

THE WORLD OF MAMMALS



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READER

Jinny Johnson & Martin Walters

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Introduction



FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE MOST FAMILIAR GROUP OF ANIMALS IS THE MAMMALS. This is partly because we keep many kinds of mammals as pets and on farms, including dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, cows, sheep, and pigs. Also, the best-known animal in the world, and one of the most numerous, is a mammal—the human being.

A mammal is warm-blooded and has a body covering of fur or hair. Most mammal babies grow in their mother's womb, and are born quite well developed. But in marsupial mammals, such as kangaroos, the babies are born tiny and hardly developed at all. They continue their growth in the safety of the mother's pouch. Monotreme mammals do not give birth to babies at all. They lay eggs, like birds, and the eggs hatch into babies. But all female mammals make milk to feed their babies. This is produced by special glands called mammary glands—which is how the group got its name.

There are over 5,400 species of mammal and those include the largest creature ever to live on Earth, the blue whale. Most mammals walk and run on land. However, the whales, dolphins, porpoises, and sea cows spend all their lives in water. Another group of mammals, the bats, have taken to the air. Others, such as moles and mole rats, tunnel underground and rarely see the light of day.



Egg-Laying Mammals

PERHAPS THE ODDEST OF ALL MAMMALS ARE THE MONOTREMES, OR EGG-LAYING MAMMALS. There are only five kinds—the platypus and four species of echidnas or spiny anteaters, the short-beaked echidna and three species of long-beaked echidna. They all live in Australia or nearby New Guinea. The platypus is also called the duck-billed platypus because its mouth is shaped like a duck's beak. These highly unusual mammals do not give birth to babies, like other mammal species. The females lay eggs, like a bird or reptile.



▲ The short-beaked echidna grows to about 14 inches (35 cm) in length. Both long- and short-beaked echidnas have strong claws for digging up their prey and excavating nest burrows.



STICKY TONGUE

The echidnas look similar to porcupines, being covered with long, sharp, protective spines. They use their powerful front claws to dig into soil, or ant or termite nests. Then they lick up the prey using their long, sticky tongue.

The female echidna keeps her single egg in a temporary brood pouch which develops on her belly. The egg hatches after about ten days. Then she feeds the tiny, helpless baby on her milk, as other mammals do.

▲ The long-beaked echidna grows to about 28 inches (70 cm) in length.

WOW!

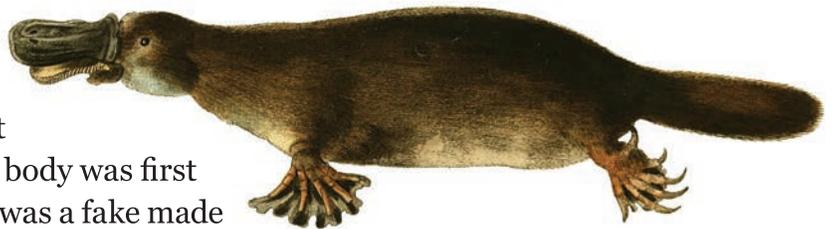
The mouth of a long-beaked echidna is just a small slit at the end of the snout. The tongue can poke out 7 inches (18 cm) beyond the snout tip. The echidna has no teeth. It squashes its tiny prey between its tongue and the roof of its mouth.

The short-beaked echidna is quite common in Australia and New Guinea. It is found in a wide range of habitats, from dry deserts to cold uplands, scrubland and forest. The long-beaked echidnas are found only in the highlands of New Guinea. They are larger than their short-beaked cousin, with fur longer than the spines, and a longer, down-curved snout. Despite their name of spiny anteater, echidnas eat earthworms as well as insects, which they catch using tough spines on the tongue.

THE PLATYPUS

The platypus lives in eastern Australia, including Tasmania. It is one of the strangest of all mammals. When a preserved platypus body was first studied by scientists in 1798, they thought it was a fake made of several animals sewn together. The platypus has a wide beak like a duck, a flattened tail like a beaver and webbed feet like an otter.

These body features make it ideally suited to swimming, and a platypus spends up to half its time nosing and grubbing in the water for food. It uses its tail as a rudder and to store a reserve of fat for the winter, when food is often scarce.

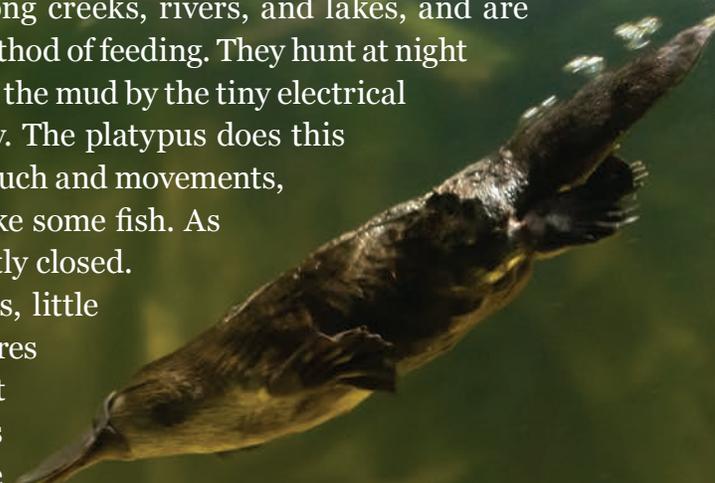


▲ The male platypus has a poison spur hidden in the fur on each hind leg. If threatened, he kicks out and causes the attacker great pain.

