

Orange-bellied Parrot (OBP) Recovery Program News, March 2021

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This breeding season was a good one for OBPs. The wild and captive populations had productive breeding seasons and release program this summer was successful. DPIPWE estimates 185 OBPs will migrate north from Melaleuca this year to winter in coastal Victoria (and perhaps south eastern South Australia), which is a 57% increase on the number leaving last autumn.

The breeding population at Melaleuca broke recent records with 31 nest attempts and 88 fledglings, which are 65% and 127% increases on the last breeding season, respectively. Eight-six of the fledglings have been observed at feed tables. The DPIPWE and ANU field team was kept busy monitoring nests and feed tables throughout the season. In one day of nestling banding for identification, they processed more nestlings than they had in a whole season previously. New ground was also broken with two nests and seven fledglings being produced at New Harbour. This is the first season that OBPs have used this site since nest boxes were established there in 2010, and the first recorded breeding range expansion since monitoring commenced in the early 1980. In 2019 and 2020, DPIPWE released OBPs at New Harbour but neither attempt resulted in OBPs nesting at the site. The OBPs that nested at New Harbour were not previously released there and might have been attracted by the recent ecological burn at the site to improve the abundance and availability of OBP food plants.

Breeding in the captive population produced 50 juvenile OBPs for release this season and maintained about 250 pairs in the breeding population for next season. Adelaide Zoo (AZ), DPIPWE's Five Mile Beach facility (5MB), Moonlit Sanctuary (MS) and Priam Psittaculture Centre (PPC), all took part in captive-breeding. Unfortunately, Healesville Sanctuary (HS) was unable to contribute due to detection of the virus that can cause psittacine beak and feather disease (PBFD) among their breeding pairs. The PBFD virus is known to circulate in captive and wild populations, but HS's breeding population was free of the virus until 2020. The virus strains detected there are already widely spread in the OBP metapopulation. The decision to halt breeding for a year was made to give HS's breeding population the best chance to develop immunity. None of HS's OBPs have shown symptoms of PBFD. In lieu of breeding at HS this season, 5MB increased their number of breeding pairs, which certainly made it a lot busier but manageable largely thanks to their custom-built facility and the hard work of the staff.

In recent years, DPIPWE have fine-tuned their release program for best results and followed that program this season. During October, 31 captive-bred adults from AZ, 5MB, HS, MS and Werribee Open Range Zoo (WORZ) were released by DPIPWE in three events at Melaleuca (i.e., the Spring Release) to increase the number of breeding pairs in the breeding population. From late January to early March, DPIPWE released 50 captive-bred juveniles from 5MB and MS in three events at Melaleuca (i.e., the Juvenile Release) to increase the size of migratory and wintering flocks and in turn increase individual survival during the nonbreeding season.

Now, early in the nonbreeding season, DELWP, Zoos Victoria and Moonlit Sanctuary Mainland Release Trial is releasing 36 captive-bred adults from AZ, 5MB, MS, PPC and WORZ in three balanced groups at The Spit, Lake Connemara, and North Western Port reserves in Victoria. The Mainland Release Trial aims to attract migratory OBPs to areas of high-quality habitat. The project also trials techniques to inform and improve our conservation actions. This winter, Moonlit Sanctuary will again use recall training on the OBPs that will be released at North Western Port to develop site fidelity; and Zoos Victoria with support from the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority are setting up a remote tracking system at Lake Connemara that uses several fixed receivers in the landscape and tiny transmitters on OBPs that will be released there to collect data on their use and movement of the site.

This year is the 5th year since the current OBP Recovery Plan was first implemented. Recently, we have been reviewing our work against the aims, objectives, and actions that we set out in the plan. In April, the OBP Recovery Team will meet online to endorse the review and the way forward for OBP recovery in the next five years. I will share this with you in the next OBPRP News.

Fast Facts:

- OBPs are small ground-feeding parrots. Males are bright green, yellow and blue with a prominent orange belly. Females and juveniles are duller with less prominent orange bellies. OBPs only breed in the south-west of Tasmania within 5 km of the coast. They migrate via western Tasmania, the Hunter Island Group and King Island in autumn and spring, and winter on the south-eastern coast of Australia. Each year, OBPs fly at least 640 km across land and sea.
- OBPs are classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN's Red List and under the Commonwealth's EPBC Act 1999 because of their extremely small wild population, single breeding location and recent rapid decline. There is some uncertainty about the cause of the species' decline; however, habitat loss and degradation, as well as introduced predators and competitors, have likely been responsible historically, and, presently, OBPs face numerous interacting threats, including the genetic, health and social impacts of a very small wild population.
- The OBP Recovery Team is comprised of 30 members representing 23 government and non-government organisations as well as community groups and individuals. The role of the Team is to coordinate recovery activities, provide advice to conservation managers, and review the progress of Recovery Plan implementation to maximise the effectiveness of the recovery program.
- Volunteers contribute significantly to the conservation actions of the OBP Recovery Program, including collecting data on the species in the breeding and non-breeding locations, assisting in the care of the OBP captive population, contributing to public awareness, and raising funds for recovery actions.
- The actions of the OBP Recovery Team are funded by the organisations within the partnership as well as through government and non-government grants, fund-raising activities, and individual and corporate donations.