

OBP Mainland Release Trial Program 2019

Two Week Update – 2 May 2019

It's now been just over two weeks since the first Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) were released for the 2019 Mainland Release Trial. This year, we released at three sites: the Western Treatment Plant (WTP), a new section of The Spit Nature Conservation Reserve, and The Avalon Coastal Reserve.

At each site, OBPs were housed in an aviary for about a week before release. Release groups were chosen to include a mix of sexes, ages and captive origin, with the exception of the five aided migrants, which were kept together for release at the WTP. Most birds had radio transmitters attached to the base of the tail feathers. The light-weight transmitters have a variable detection range, as low as 50m in dense vegetation, and accessibility is sometimes difficult, meaning we cannot expect to detect all individuals on all tracking attempts. Following the release, radio tracking and monitoring has been carried out at least every second day.



A release aviary. Photo: Ash Murphy. Birds prior to release. Photo: Michael Magrath

The first release was conducted on 16 April at the northern end of The Spit NCR. Seven OBPs, captive-bred at Healesville and Moonlit sanctuaries were released. These OBPs appear not to have returned to the aviary, where supplementary food and safe roosting were available, and the aviary has now been closed. Two individuals have not been seen since the day of release, while the remaining five have been detected up to 1 km from the release site.

The second release was conducted on 18 April at the WTP, the only site to have been used previously. Eight birds were released, including the five aided migrants and three Healesville-bred birds. Post-release, these birds have heavily utilised the supplementary food, and some roosted in the aviary initially. The aviary has now been closed, and the food available reduced to encourage birds to shift entirely to wild plants, which most birds have been observed using.

Following the WTP release, most OBPs have remained close to the aviary, usually within a few hundred metres. Five of the eight birds have been seen regularly, with two not detected for the past week. Both these birds lack transmitters, and additional search effort will be

undertaken to visually search for these birds. The eighth bird (an adult male aided migrant) was unfortunately found deceased just over a week after release, likely as a result of a fungal infection (pathology results pending).



A bird takes flight into the wild for the first time. Photo: Michael Magrath

The third and final release was conducted at the Avalon Coastal Reserve on 23 April. This cohort included birds from Moonlit Sanctuary and Adelaide Zoo, and left the aviary only after a Welcome Swallow flew into the aviary! As with the Spit site, these OBPs have not been observed returning to the aviary, and it has now been closed.

While five of the eight birds released at Snake Island were detected near the aviary on the day after release, only one has been seen in the week since. One group of three OBPs was sighted two kilometres from the aviary, but these were unable to be identified. This may indicate that a group of birds have moved into an area we have not yet searched. To maximise the chance of locating the missing birds we are expanding the search area. Sadly, the partial remains of one bird from this group was recovered on 1 May and appears to have been taken by a predator.

We are continuing to collect information on the movement patterns, habitat use, foraging behaviours and social groupings of the birds. We are also searching for any wild OBPs arriving. So far, the only confirmed sightings have been of the three, mainland-released males that over-summered in the area, but these have not yet been seen associating with any released birds.

The Mainland Release is a partnership between DELWP, Zoos Victoria, BirdLife Australia, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, Moonlit Sanctuary, Adelaide Zoo and the Tasmanian OBP Program. We are grateful to the many volunteers who are assisting us to care for, and monitor, these special birds.

We are encouraging all public sightings of OBPs in the area to be reported to OBP.Release@delwp.vic.gov.au

We are making fortnightly updates on the project on Facebook. Our next detailed progress update is due in two weeks.