

June 2011 in Our Catchment

It has been exceptionally dry, and the cold mornings have been numerous and chilly. I hope there is still a bit of flow in your waterway! Maybe the winter highs will drop down a few degrees and let us get some of the weather the Victorians and South Australians have been getting, because it has been a hard winter on the southern tablelands.

Your Results

A few places are showing elevated pH, possibly because of the lack of flow. This month there are quite a few places with elevated electrical conductivity, often with notes about increased algal growth and the waterways shrinking to chains of ponds. This is probably a not uncommon phase in the life of our waterways, but is unusual at this time of year ... it really does need to rain for more than the occasional couple of hours! All three of the ANU sites also show much depleted oxygen saturation. Sadly, this fits in with the state of Sullivans Creek just above the university where almost no flow in recent months has led to problems with smelly stagnant water at the weir. Someone is still either spreading super or digging holes in the upper Jerrabomberra Ck but below Royalla, and there is a rise in nitrates at Banksia Street wetland. Not too nice at present!

Water Rats – *Hydromys chrysogaster*

Our water rats are native rodents with the behaviour of otters and the face of a fox terrier. They have partly webbed feet, with very long toes, water-proof fur, rich brown on top, tawny below, and a long tail tipped in white. That fur is so good that in 1941, in Victoria, pelts regularly sold for 10s4d, better than the hourly rate for most workers (Barrett, 1943).

Water rats are burrowers, and so are unloved by irrigators. They thrive in slower river pools and billabongs but turn up wherever there is water and sufficient food. They are carnivores, and feed on the larger macroinvertebrates, fish, frogs and will take young birds and mammals. Their love of yabby should compensate for their burrowing in farm dams and channels, as they very probably keep yabby numbers low. They also enjoy carrion, and will clean-up beached carp with glee.



They are reputed to be secretive. Most sightings are early morning and late afternoon but ... I remember as a small boy watching them from our balcony as they swam in the Hawkesbury above the Windsor bridge ... not on speed-boat race days, but most other times. The pair in the pools at John Knight Park last Friday played to the gallery in the middle of the (overcast) day.

I don't know what the local indigenous language name is for water rat, but there are something like 50 names reported across the continent. The name "Rakali" is from Victoria and is the one used in Platypus Conservancy literature; "mundora" is one from south-east Queensland.

Water rats are not usually used as indicator species, but their presence in a waterway shows that the upper end of the food web is thriving ... so in an oblique way they indicate the place is hopping. So, just like Platypus, we'd love you to report in when *H. chrysogaster* joins you for your Waterwatching!

Calendar

July Sampling Weekend

Saturday, Sunday 16th and 17th.

We will have a Frog Information Evening in Queanbeyan on Tuesday 2nd August, details when I know them! And when the spring really has arrived, there will be more happening, including invertebrate and vegetation training, so watch this space!

Stephen Skinner

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