

Podcast 133 – The Platypus

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,
with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 133 – The Platypus

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(This podcast is 10 minutes and 31 seconds long).

Hi,

Australia has some really unique animals. The classic example is the kangaroo. Seeing a picture of a kangaroo immediately makes you think of Australia. There is another Australian animal which is also just as unique, although perhaps not quite so well known. Its features are also very unusual. That animal is the platypus. In this podcast, I would like to tell you a little about this amazing creature found only in Australia.

The platypus is a small semi-aquatic mammal which lives in and around the fresh water streams and rivers of eastern Australia. It has a bill (or mouth) just like that of a duck. In fact, sometimes it is referred to as 'the duck-billed platypus'. It has four feet which are shaped like paddles, with webbing between its toes which are perfectly shaped for swimming and diving. It has a tail which is wide and flat, just like the tail of a beaver found in North America. The male's average length is around 50cm and can weigh up to 2.4kg, so it is not a large animal. Its body is shaped like a thick plank of wood and it is covered in fur which helps it to stay warm and dry when swimming. It lives in a burrow or hole on the bank of the river, so it is also quite comfortable on land as well as in the water, although it spends most of its time in the water looking for food. The male has a poisonous

spur on the hind foot, which can deliver a painful sting to humans, however they are not considered to be aggressive towards people.



Image by [pen_ash](#) from [Pixabay](#)

The Yarra River flows next to the walking track I use near my home on the outskirts of Melbourne. There are several spots along this river where platypuses are sometimes sighted. Unfortunately, I have never seen one in the wild. I have seen a captive platypus at a wildlife sanctuary near Melbourne, in a town called Healesville, but that's not the same as seeing one in the wild. I have been walking alongside the Yarra River for many years on my daily walks, but I have never seen a platypus. The truth is, they are not easy to see in the wild. I can remember several years ago chatting to an American tourist whom I met while walking one morning on the Yarra Trail. He was taking photos and we started up a conversation. He was excited to tell me that he had seen a platypus in the river. I can remember being amazed and telling him that he was a lucky man. I live in Australia and had not yet seen one in

the wild. Perhaps I will one day – here's hoping.

There are other amazing facts about the platypus. Platypuses are one of only five living monotremes – these are mammals that lay eggs instead of giving birth to live young. In all other respects, they are like other mammals. All mammals breathe air, have a backbone, grow hair and produce milk for their young. Nearly all have their young live – but not the platypus.

The platypus is so unusual in appearance, that when European scientists first saw a preserved platypus in 1799, they thought that somebody had sewn bits of other animals together to make a fake animal. Of course, they soon discovered the truth as more examples were found and studied. Later on, scientists learned that platypuses have a special way of catching their food. They are carnivores, which means they eat other creatures such as worms, insect larvae or small Crustacea such as shrimps and yabbies. It can easily find them in the water or when they are hidden in the mud at the bottom of the stream. It does this by using electroreception to identify their movement. This means the platypus can detect the electricity produced when these small animals move their muscles. Actually, the platypus shuts its eyes, ears and nose when it dives, so their ability to sense these electric pulses is very good. The platypus must eat around 20% of its body weight every day, so as a result it forages for food for around 12 hours every day.

Platypuses breed once a year and the female looks after the young. After mating, she lays usually 2 eggs which she incubates for around 10 days inside a deep burrow which she digs especially for this purpose. Once they hatch, she produces milk which comes from pores on her skin. The young are able to lick up the milk which collects in grooves on her abdomen. She feeds the young in this way for around 3 to 4 months, after which time they leave the burrow and can fend for themselves.

While the platypus is not easy to observe in the wild, it does not mean that they are reducing in numbers or in danger of becoming extinct. However, their habitat is under pressure from humans as we build dams, or undertake building developments near or along rivers. There is always the risk of affecting the environment on which platypuses depend. This is why there is ongoing research being undertaken to help ensure that platypuses can grow in numbers in the future. The platypus is fully protected in Australia, for which I am very thankful.

It also has its image on one side of our 20 cent coin. That's how important it is to Australians. It is certainly one of my favourite Australian animals. And one day, I hope to see one while walking alongside the Yarra River.



Image of the platypus on Australia's 20 cent coin

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 133 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

[Start quiz](#)

Vocabulary

- ☐ Play abdomen = stomach
- ☐ Play aggressive = likely to attack or bite
- ☐ Play amazing = when something is very, very good, so good that it is hard to believe
- ☐ Play average = the middle number in a range of numbers
- ☐ Play bank = (here) the earth next to a river
- ☐ Play bill = mouth
- ☐ Play breed = reproduce, have babies (usually used to describe animals)
- ☐ Play building developments = the construction of homes, factories, other buildings
- ☐ Play burrow = a long hole in the ground where an animal can live (eg rabbit, platypus)
- ☐ Play captive = held in a cage or a place from which you cannot escape
- ☐ Play carnivores = animals which eat other animals (plant eaters are called herbivores)
- ☐ Play chatting = talking
- ☐ Play classic = something of quality, usually for a long time

- Play considered = thought to be
- Play creature = animal
- Play Crustacea = a group of animals with hard outer shells (e.g. crabs, shrimps)
- Play detect = discover or identify
- Play extinct = no longer existing alive on earth
- Play fake = not real
- Play features = the characteristics
- Play fend = look after themselves
- Play forages = looks for food
- Play fresh water = water that has no salt, water you can drink (not sea water)
- Play fur = hair on an animal's body
- Play grooves = a long narrow channel
- Play habitat = a place where animals live
- Play hatch = when the young platypus breaks out of its egg
- Play here's hoping = I am hoping
- Play hind = back, rear
- Play image = picture, drawing or photograph
- Play incubates = keeps eggs warm so the new animals inside can grow
- Play live = (here) born alive and not in an egg
- Play mating = the joining of a male and female to reproduce, to create babies

- Play observe = see, find, watch
- Play outskirts = edge
- Play paddles = something broad and flat to push you through the water
- Play plank of wood = a piece of flat wood
- Play poisonous spur = an object with a sharp point
- Play pores = very small holes in the skin, through which liquids pass (e.g. sweat, milk)
- Play protected = there is a law against killing or hurting this animal
- Play pulses = (here) a single vibration or burst of electric current
- Play referred to as = called
- Play respects = ways
- Play sanctuary = (here) a place where animals are kept
- Play semi-aquatic = spends much of its time in the water, as well as on land
- Play sewn = when things are joined together using needle and thread (like clothes)
- Play shaped = formed
- Play sighted = seen
- Play unique = there is nothing else like this
- Play unusual = not normal, not often seen
- Play webbing = covering of skin between the toes (eg on ducks feet)

□ Play wild = (here) in a natural environment, not in a cage or in captivity