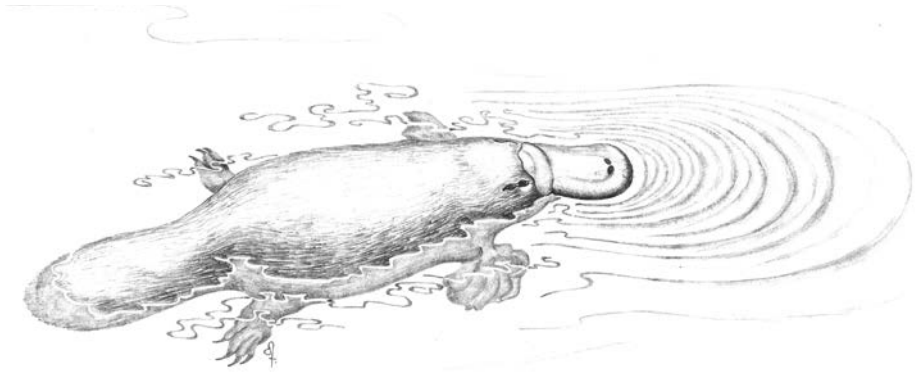


4

THE SENSORY WORLD OF THE PLATYPUS



'My observations of the platypus under water support the view that, of the five senses ordinarily possessed by animals, the only one operative while the platypus is gathering its food at the bottom of a river or water-hole is that of touch. My opinion is that this animal must have developed some extraordinary means of finding its prey, apart from the sense of touch, and that the sensory apparatus through which it acts is connected in some way with the fleshy bill. If this 'sixth sense' is not responsible, then we must fall back upon that makeshift word 'instinct'.'

HARRY BURRELL (1927)

In the wild, platypuses can often be observed in the water continuing to forage, apparently unperturbed by a human presence. Yet the slightest sound or movement will cause them to disappear, presumably in response to something they hear or see. Most probably the species also tastes and smells food in its mouth. In other words, the platypus uses the familiar senses possessed by other mammal species. However, the nature of the sensory world experienced by a platypus embarking on its daily foraging can be described in the following way: