

OBP Mainland Release Trial Program Update – December 2019

At the end of the third year of the Orange-Bellied Parrot Mainland Release Trial the birds continue to teach us more about how they live and behave on the mainland.

This trial aims to test whether releasing captive-bred birds on the mainland is an effective strategy to increase the number of Orange-Bellied Parrots (OBPs) in the wild, and whether naturally migrating juveniles can be attracted to suitable mainland habitats by an established flock of released OBPs.

In April 2019, 23 birds were released at three sites in the Werribee/Avalon area: The Western Treatment Plant (8 birds), Snake Island (8 birds), the northern end of The Spit Nature Conservation Reserve (7 birds). An additional release of a further eight birds occurred in June, four birds at both the Western Treatment Plant and North Spit sites, bringing the year's total to 31 birds released.



Photo Credit: Paul Rushworth

Success for releases are measured by the following criteria:

- At least 70% survival rate of released birds for the first month after release
- At least 50% survival rate of released birds by late winter
- A stable flock of 10 birds established, that remain in the area over winter.
- Wild birds observed joining the release flock

Of the three release sites this year, the North Spit release site was considered partially successful with a stable flock of nine birds established including a wild juvenile female Silver Silver C. The majority of the first release group survived into late winter (71%), however only one (25%) of the second release group were seen at this time. Silver Silver C remained in the area until August.

At the Western Treatment Plant site, a flock of seven birds established, which included 38% of the first release group, 50% of the supplementary release group, one bird from the 2018 release that had stayed in the area, and one wild adult male. However, by July this group was more mobile, and left the surveyed area. Only four birds returned to the site in late August (two from the initial release, one from the second release and the one 2018 released males). This contrasted with previous releases at the WTP where a stable flock formed and stayed in the survey area until September.

Unfortunately, a flock failed to establish at the Snake Island release site. The last sighting of an individual from this release group was in early May. Of the eight individuals released at site, the partial remains of one was recovered, and dropped transmitters were recovered from another

three. Radio-tracking and searches of the area failed to locate any sign of the additional birds or their transmitters.

As with previous years, the released birds quickly transitioned from supplementary food provided by the project team, to foraging naturally on a mixture of native and introduced plants. The use of food plants appeared to be predominately driven by availability.



Photo Credit: Steve Davidson

A variety of social interactions were observed in the field both in large and smaller groups, as well as awareness of predators and other birds. One of the 2018 birds was seen at the Werribee Open Range Zoo and then with the Western Treatment Plant flock in the same afternoon, helping us understand the distances these birds can travel to look for other OBPs. Two of the 2019 WTP released birds were observed to be moving between the WTP and Spit flocks (about 14km).

Bird watchers have again provided valuable support to the project this season. Reported sightings, predominately of the North Spit flock, have allowed the team to gather important information about the birds' movements and habits.

The most recent sightings of released birds occurred at the end of November, with four of the North Spit initial release group seen feeding together in the saltmarsh. Wild Juvenile Silver Silver C arrived at Melaleuca in late November, completing her first journey from Victoria to Tasmania.

The Mainland Release is led by DELWP and Zoos Victoria in partnership with 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 post updates about the project on DELWP's Barwon South West Facebook page. We welcome sightings of OBPs in the area to be reported to OBP.Release@delwp.vic.gov.au