

From *Life on Earth*, by David Attenborough

At the end of the eighteenth century, the skin of an altogether astounding animal arrived in London. It had come from the newly established colony in Australia. The creature to which it had belonged was about the size of a rabbit, with fur as thick and as fine as an otter's. Its feet were webbed and clawed; its rear vent was a single one combining both excretory and reproductive functions, a cloaca, like that of a reptile; and, most outlandish of all, it had a large flat beak like a duck. It was so bizarre that some people in London dismissed it as another of those faked monsters that were concocted in the Far East from bits and pieces of dissimilar creatures and then sold to gullible travellers as mermaids, sea dragons and other wonders. But careful examination of the skin showed no sign of fakery. The strange bill which seemed to fit so awkwardly on to the furry head, with a flap like a cuff at the junction, did truly belong. The animal, however improbable it might seem, was a real one.

When complete specimens became available, it was seen that the bill was not hard and bird-like as it had first seemed when the only evidence was a dried skin. In life it was pliable and leathery so the resemblance to a bird could be discounted. The fur was more significant. Hair or fur is the hallmark of a mammal. Everyone agreed, therefore, that this mystery animal must be a member of that great group which contains creatures as diverse as shrews, lions, elephants and humans. A mammal's hairy coat insulates the body and enables it to maintain a high temperature, so it followed that this new creature must also be warm-blooded.

The Australian colonists had referred to the creature as a 'water-mole' while the Aboriginal names included 'mallangong', 'tambreet' and 'dulaiwarring'. Scientists decided that they should have something that sounded a little more scholarly. There were many extraordinary features to inspire a vivid name, but the one invented for it was the rather dull one of platypus, which means no more than 'flat-footed'. Soon afterwards, it was pointed out that the name was invalid anyway as it had previously been given to a flat-footed beetle, so a second one had to be devised and the animal was re-labelled *Ornithorhynchus*, 'bird-bill'. This is the scientific title it still bears. To most people, however, it remains a platypus.

## Questions

What characteristics made this creature such an astounding find?

What did some people in London assume about this creature?

What did scientists then discover about the bill of this animal?

What was the animal categorised as?

What does the word 'platypus' mean?

What is the official (scientific) name of this creature?

## Creative response

*Imagine you have discovered an entirely new creature. Draw it, label it and give it a name and a brief description.*

*Or, imagine you are the first to come across a creature we now know well (we're so used to seeing many animals now, thanks to nature documentaries, but at the time of first encounter, imagine how amazing it must have been!). Describe the encounter, and the creature, and give your 'new' creature a name.*