

OBP Mainland Release Trial Program 2021

Update – 15 June 2021

In April 2021, 36 Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) were released from three sites in Victoria for the fifth year of the Orange-bellied Parrot Mainland Release Trial. Here's an update on how the birds are faring at each site so far.

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.

Covid-19 restrictions in place in Victoria in May/June interrupted field monitoring for one week in sites classified as regional, and two weeks in sites classified as metropolitan Melbourne. Following the staged easing of restrictions, monitoring recommenced following Covid-safety protocols for the project. Due to this hiatus, there have been limited new observations since our last detailed update on 24 May.

The Spit release

Ten birds were released at the Spit NCR on 21 April, with only three still being observed in the first eight weeks after release. Two of these release birds were seen with one juvenile male natural migrant, and the third by itself in an area 11km from the release aviaries.

A flock comprised of a 2019 released male, a 2020 released female, and three natural migrants that have visited the site previously, have been observed using habitats they are all familiar with from last year.

A flock of seven birds has been seen in May and June. This flock is extremely mobile, and the team have been unable to identify the individuals. No birds in this group are currently carrying transmitters.

On one day in May when this flock of seven was observed, a smaller group found later in the day included Gold E Yellow, a female natural migrant here for her second winter, and the mother of one of the juvenile migrants observed in South Australia in late May.

In total, five natural migrants have been observed at this site:

- Silver Silver C, a wild-born female born in 2019; here for her third winter at the site
- Blue D Yellow, a captive-bred female released as a juvenile at Melaleuca in 2020; here for her second winter at the site
- Silver Orange W, a wild-born juvenile male; here for his first winter at this site
- Gold E Yellow, a captive-bred female released as a juvenile at Melaleuca in 2020; here for her second winter at the site
- Silver Orange U, a wild-born juvenile female; here for her first winter at this site.



Released bird at the Spit. Photo: Paul Rushworth

The north Western Port Bay release

Twelve birds were released at North Western Port Bay on 23 April. Two weeks after release, only 2-3 birds were being regularly seen at the release area. Three birds were unfortunately predated by a bird of prey (observations suggest a Brown Goshawk).

Four weeks following release, two “new” OBPs arrived and joined two of the release birds. One bird was from the 2020 release in north Western Port Bay and had not been seen since October of that year. The other bird was Silver Green Z, a wild-born juvenile female here for her first winter. The last confirmed sighting of a natural migrant on the mainland coast of Western Port Bay was in 1984.

Eight weeks following release, six birds (excluding the 2020 release bird and the wild migrant) were detected by one of the fixed receiver stations that was relocated from the Lake Connewarre site, to assist with monitoring at North Western Port Bay. This station can detect transmitters at a much greater distance than a hand-held receiver. This was exciting news, because it added an extra four birds in addition to those being detected during ground surveys. The fixed tracking station has been invaluable because habitat along the north Western Port Bay shoreline is extensive, and many parts are inaccessible on foot.



Fixed tracking station erected recently at north Western Port Bay release site, to supplement hand-held radio-tracking efforts. Photo by Ashley Herrod

The Lake Connewarre release

Fourteen birds were released at Lake Connewarre on 17 April. Initially, the birds settled into habitat close to the release aviaries and continued to make use of supplementary food until it was removed on 17 May after a gradual reduction in food quantity.

Two weeks following release, 11 of the 14 birds were still being detected at the release site. Four weeks following release, 10 of the released birds were still being observed and/or detected. Eight weeks following release, 7 released birds were still being detected, together with four migrants (see below) in loose flocks of up to 8 individuals at a time.

At this site, monitoring has occurred through a combination of ground-based field observers aided by hand-held radio-tracking equipment, and four fixed tracking receivers located around the lake. The fixed tracking stations detect thousands of records of tagged birds each day, including some individuals that have, as yet, avoided the gaze of our ground observers.

The field team have also observed four natural migrants at this site, two that have been around for over a month and two more that have only recently joined this flock.

- Black D Orange, a captive-bred juvenile female released at Melaleuca in early 2021; here for her first winter
- Silver Orange J, a wild-born juvenile female; here for her first winter
- Silver Orange D, a wild-born juvenile male; here for his first winter
- Purple Green M, a wild-born adult female; in her second winter but at this location for the first time that we know of.

The flock of released and wild OBPs at this site have been seen in the saltmarsh eating feeding on a range of saltmarsh plants including Austral Seablite, Beaded Glasswort and Sea Barley-grass.



Bird feeding on Beaded Glasswort at Lake Connewarre. Photo: Craig Morley

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.

DELWP, Zoos Victoria and Moonlit Sanctuary have committed funds and resources to the trial. In 2021 the project is also supported by the Victorian Government and the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, with the latter partner contributing funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program. The project team is working with a range of partners to implement the project.

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 October.