

## **OBP Mainland Release Trial Program 2021**

### **Two Week Update – 7 May 2021**

Just over two weeks ago 36 Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) were released from three sites for the fifth year of the Orange-bellied Parrot Mainland Release Trial. This year we released birds at The Spit Nature Conservation Reserve, a site located in North Western Port Bay, and at a new site at Lake Connewarre.

The project aims to establish flocks of released birds in suitable habitats in Victoria, attract naturally migrating Orange-bellied Parrots to those sites, and, ultimately, improve the over-winter survival of those natural migrants.

This year most birds were again fitted with tiny radio transmitters attached to the base of their two central tail feathers. In addition to the usual ground tracking of these transmitter birds, we set up four fixed receiver stations at one of the sites to allow automated detection of these birds within the area. These receiver stations are performing well (over 1.5km detection range) and continue to provide us with additional detections of birds that supplement the data we are collecting with ground-based tracking. Furthermore, two birds were instead fitted with solar-powered satellite transmitters to continue the trial of these transmitters that commenced last year.

#### **The Lake Connewarre release**

The release at the Lake Connewarre site was conducted on April 17, where a total of 14 birds from multiple institutions (DPIPWE, WORZ, Adelaide Zoo and Priam) were released from two onsite aviaries where the birds had been held for six days. Both aviaries were opened simultaneously to provide maximum opportunity for the birds to flock together.



Birds exiting the Lake Connewarre release aviary. Image Brian Aherne.

Most of these birds have remained in the area (11/14 detected in the area two weeks post release) and most of these have been observed regularly near the aviaries. The birds visiting the aviaries have been making use of the supplementary food that is being provided at this location. However, there is considerable wild food available in the area and the supplementary food will now be scaled back and ended over the coming weeks to ensure a complete transition to wild foods. Unfortunately, signals

have not been detected from the two satellite transmitter birds beyond the day after release, though one of these birds was observed two weeks after the release still wearing the transmitter.

Two wild migrants have now been seen at this site:

- Black D Orange, a juvenile female bred at Tasmania's Five Mile captive breeding facility, and released in early 2021 at the wild breeding location in SW Tasmania, Melaleuca. She was first observed on Apr 30 foraging within a flock (40-50) of Blue-winged Parrots about 500m from the aviaries.
- Silver Orange J, a wild juvenile female, first observed with our released birds on May 7.

### **The Spit release**

The release at the Spit NCR was conducted on April 21<sup>st</sup> where a total of 10 birds bred at Tasmania's Five Mile captive breeding facility were released. On the day of release both aviaries were opened simultaneously to provide maximum opportunity for the birds to flock together.

Two individuals have been seen visiting one of the release aviaries and are using the space for safe roosting and eating small amounts of seed while also enjoying a range of nearby saltmarsh plants (including Austral Seablite *Sueda australis*, Carpetweed *Galenia pubescens* and a *Chenopodium* species). A third released bird, who eluded our search efforts for some time, was finally seen in another area of the Western Treatment Plant on May 7. Unfortunately, the remaining 7 birds are still eluding us, and our team are expanding their survey efforts to locate them.

Near Lake Borrie, we also have two birds from previous releases (2019 and 2020), who have remained resident in the area since their releases.

Three natural migrants have been spotted at this site:

- Blue D Yellow, an adult female, initially released as a captive-bred juvenile in SW Tasmania in late summer 2020, returning to this area for her second winter on April 1.
- Silver Silver C, an adult wild-born female, returning to this area for her third winter, was seen with the resident birds at Lake Borrie on April 27.
- Silver Orange W, a wild-born juvenile male was seen with the two 2021 released birds, foraging in saltmarsh near the release site on May 3.

There is now a mixed group of four birds in the Lake Borrie area, and a mixed group of three birds at the Spit area.



Two released birds, and natural migrant Silver Orange W, foraging at the Spit.  
Photo: Hanne Martens.

### **The North Western Port Bay release**

The twelve birds for this year's release at North Western Port Bay spent six weeks in the on-site release aviary (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 responding to an auditory cue in the absence of people, when food was dispensed from automatic feeders at set times. During their time in the pre-release aviary, the birds were offered trays of salt marsh plants (collected with permission from private property). This natural food was eaten very enthusiastically by the birds while still maintaining strong recall response.

This release took place on April 23rd, with the flock of 12 birds eventually taking to the air together after feeding outside the aviary briefly as a group. After the release attempts were made to recall the birds back to the aviary following daily recall training procedure the birds were familiar with. Some birds showed interest in the recall cue, circling in flight high above the aviary. They were not, however, observed to return to the aviary, preferring to remain in the salt marsh habitat in the immediate area around the aviary.

The first day after their release, all of the 12 birds were observed or detected in the area. Within the first week after the release, eight of the 12 birds were being located daily, consisting of three birds spending time by themselves, and the other five birds forming a small flock. Unfortunately, three birds have been predated by a bird of prey: they were two solo birds and one bird from a group of five. This seems to have caused the group to disband, and in recent days only 2-3 birds are being detected or seen regularly. Staff from Moonlit Sanctuary are continuing to expand their search efforts to relocate the birds and keep a look out for any arriving natural migrants.

As per last year's release in north Western Port Bay, the birds have been observed eating primarily Beaded Glasswort, in a large section of saltmarsh close to the release aviary. Interestingly one bird (a



female) has been observed foraging among the flowers and foliage of White Mangroves which line the creek that flows into the bay at the release site.



Birds foraging on Beaded Glasswort at the north Western Port Bay release site.  
Image Brodie Zealand.

DELWP, Zoos Victoria and Moonlit Sanctuary have committed funds and resources to the trial and in 2021 the project has the additional support of the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, funded by the Australian Government's National Landcare Program. The project team is working with a range of partners to implement the project.

DELWP, Zoos Victoria, Moonlit Sanctuary, BirdLife Australia, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (CMA), and the Tasmanian Government are partnering to deliver the Mainland Release Trial, with the hope of once again having flocks of OBPs in Victoria's coastal habitats.

The release groups include captive-bred birds sourced from Moonlit Sanctuary, Werribee Open Range Zoo, Adelaide Zoo, Priam Psittaculture Centre and DPIPW.

We are encouraging all public sightings of OBPs in Victoria to be reported to [OBP.Release@delwp.vic.gov.au](mailto:OBP.Release@delwp.vic.gov.au).

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.