

Orange-bellied Parrot (OBP) Recovery Program News

Prepared by Kerri Duncan, OBP Recovery Team Coordinator (ZAA), on behalf of the OBP Recovery Team.

HPAI H5N1 2.3.4.4b; BIRD FLU

In 2024, the Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Team (OBPRT) identified high pathogenicity avian influenza H5N1 Clade 2.3.4.4b (referred to as HPAI) as a potential extinction-level threat to the wild population. In preparation, the OBPRT developed a comprehensive preparedness framework, including a wild population preparedness plan and site-specific plans for captive institutions. These plans incorporated detailed risk assessments and a tiered suite of mitigation measures.

Preparedness activities implemented across the program included expansion of quarantine facilities, increased stocks of personal protective equipment (PPE) and disinfectants, development of enhanced biosecurity protocols, targeted staff training, redesign of enclosure infrastructure to minimise contact with wild birds, and strengthened surveillance and monitoring.

Following the first confirmed detection of HPAI in Australia on 19 June 2026, response measures were activated in accordance with established trigger points, with actions escalating based on the proximity and transmissibility of disease detections.

The OBPRT continues to work closely with government agencies, zoo and wildlife park partners, wildlife health experts and conservation organisations to respond to the outbreak. Efforts continue to be refined in response to evolving circumstances and new information. Biosecurity measures remain the primary line of defence for disease risk management.

VACCINATION

HPAI vaccination is underway at several facilities as a complementary tool to reduce potential risk to captive OBPs, including birds intended for release to the wild. Vaccination is considered one of the few potentially effective interventions available.

The available vaccine has been assessed by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) for use under an emergency permit. Pilot studies in Australian bird species have provided additional information on vaccine safety and effectiveness. Data about the potential protective duration of the vaccine is limited. Further use of the vaccine during the HPAI outbreak response will continue to improve understanding of its performance in different species.

Current requirements include that the birds must weigh more than 38 grams, be at least three weeks of age, receive two vaccinations three to four weeks apart, and be monitored for a minimum of two weeks following vaccination. This means that vaccination of wild birds is not currently a feasible option.

Captive facilities housing OBPs are managing vaccination approval applications according to their respective regulator, and clinical and operational circumstances. Decisions about the suitability of individual birds are the responsibility of the attending veterinarian.

On 1 September, 64 captive OBPs began receiving their first dose of the vaccine at the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania's (NRE Tas) Five Mile Beach facility. Cleland Wildlife Park, Priam Psittaculture Centre and Zoos Victoria are at various stages of administering doses to their captive birds.

Public advice continues to be to report sick or dead wildlife suspected of avian influenza to the 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888. For your own safety and to reduce accidental spread of the virus, avoid contact with any sick or dead wildlife. More information, including regularly updated reports of events, can be found on birdflu.gov.au.



Image.1 An OBP spotted on South Australia's Younghusband Peninsula in August 2026. Photo by Tim Jones.

MAINLAND SIGHTINGS

Winter survey efforts have continued across mainland sites where contamination risks are considered to be low. These have resulted in multiple exciting findings, including:

- A total of 29 mainland sightings (as of 13 October).
- Four of these were in South Australia: One on the Narrung Peninsula during the May surveys, and three on the Younghusband Peninsula shortly before the September surveys.

- One of the South Australian birds was identified to be one of the oldest birds in the wild, a captive born juvenile released in 2020. This is the first recorded sighting of this individual on the mainland.
- A flock of up to 11 OBPs has been sighted several times on private property at Lake Connewarre.
- An additional 11 birds have been seen at the Western Treatment Plant near Werribee. Sightings at Williamstown and Newport are presumed to be included in this count.
- Three OBPs were photographed on French Island in Western Port Bay.

In addition to visual sightings, several OBPs have been detected via dedicated tracking towers. Data are currently being analysed to determine accurate numbers.



Image.2 Volunteers looking for OBPs within the Coorong National Park, SA, under the guidance of regional coordinator Bob Green. Photo by Kerri Duncan.

MIGRATION TRACKING PROJECTS

The OBP Tracking Project, led by NRE Tas in collaboration with Zoos Victoria, has continued into its third year in 2026. A total of 49 birds were fitted with lightweight VHF transmitters early in the year to monitor their northward migration patterns. Specially placed, fixed receiver stations are maintained across Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia to detect the transmitters.

Data have been downloaded and are in the process of being analysed. The 2025 final tracking report is due to be released soon.

SPRING RELEASE

A small, female-only spring release is planned for October 2026. The primary goal of this release is to balance the observed wild male-biased sex ratio for the upcoming breeding season. Eight females bred in captivity at Healesville Sanctuary, Victoria were transferred to NRE Tas' Five Mile Beach holding facilities near Hobart in early September. There they received two doses of HPAI vaccine, and will be monitored as required before being flown by light plane to the Melaleuca breeding grounds.

NEXT STEPS

Due to the threat of HPAI, on-ground management at Melaleuca may be approached differently this breeding season. NRE Tas staff are currently working through the operational requirements and will provide an update as soon as possible.

Surveys are still taking place in north-western Tasmania along the southern migratory route in mid-spring. These are occurring on the following dates:

- 10-11 October 2026 – Woolnorth
- 17-18 October 2026 – Woolnorth

The 2027 mainland survey dates have also been confirmed for the following weekends:

- 15-16 May 2027
- 24-25 July 2027
- 11-12 September 2027

To get involved, contact your regional survey coordinator. Details are listed on the [OBP Recovery Team website](#). Outside of surveys, public OBP sightings can be reported to regional coordinators or by filling out the sighting form on the [BirdLife Australia website](#).



Image 3. A female Orange-bellied Parrot showing coloured leg identification bands. Photo by Sarah Agterhuis.

Fast Facts:

OBPs (*Neophema chrysogaster*) are small parrots that primarily feed on seeds on the ground or low vegetation. 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.

Many threatening factors have contributed to the decline of the OBP in the wild. Habitat loss and degradation plus introduced predators and competitors likely drove past declines. Today, several interacting threats impact the ongoing survival of wild OBPs, including ongoing habitat degradation, reduced genetic diversity, disease, stochastic environmental events, climate change, and barriers to migration.

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

Volunteers greatly 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 additional financial support.

The OBPR is coordinated by the Zoo and Aquarium Association Australasia (ZAA), funded by the Australian Government's Saving Native Species Recovery Action Coordination grant.

