The Platypus – *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*

GENERAL INFORMATION SHEET [Updated Tuesday, 4 May 2004]

GENERAL

- Part of the Australian fauna for at least 50,000 years.
- Once eaten by Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples
- Killed for their fur by white hunters in 19th century.
- Supposedly protected by law by 1923 but skins still being sold in 1930's.
- Often caught in fishing nets and drown (fishing nets still a serious threat to platypus).
- Found in eastern Queensland, eastern New South Wales, much of Victoria and throughout Tasmania. Once common in South Australia – being reintroduced.
- Isolation of Tasmanian population since end of Ice Age.

DIET

- Diet – insects, yabbies, amphibians, small fish and fish eggs.
- Eat about 20% of their body weight per day.
- Feed day and night.
- Close eyes and ears when feeding underwater.
- May stay under water for 5–6 minutes.
- Catches prey using electro receptors in beak.
- Chews food on water surface or on edge of lake/river.

REPRODUCTION

- Mating begins in August through to October in Tasmania.
- At ovulation egg about 4mm in diameter.
- At time of laying egg is 14–17mm.
- Incubation thought to be 6–10 days.
- The new borns live on milk produced by glands in mother's skin.
- Young remain in burrow for up to 4 months, often 3 months.

BURROWS

- Two types of burrow – resting and nesting.
- Nesting burrows may be up to 35m long but often only 3–8 metres.
- Resting burrow up to 2m.
- Sharing of burrows is not uncommon.
- Some animals live in log piles and other plant debris accumulated on shore or bank.

DISEASES AND PESTS

- Serious threat from fungal disease Mucor amphibiorum in Tasmania.
- Ticks
- Poison in waterways
- Road vehicles
- Dogs
- Foxes

THE FUNGUS – *Mucor amphibiorum*

- Possible initial cause tropical green tree frogs from mainland – arrived on bananas? Introduced into Tasmanian creeks?
- No obvious immune response in Tasmanian platypuses but mainland animals immune.
- Need to develop a vaccine.
- Work on the disease pioneered and research team lead by the late Dr Barry Munday.
- Research includes diagnosis, blood sampling, genetic monitoring and general health assessments of animals from all over Tasmania and King Island.

OTHER RESEARCH

- Toxicity of male platypus venom (Professor Dominic Geraghty, University of Tasmania)
- Population dynamics in lakes.

PLATYPUS HOUSE

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