

## Orange-bellied Parrot (OBP) Recovery Program News, January 2023

Prepared by Toby Galligan, OBP Recovery Program Coordinator, on behalf of the OBP Recovery Team.

The OBP Recovery Team has some exciting news to start the year: 74 OBPs have returned to Melaleuca to breed. This is four more than the last breeding season and the greatest number of returnees in the last 15 years.

During the survey period, from September to the census date of the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, NRE Tas staff and volunteers recorded 43 male and 31 female returnees. Of these, 44 fledged from nest boxes at Melaleuca and 30 fledged in captivity and released as juveniles at Melaleuca. Among the 44 wild-fledged OBPs, approximately half (23) were making their first journey back, while the other approximately half (21) was two years of age or older. Among the 30 captive-fledged OBPs, two-thirds (20) were released last breeding season (2022/23) and one-third (10) were released in previous breeding seasons.

The returnees included five of seven natural migrants that flocked with captive-fledged OBPs at Lake Connewarre, Victoria, over the winter of 2022. The Mainland Release Team\* released the captive-fledged OBPs in the autumn of 2022. The Mainland Release Team observed another four natural migrants at Melbourne Water's Western Treatment Plant (a site used for Mainland Releases in previous years). They did so repeatedly during non-breeding season monitoring of the site.

Three more OBPs had been spotted in South Gippsland in early October, which was very exciting given the last confirmed sighting of the species in this region was 24 years ago. A pair of local birdwatchers incidentally found The Trio, as they became known, on a morning walk. The birdwatchers then monitored the birds every day until they left the site nearly a month later. Each morning, The Trio would forage boldly in the same relatively open and busy (with people) place. Volunteer OBP experts in the region visited the site to assist in monitoring and identification of The Trio.

Two of The Trio were wild-fledged and one was captive-fledged; all were first-year birds, having yet to complete a full migration. When The Trio disappeared from the site, we crossed our fingers, and, when NRE Tas confirmed that all three had made it to Melaleuca, we were both delighted and relieved. The Trio were last seen in South Gippsland on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, then one was confirmed to be at Melaleuca on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November and the other two were confirmed to be at Melaleuca on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of November.

NRE Tas topped up the breeding pool at Melaleuca with the release of 26 captive-bred adults (half males, half females) in their annual Spring Release. NRE Tas' Five Mile Beach breeding facility, Zoos Victoria's Healesville Sanctuary, and Moonlit Sanctuary provided OBPs for release. Fifteen of these OBPs survived the translocation; therefore, the total number of OBPs known to be alive at Melaleuca as of the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 2022 was 89 (i.e., 74 wild plus 15 captive-release OBPs).

Breeding is underway at Melaleuca with the first eggs detected during a nest box check in mid-December. Breeding is underway in the captive institutes, too. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, five captive institutes - namely, Five Mile Beach, Healesville Sanctuary, Moonlit Sanctuary, Priam Psittaculture Centre, and Zoos SA's Adelaide Zoo - were managing 55 pairs and 233 eggs, 86 nestlings, and 13 fledglings. And, while many of us were taking a break for Christmas and New Year, the NRE Tas' field

team continued monitoring OBPs at feed tables and nest boxes, and our five captive institutions continued to care for OBPs in breeding, holding and flight aviaries.

Later this month, the NRE Tas' field team will be busy banding nestlings and the captive institutes will be busy preparing juveniles for release. Released in three groups, captive-fledged juveniles will mingle with their wild counterparts, learn how to survive in the wild from wild adults, and further bolster the wild population as it departs from Melaleuca in autumn.

*\*DELWP, Zoos Victoria, Moonlit Sanctuary, BirdLife Australia, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, CCMA, the Tasmanian Government and Adelaide Zoo*



Above photograph: Two Orange-bellied Parrots foraging on native plants in Melaleuca in December 2022. Both were raised in captivity; one was released as a juvenile at Melaleuca in January 2022 and thereby having made the full migration back to the breeding site; the other was released as an adult at Melaleuca in the Spring Release 2022 and thereby stretching its wings for the first time. Photographer: Marianne Gee.

*Fast Facts:*

OBPs (*Neophema chrysogaster*) are small ground-feeding parrots. Males are bright green, yellow, and blue with a prominent orange belly. The colours of females and juveniles are subdued and they have less prominent orange bellies.

In the summer, OBPs breed in southwestern Tasmania within 5km of the coast. In autumn and spring, they migrate via western Tasmania, the Hunter Island Group, and King Island. OBPs winter in coastal habitats in southeastern Australia. Each year, OBPs migrate at least 600 km over land and sea.

The IUCN Red List and the Australian EPBC Act 1999 classify the OBP as Critically Endangered. The species persists as a tiny wild population, breeding at a single location, after a recent rapid decline.

There is some uncertainty about the cause of the species' decline. Habitat loss and degradation plus introduced predators and competitors likely drove past declines. Today, several interacting threats impact OBPs.

The Recovery Team comprises 28 government, non-government, and community groups. It develops, coordinates, and reviews the OBP Recovery Plan; and preserves expertise and advice in OBP biology, ecology, and conservation.

Volunteers contribute to the actions of the OBP Recovery Program. They assist by collecting data on OBPs in the field and captive institutions. They also raise public awareness and funds for recovery actions.

The organisations within the Recovery Team fund recovery actions. Government and non-government grants, and individual and corporate donations, provide extra financial support.