

Out-of-place platypus

by Harriet Mills



The platypus might be considered an iconic Australian animal, but at least one unsuccessful attempt to introduce them to Western Australia since colonisation proved that not all native Australian animals are suited to all Australian environments. So how do we explain the occasional reports of platypuses in WA waterways?

remained in the water for some time but weather and they had to be liberated. Last week Mr David Fleay the Heathville sanctuary consultant, decided to make another attempt. With the assistance of Messrs Frank Wandin and David Milne, he captured two healthy platypuses and yesterday morning they were carefully crated in separate boxes packed with native grasses and equipped with water vessels. The crates were packed in the plane's tail locker because it was cooler there. At Adelaide they were placed in a cool spot for the half hour break and their water supplies refilled.

of the State Car-

The platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*) is an Australian icon, known alongside the kangaroo and koala as uniquely 'Australian'. Every Australian school child can identify a platypus, but those of us who grew up in Western Australia have probably only seen them in books, on TV, or during visits to zoos in other states of Australia.

Platypuses are found along the eastern coast of Australia – from the tropical streams in northern Queensland to the cold alpine regions in Tasmania. As far as we know, they have never existed in WA of their own volition, with no sub-fossils or fossils being found and no mention of them in Indigenous rock art or stories. The nearest platypus population is an introduced group on Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast. They were once found in the Adelaide Hills and Mount Lofty Ranges, but are probably now extinct on the South Australian mainland, apart from occasional sightings of animals that swim downstream along the Murray River from Victorian populations.

FAILED INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival of Europeans, there has been at least one attempt to establish a platypus population in WA. In 1951, a pair was flown to Perth from Healesville, Victoria, via a brief stop-off in Adelaide. They landed at the Perth Airport (then known as the Guildford Aerodrome) in early March, reportedly after 'years of negotiations' between the State Gardens

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Main Platypuses occur along the east coast of Australia.

Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman Transparencies

Inset John Forrest National Park.

Photo – Lynne Whittle/DBCA

Inset bottom left *The West Australian* reported on the arrival of the Australian icons.

Above right In their natural habitats, platypuses can live for up to 20 years.

Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman Transparencies



“The fate of the pair remains a mystery. In their natural habitat, platypuses can live for up to 20 years ...”

Board of WA and the Victorian Fisheries and Game Department. Despite that, newspapers of the day reported that the planning for the event was not very thorough, and 'hasty' arrangements had to be made for the platypuses to be housed overnight at the private residence of the Chairman of the State Gardens Board, Mr H. E. Smith. Then (after they escaped from their box and were retrieved from behind a fireplace) they were released into a newly constructed dam on the Mahogany Creek in the area we now know as John Forrest National Park.

The dam is a few hundred metres upstream from the popular main picnic area, and can still be viewed by bushwalkers following the track on the southern side of the Mahogany Creek. Before the platypuses' arrival, wire was placed across the top of the dam, supposedly to prevent them escaping

by swimming upstream. It was thought the dam would provide plenty of food, although there was a plan for the animals to also be hand-fed worms and boiled eggs, as had been done in their captive environment at Healesville. Newspaper reports point out that this hand-feeding was carried out in the afternoon for the benefit of the visitors and was not in the best interests of the platypuses, which are naturally nocturnal.

FEARING THE WORST

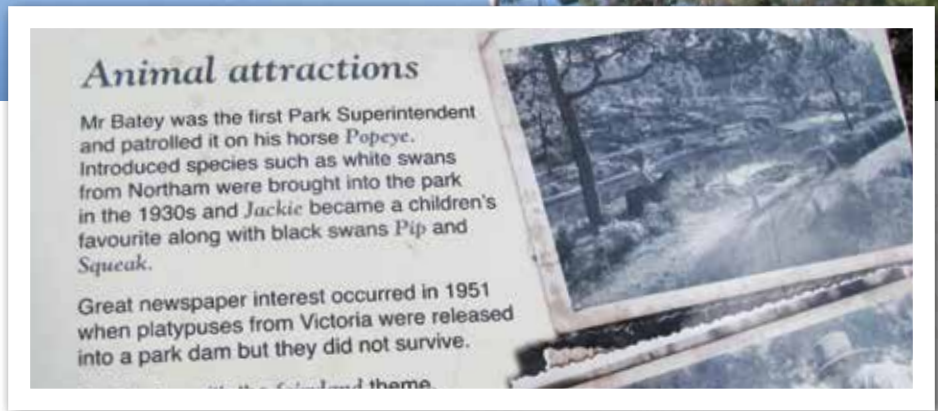
Only a few days after their release, there were already concerns that the platypuses had not been sighted. By the end of May, *The West Australian* reported that there were no signs of either platypus, although this was put down to their nocturnal behaviour, and also to the reluctance of the park's caretaker to venture out on cold nights to look for



Above The platypuses were released at a dam on Mahogany Creek in John Forrest National Park.

Right Interpretive signage at John Forrest National Park shares the story of the platypuses with visitors.

Photos – Harriet Mills/DBCA



them. More than a year later, in June 1952, it was reported that the platypuses had actually been seen regularly in the first few weeks after their release, but that they had since vanished and were believed to be dead.

