

OBP Mainland Release Trial Program 2021

Four Week Update – 24 May 2021

Just over a month ago, 36 Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) were released from three sites for the fifth year of the Orange-bellied Parrot Mainland Release Trial. It's time to check-in again on how they are faring.

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.

The Lake Connewarre release

Fourteen birds were released at Lake Connewarre on April 17. In our last update (May 7) we noted that 11 of the 14 birds were still being detected at the release site, and they had been joined by two juvenile female natural migrants. As of May 24th, 10 of the released birds were still being observed and/or detected, together with the two juvenile migrants. The fixed tracking receivers continue to detect thousands of records of tagged birds each day, including three individuals that have not been seen since the time of the release.

Some of these birds continue to frequent the area in and around the release aviaries, including the two wild migrants. However, based on observations of the birds foraging naturally and sufficient supplies of natural food sources, the provisioning of supplementary feeding was gradually scaled back and ended completely on May 17th.



Birds feeding at Lake Connewarre. Image Scott Rolf

The Spit release

Ten birds were released at the Spit NCR on April 21. In our last update we noted that only three of this group had been seen in the first two weeks following release; one bird on its own, and two birds with

one juvenile male natural migrant. Another group of four birds had formed, made up of two adult female natural migrants who have previously visited this site, with two previously released birds (from 2019 and 2020) who had remained in the area.

After many of the recently observed birds evaded detection for the better part of a week, a flock of seven individuals were observed early Friday morning (21/5); none of whom were carrying transmitters. This flock was extremely mobile. A smaller group was later seen feeding together, and one was identified as Gold E Yellow, a newly arrived adult female natural migrant, here for her second winter.

This flock of birds and the released bird currently by itself are all making use of the phragmites reeds at the site as wind breaks, and have been observed eating the fat hen, a common OBP food plant.

This new arrival brings the total known natural migrants at the site this year to four; three adult birds that over-wintered at this site last year, and one juvenile.

The team are continuing to look for the missing released birds while also trying to confirm the identities of the flock of 7 birds and any new arrivals who may join them.



Flock at the Spit. Photo: Brian Aherne

The north Western Port Bay release

Twelve birds were released at North Western Port Bay on April 23. In the last update, we noted that, two weeks after release, only 2-3 birds were being regularly seen at the release area.

Two birds, an adult male and adult female, have continued to be seen regularly. They have been seen feeding alongside each other and flying together along the mangrove-lined creek that cuts through the saltmarsh at the release site.

In the third week post-release a female from the 2020 Western Port Bay release group arrived back at the release site and joined these two birds from the current release. Prior to this sighting, this bird was last seen in October 2020.

Four weeks after the release a very exciting observation was made, with a wild migrant sighted feeding alongside the two 2021 release birds and the 2020 release bird. The bird was identified as a wild-hatched juvenile from the 2020/21 breeding season at Melaleuca. This bird has recently completed its first ever migration to the mainland, before settling down in high-quality habitat with the mainland release birds, which is the primary aim of the project. The last confirmed sighting of a naturally-migrated OBP on the mainland coast of Western Port Bay was in 1984! We hope this is the beginning of Western Port Bay once again being a site used by OBPs over winter.



Left: Juvenile wild migrant (background) with one of the male 2021 release birds foraging on Beaded Glasswort. Right: Juvenile wild migrant (front right) with two adults (male and female) from the current release and one adult female from the 2020 release. Photos by 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.

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 mid-June.