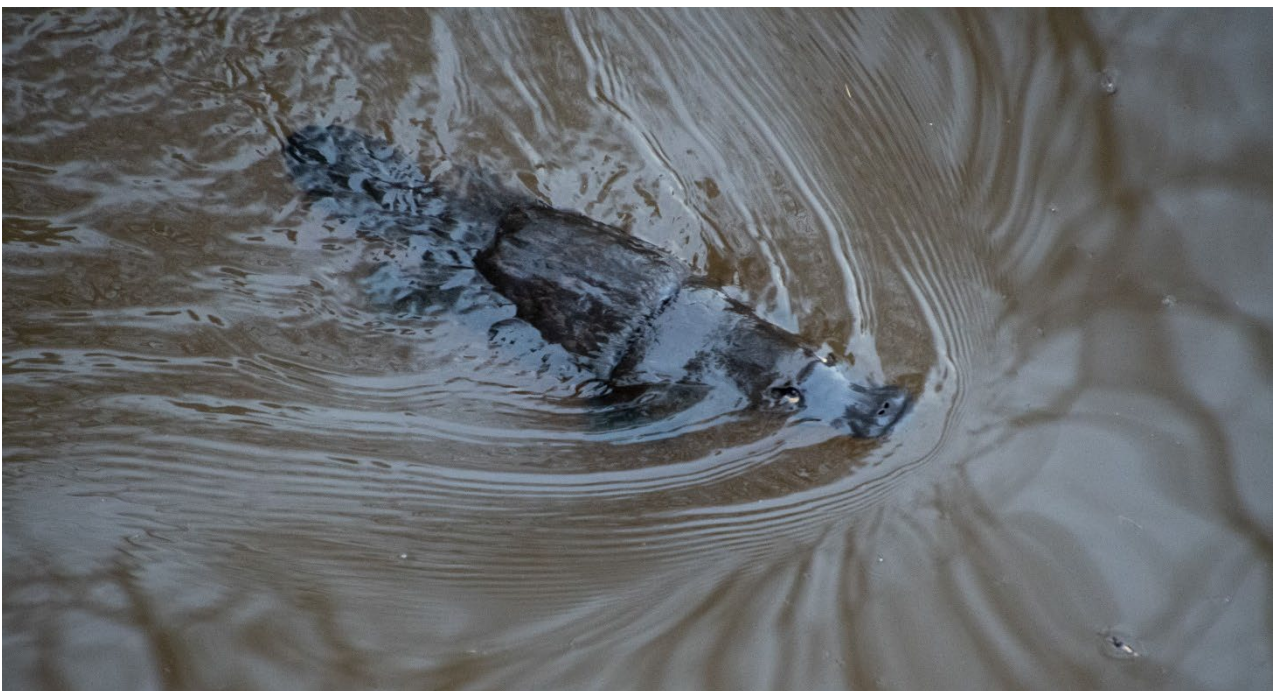
Rakali on the Queanbeyan River. Photo: Claudia Munera

So overall it appears that the increased flows through the system due to the wet weather this year has positively outweighed any negative effects that fires may have had on platypus at the sites surveyed. Past research by the Australian Platypus Conservancy has suggested that a wet Autumn and Winter may support a successful breeding season in the Spring. The general increase in platypus activity across all sites this year appears to support this notion.

One thing that we can all do to help platypus right now, is to **pick up litter**. There are too many examples of hair ties or plastic milk bottle rings getting caught around platypus which can rub through their fur and compromise their ability to maintain body temperature. This often leads to death. Another common scenario is platypus getting caught in discarded fishing line or fishhooks and drowning. In fact, two Waterwatch volunteers captured images of such occurrences during our surveys (see below).



Platypus at Jerrabomberra Creek with a fishhook in its back. Photo: David Cunningham.



Platypus at Queanbeyan River with what looks like a band around its body. Photo: Dylan Jones.

Given everything that 2020 has thrown at us, Waterwatch are very proud to say that Platypus Month 2020 was our best yet with more platypus spotted than ever before and ever increasing interest and support from the community in the ACT and surrounding NSW region. Waterwatch are continuing to work towards strengthening the methods for collecting platypus data so that it can be used to better gauge the status of platypus populations in the ACT region. Waterwatch also have a grant submitted that would seek to map platypus distribution in some of our fire-affected catchments through what's known as eDNA (find out more [here](#)).

As mentioned last year, if you are keen to do more platypus data collecting between now and next August, we have 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 (ie. beyond Platypus Month). This suits people who would regularly visit these areas and can look for platypus there preferably once or twice a week 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 confidence in the data. We did not get any uptake to these in 2019 but I urge you to get in touch with us if you think you may be interested and were happy to talk through what is involved. Go to 'View Findings' on the APMN homepage to see the sites and contact [Waterwatch](#) or [Geoff Williams](#) (APC).

We are pleased to inform you that Waterwatch received ongoing funding from the ACT Government earlier in the year. This means there will be a Platypus Month in 2021 and beyond! Waterwatch also receives funding by Icon Water who support the implementation of the program in the Cooma-Monaro region. Many thanks to both these funding sources that enable Waterwatch to monitor platypus on a broader, catchment scale.

Thanks also to staff at Scottsdale Bush Heritage Reserve and at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve who collaborated with Waterwatch to conduct ten of the 34 group surveys. This adds valuable data to the mix that Waterwatch would not otherwise have the capacity to collect. And finally, thank you to the volunteers for your support and interest. Know that Waterwatch will continue to work hard to raise awareness and increase our understanding of platypus in the region. We couldn't do it without you.



A frosty platypus survey on the Molonglo River below Coppins Crossing.