

Name: _____

edHelper

Platypuses

Can you picture an animal that has a beak shaped like a duck's, a tail like a beaver's, and a bone structure like a reptile's? Oh, did I also mention that this strange-looking animal lays eggs? Well, if you have a hard time picturing what this animal may look like, you are not alone.



When the British settlers in Australia had their first sighting of the platypus in 1797, they could not believe what they saw. Was the platypus a bird, a mammal, or a reptile? Upon examining a specimen, scientists back in England said it was a fraud. They suspected that the specimen had been made by stitching many different animals' body parts together. One scientist even used a pair of scissors to try to pry the "duck's beak" off the specimen! This very first platypus specimen, with scissor marks still visible, is preserved and on display in the British Museum of Natural History in London.

After many lengthy debates that lasted for almost a century, scientists finally confirmed that the platypus is a mammal. They classified it, along with the other two egg-laying mammal species (the short-beaked echidna and the long-beaked echidna), as monotremes.

Living a solitary life along riverbanks or lakeshores, platypuses can only be found in eastern Australia. Adult platypuses are about 18 inches long and weigh around 2 pounds. They usually spend their daytime hours hiding in their tunnel-like underground homes (or burrows). They only come out to search for food as night falls. Platypuses are superb swimmers and divers. Platypuses have two layers of fur coats - a waterproof outer jacket that functions like a wetsuit, and a wooly undercoat that keeps them warm. Platypuses have webbed feet that help them to maneuver in the water.

Platypuses have webbing covering the entire area of their front legs and a partial area of their hind legs. They rely on their front legs to propel and paddle and their hind legs to steer and balance. All four legs have claws. When platypuses travel on land, they fold back their webbings to reveal their sharp claws. Platypuses use their claws for digging tunnels, walking, anchoring on a submerged object (such as a rock), or cleaning their fur.

Interestingly, when platypuses swim, they close their eyes, nostrils, and ears. So, how can they know where they should go to find food - crayfish, shrimps, worms, tadpoles, fish, and insect larvae? Well, platypuses' soft, blue-gray colored beaks contain about 850,000 receptors that pick up electric signals sent out, uncontrollably and unknowingly, by all animals through their muscles and nerves. Hence, even though platypuses cannot see where they are heading, they have no problem pinpointing the location of their next meal!

Platypuses don't eat their victim immediately after they catch it. Instead, they put the food away in their cheek pouches and resume hunting. After they gather enough food, they return to the surface and grind it with rows of horny, ridged plates on their jaws. (Adult platypuses do not have teeth.) Platypuses have an amazing appetite. The

Name: _____

amount of food they eat a day is equivalent to their own body weight! Platypuses store extra fat in their flat tails and live off it when they cannot hunt or the food supply is limited.

Platypuses breed once a year from June to October. When a male platypus wants to discourage other rival males from pursuing his mate, he will not hesitate to use his secret weapon - a poison spur - jabbing it into other suitors. The male platypus has two poison spurs, one on the ankle of each hind leg. While he may sometimes use his poison spurs for self-defense, he never relies on them to hunt!

A female platypus usually lays two white, soft, leathery eggs in a special nursing burrow, dug for the occasion. After about 10 days, baby platypuses hatch from their eggs and drink milk produced by their mother. Unlike other mammals, female platypuses and echidnas do not have nipples. They have mammary glands under their skin, and milk oozes out onto two patches of fur on their bellies for the young to lap up.

Baby platypuses are tiny and defenseless when they just hatch. About half of an inch long, they are hairless and blind. They feed on their mother's milk for the next 5 months. Shortly after they wean, they are ready to move out and establish a home of their own.

Platypuses

Questions

- _____ 1. Where can you find platypuses?
 - A. central Australia
 - B. all over Australia
 - C. eastern Australia
 - D. western Australia
- _____ 2. Platypuses hunt during the day and hide in their burrows during the night.
 - A. true
 - B. false
- _____ 3. What did British scientists think when they first heard about the platypus?
 - A. They were overjoyed with the discovery of a new species.
 - B. They were indifferent because a specimen of the same animal collected from China was sent to them a year earlier.
 - C. They were doubtful but they quickly classified the animal as a mammal.
 - D. They were suspicious and thought that the animal was a fake.
- _____ 4. Which of the following about platypuses' appearance is **incorrect**?
 - A. They have dog-like legs.
 - B. They have a reptile-like bone structure.
 - C. They have beaver-like tails.
 - D. They have duck-like beaks.

Name: _____

- _____ 5. Adult platypuses don't have teeth. They grind food with the ridged plates on their jaws.
- A. false
 - B. true
- _____ 6. How does a male platypus drive away other rival males during the breeding season?
- A. He jabs his poison spurs into other rival males.
 - B. He bites other rival males.
 - C. He shouts at other rival males.
 - D. He whips other rival males with his flat tail.
- _____ 7. Which of the following about platypuses is true?
- A. They swim with their eyes and nostrils closed, but their ears are open.
 - B. Female platypuses do not have nipples so they cannot produce milk to feed their young.
 - C. Platypuses have webbed feet with sharp claws.
 - D. Platypuses eat water plants.
- _____ 8. How do platypuses hunt?
- A. They rely on their beaks containing about 850,000 electric signal receptors.
 - B. They rely on their good sense of smell.
 - C. They rely on their excellent eyesight.
 - D. They rely on their acute hearing.
- _____ 9. What does a baby platypus eat?
- A. milk
 - B. shrimp
 - C. insect larvae
 - D. fish
- _____ 10. Which of the following statements about platypuses is true?
- A. Platypuses store extra fat in their cheek pouches and consume it when they cannot hunt or the food supply is limited.
 - B. When platypuses catch a fish, they store it in their cheek pouches first and eat it after they go to the surface.
 - C. Platypuses live along riverbanks or lakeshores of eastern Australia.
 - D. There are three species of monotremes - platypuses, echidnas, and kiwis.