

Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Program News (January 2020)

By Toby Galligan, OBP Recovery Program Coordinator

The Orange-bellied Parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*; OBP) is one of Australia's most critically endangered species. Throughout the past decade, the number of individuals that have returned to their last known breeding location, Melaleuca, in the far southwest of Tasmania has ranged between only 17 and 35 individuals. Despite the OBP's worryingly small wild population, the OBP Recovery Team has three pieces of encouraging news to share from Melaleuca.

First, based on observation made by volunteers working for the Tasmanian Government's OBP Tasmanian Program, 23 OBPs are confirmed to have returned to the breeding site this year; and, for the first time in five years, more than half of these birds are females. An increased number of females eases concerns that extinction in the wild was imminent when as few as three females returned in previous years. Among those returned birds, 16 were born in the wild: six were first-year birds completing their first full migration and 10 were older birds completing a full migration for up to the tenth time (or perhaps more than the tenth time as one bird was banded as an adult in February 2011). Of those older birds, three were *head-started* (see definition below). The other seven of the OBPs that returned were born in captivity and released at Melaleuca as either: juveniles last autumn (four) or the previous autumn (one); or adults last spring (one) or a previous spring (one). While few birds released as adults in previous years returned this year, their offspring are among the wild-born that did return this year.

Second, the OBP Recovery Team has boosted the wild population with the release of 34 OBPs. Seventeen males and 17 females, which can be further divided into four groups, specifically: 1) *captive-bred released*; 2) *ranched*; 3) *head-started*; and 4) *head-started-and-ranched*. *Captive-bred released* birds were captive-born adults released for the first time. *Ranched*, *head-started* and *head-started-and-ranched* birds were all released after having been captured last autumn and held in captivity last winter to reduce their individual risk of mortality by removing them from the wild population during migration and winter. The difference between these three groups is in the origin of the birds and the age when they were held in captivity over winter, specifically: *ranched* birds were captive-born and were held as adults over winter; *head-started* birds were wild-born and were held as juveniles over winter; and *head-started-and-ranched* birds were wild-born and have over winter once as juveniles and once as adults. Among the 34 OBPs added to the population, nine (males) were released, three (females) were ranched, 18 (six males and 12 females) were head-started, and four (two males and two females) were head-started-and-ranched. These birds were either born or held in captivity at the OBP Tasmanian Program's Five Mile Beach facility, Moonlit Sanctuary, and Zoos Victoria's Healesville Sanctuary and Werribee Open Range Zoo.

Third, recent planned burns to enhance OBP habitat at Melaleuca are paying off, with OBP food plants abundant in the now regenerating burn area. In autumn 2018, approximately 20 ha of habitat near the current breeding site was identified as suitable for regeneration and burning was implemented by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. Researchers from the Australian National University have surveyed vegetation in the burn area every six months. An abundance of OBP food plants, such as paper daisies (*Helichrysum pumilum*) and tiny flannel flowers (*Actinotus bellidioides*), have been recorded this breeding season; and what is more exciting is OBPs have been recorded numerous times foraging in the regenerating burn area. The Tasmanian Government will continue to conduct planned burns in Melaleuca for the benefit of OBPs.

With the best female returns for several years, released birds boosting the small wild population, and productive feeding habitat at Melaleuca, the OBP Recovery Team are hopeful for a good result this breeding season.

Fast Facts:

- Only a little bigger than a Budgerigar, the OBP has bright blue, green and yellow plumage and, of course, a distinctive orange belly on adult males. This unique species breeds in remote south-west Tasmania and migrates to the Australian mainland coast for winter. Each year, OBPs cross about 240 km of sea, twice.
- The OBP is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN's Red List given its extremely small wild population, single breeding location and recent rapid decline, the cause of which is uncertain. The species faces numerous interacting threats, including the genetic, health and social impacts of a very small wild population and habitat decline in both breeding and wintering locations.
- The OBP Recovery Team is comprised of 30 people representing 23 government, non-government and community organisations. The role of the OBP Recovery Team is to facilitate coordinated implementation of the current OBP Recovery Plan and to identify and provide advice for effective conservation actions for the species.
- Conservation actions of the OBP Recovery Team are funded by organisations within the partnership as well as government and non-government organisations and private individuals supporting the partnership.