

OBP Mainland Release Trial Program 2020

Two Week Update – 7 May 2020

Just over two weeks ago 26 Orange-bellied Parrots (OBP's) were released from two sites for the 2020 Mainland release trial. This year we again released at The Spit Nature Conservation Reserve, a location used in 2019, and from a new site located in North Western Port bay.

This year our partners at Moonlit Sanctuary held the birds at Western Port Bay in their on-site aviary for seven weeks (as opposed to the usual one week for other mainland releases) to allow for pre-release recall training. During that time in the aviary, the recall training was successfully implemented, with the flock of 13 birds responding to an auditory cue when food was made available at set times throughout the day via a specially-design food station. Also, during their time in the pre-release aviary, the birds were offered various local wild plants, with immediate uptake. The presence of Goshawks and Whistling Kites in the area gave them an awareness of birds of prey. Over time a presumed beneficial change in their behavioural response to raptors was observed, from taking flight to remaining motionless in the grass where they became incredibly camouflaged. The large aviary also gave them exposure to strong wind and rain, which we inferred would serve them well for the conditions they would experience in the wild.



Release aviary at north Western Port Bay site. Photo: Ashley Herrod

This year most birds were again fitted with radio transmitters attached to the base of their two central tail feathers. As part of a new remote monitoring trial, two birds at each site were instead fitted with solar-powered satellite transmitters. As in previous years, the light-weight radio transmitters have a variable detection range, as low as 50m when on the ground in dense vegetation and the satellite detections update only periodically based on satellite orbit schedules and weather conditions. In the two weeks since release, radio tracking and monitoring at both sites has been carried out almost every day.



Satellite tag on released bird. Photo: Paul Rushworth

The Spit release

The release at The Spit NCR was conducted on April 19th where a total of thirteen birds were released. Included in this release were eight captive-bred OBP's from Healesville Sanctuary and five assisted migration birds. On the day of release the aviaries were opened simultaneously to provide maximum opportunity for the two groups to flock together on the first day. Based on camera-trap surveillance and monitoring of provided supplementary food, no birds appeared to visit the aviaries after the release for either food or safe roosting, so these two aviaries have now been closed.



Assisted migration birds about to leave the Aviary. Photo: Brian Aherne

Since release, the group has been seen enjoying many native plants like the Seaberry Saltbush, and Austral Seabligh, and have been ranging up to 1km in either direction along the coast from the aviary site. They have been observed singly, in pairs, and larger groups of up to six individuals.

Two individuals have not been visually observed since the day after release. Of these, one individual had no transmitter fitted, and the other a satellite transmitter which last transmitted a signal on April 22nd. The on-ground monitoring program may yet locate these birds through colour band observation. The second satellite transmitter bird has been observed and detected regularly.

Unfortunately, one radio-transmitter individual was found predated in the first week, most likely by an Australian Hobby.

Field staff are also keeping an eye out for the arrival of any wild birds, and for the 3-5 individuals released in the area in 2019 who were last seen in February.



Release bird feasting on Seaberry Saltbush. Photo: Brian Aherne

The north Western Port release

This release also took place on April 19th, with the aviary being opened in the morning, to clear skies and no wind. Some of the 13 individuals left soon after the aviary was opened, while others took longer, choosing to leave in the early afternoon. The birds showed strong and swift flight in the wild, with some flying up into nearby trees, while others settled into the adjacent saltmarsh.

Since their release, seven of the 13 birds have been visually observed, consisting of two birds spending time by themselves, and the other five birds forming a small flock. The birds have been observed eating primarily Beaded Glasswort, in a large section of saltmarsh close to the release aviary. Five birds have not been visually observed after the release, including two without transmitters, two with VHF transmitters, and one satellite tag bird from which weak signals continue to be received irregularly.



Released bird in Western Port Bay foraging on Beaded Glasswort. Photo: Ashley Herrod

Sadly, the second satellite tag bird at this site was attacked by a Butcherbird three days after the release. It was re-captured and treated by a veterinarian but unfortunately later died.

Moonlit Sanctuary staff have been expanding their search effort further south and east of the release site, to potentially locate some of the birds that have not been observed since the release, and keep an eye out for any naturally-migrating birds that may be in the area.



Radio tracking OBPs in Western Port Bay. Photo: Blaire Bunter.

The Mainland Release is a partnership between DELWP, Zoos Victoria, and Moonlit Sanctuary, assisted by BirdLife Australia, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, and the Tasmanian OBP Program. This year we are undertaking our monitoring with modified procedures to keep an eye on the birds while also observing social distancing to keep our community safe.

We are encouraging all public sightings of OBPs in the release areas to be reported to OBP.Release@delwp.vic.gov.au. However, we ask community members to remember to limit their out-of-home activities to whatever is permitted in their area with the Covid-19 restrictions active at the time.

Social media updates are being shared by Moonlit Sanctuary, Zoos Victoria and DELWP this season – so keep an eye out on each of these platforms. Our next detailed progress update is due in two weeks.