The fate of the pair remains a mystery. In their natural habitat, platypuses can live for up to 20 years, but it seems likely that this ill-fated duo perished after being devoured by a fox or other predator, or were not able to find sufficient food. They feed on macro-invertebrates that they find in the water using their sensitive leathery bill and forage on the bottom of ponds and streams, searching for aquatic insects, worms and small crustaceans. This keeps them busy as they require an abundant

food supply and need to eat approximately 20 per cent of their body mass each day, with lactating females requiring much more. They have specific habitat requirements including permanent water and they are slow to breed, producing only one to three young per year. It seems unlikely that they would ever have become abundant in the Perth area. In fact, efforts to maintain them in captivity outside their natural range have been almost entirely unsuccessful, with only one zoo outside Australia (the Bronx Zoo in the USA) managing to keep any alive, and then only for a few months in 1947.

This begs the question of why they were brought to WA in the first place.

TRUE BLUE

Perhaps what led to platypuses being brought to WA was the pervasive idea that some species are 'typically Australian' and are therefore 'missing' in other parts of Australia outside their natural range. Certainly, this misconception has been observed surprisingly often in the past, such as when laughing kookaburras from the eastern states were released in Perth, around the time of Federation as they were considered to be 'useful' and 'interesting'. At the time, there was a plea for the public to protect the birds, and prevent small boys from molesting them, so that they might become established. More than a century later they are well



Above Laughing kookaburras were also introduced to WA but have become so prolific they are now considered pests.
 Photo – Jiri Lochman

Right Platypuses are listed as near threatened.
 Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman Transparencies

Status of an icon

Platypuses are listed as near threatened by the IUCN. Although it can be difficult to obtain an accurate population estimate, it is suspected that they have declined across much of their natural range. Threats to platypus populations include habitat degradation such as the clearing of vegetation along waterways; poor water quality including sedimentation and water pollution; reduced water flows caused by water extraction, drought and climate change; and predation by foxes and feral cats. Another significant factor is drowning, which is caused by the animals being caught in yabby traps and being snagged by fishing gear.



and truly established in WA. In fact, they are considered a pest and cause minor damage to aquaculture and, more significantly, predate on native fish, reptiles, frogs and small mammals, and compete with native species for food.

These days, translocations of a species to areas outside of the known original range are called ‘assisted colonisations’ and these sometimes form part of conservation programs when species can no longer survive in their existing range due to threats such as loss of habitat or climate change. However, the motivation behind the platypus translocation to WA in 1951 seems to have been purely for increasing tourism to the park, based on a misguided sense of patriotism.

A ONE-OFF ATTEMPT. OR WAS IT?

While the 1951 release is the only confirmed case of platypuses in WA,

there are unconfirmed reports that another pair was introduced by David Fleay to an ‘artificial lake south-east of Perth’ sometime around 1940. David was an Australian naturalist who was well known as the first person to breed several Australian species in captivity, including the platypus at Healesville Sanctuary,

and was instrumental in the 1951 release. There is an earlier unsubstantiated report that two pairs of platypus were introduced from Tasmania to a site near Pemberton in about 1898, and there have been various other sightings, extending from several sites in the south-west to just north of Perth near Bindoon. Retired DBCA



Above Early European naturalists marvelled at platypuses, which were unlike anything they'd seen before.

Painting – John Gould

Above right Rakali water rats are often mistaken for platypuses.

Photo – Neil Edwards

Below right A zookeeper cradles rare twin platypus babies known as puggles.

Photo – National Geographic Image Collection/Alamy

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 scientist Dr Ian Abbott has published a thorough account of all known sightings of putative platypus in WA.

There is a plausible explanation for most of the sightings of platypus in WA. The Australian water rat or 'rakali' (*Hydromys chrysogaster*) (see 'Rakali: the Aussie otter', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2011) is similar in size and colour, and can easily be mistaken for a platypus when swimming. This potential confusion is well recognised by platypus researchers in eastern Australia, who commonly encounter examples of mis-identification across their regions. Both the platypus and rakali have brownish fur and swim low in the water, so it can be very difficult to distinguish them, especially if you have a brief glimpse in low light or from a distance, which is often the case. The area of supposed sightings

of platypus in WA overlaps quite convincingly with the known range of rakali throughout the south-west, and a community survey carried out by the World Wildlife Fund in 2014–15 indicates that rakali are still seen regularly along the Swan and Canning rivers, Murray River, Peel-Harvey Estuary and in the Walpole-Nornalup Inlet.

So, while you are extremely unlikely to spot a platypus in WA, stranger things have happened. You just have to consider the discovery of a Tasmanian devil in the suburb of Balga in 1997, which was

presumably illegally imported into WA and eventually made its home at Perth Zoo. While it is possible that individual platypus have been illegally released into WA waters over the years, their specialised habitat and diet mean that it is unlikely they would have survived for very long, or that a population would establish. It is much more likely that the splash of brown fur you catch a glimpse of in the water is an Australian water rat – in which case, you have still been lucky to see a marvellous Australian mammal.



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