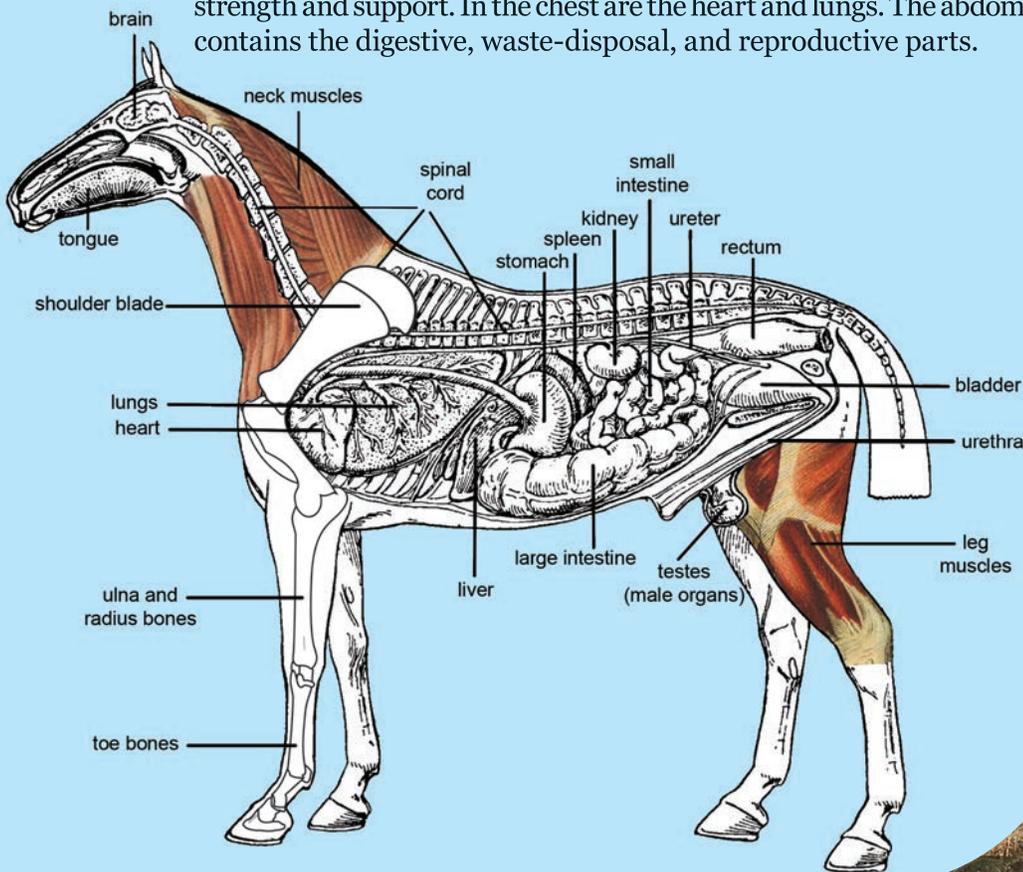
ELECTRIC BILL

Platypuses are not often seen since they live along creeks, rivers, and lakes, and are usually active at night. They have an extraordinary method of feeding. They hunt at night along the stream or lake bed, detecting prey hidden in the mud by the tiny electrical impulses given out by the muscles in the prey's body. The platypus does this using its wide, leathery bill. This is very sensitive to touch and movements, and also has tiny pits which can detect electricity, like some fish. As it hunts, the platypus keeps its eyes and nostrils tightly closed.

The platypus catches mainly insect grubs, worms, little shrimps, and similar small freshwater creatures. It stores them in its cheek pouches and eats them later, when it returns to its burrow in the bank. Then the platypus grinds up its food using horny ridges in its jaws, since like the echidnas, it has no teeth.



INSIDE A MAMMAL: All mammals have the same basic parts inside. The body has an internal skeleton made of bones, which give strength and support. In the chest are the heart and lungs. The abdomen contains the digestive, waste-disposal, and reproductive parts.



▲ The platypus catches small creatures including frogs and fish, and even water plants. Each dive lasts about one minute. The head and body are about 18 inches (45 cm) long, and the tail 6-8 inches (15-20 cm). Once very rare, platypuses are now protected by law and have become more common in some regions.

▼ The female platypus digs a very long breeding burrow, 60 feet (18 m) or more into the riverbank. At the end of the burrow she makes a nest of dry leaves and grass.

MAMMALS

- young feed on mother's milk
- warm-blooded
- body with fur or hair
- most have four limbs

First Major Subgroup of Mammals:

Monotremes

- only mammals that lay eggs
- adults have no teeth
- found only in Australia and New Guinea

