

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

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

Just as we finalise this newsletter, the recovery team has received some sensational OBP news from Victoria and South Australia. At the Western Port Bay release site, Moonlit Sanctuary (MS) staff spotted a natural migrant OBP with a small group of released OBPs; and, on Hindmarsh Island during a *Neophema* parrot identification workshop for DEW, our SA Regional Coordinator spotted two OBPs, one confirmed as a natural migrant, with a group of Elegant Parrots. While these are not the only natural migrant OBPs that have been seen so far this year (see below), they are the first sightings in these historical areas in many years. The two confirmed OBPs were wild-bred juveniles from the 2020-21 breeding season; therefore, not only are OBPs returning to their former stomping grounds, but their drive to do so is instinctive and retained in the wild population.

The OBP Recovery Team meets every April to review current recovery activities and discuss future ones. This year we met online again to avoid the unnecessary risks, expenses, and complications of interstate travel during this time. Ahead of the meeting, the various groups contributing to the OBP Recovery Plan objectives provided reports to the Recovery Team.

The Tasmanian OBP Program, delivered by DPIPWE staff and their dedicated volunteers, reported another year of population and breeding success increases. More specifically, 51 OBPs returned to Melaleuca for the 2020-21 breeding season compared to 23 in 2019-20. The 2020-21 breeding season saw 32 breeding pairs compared to 20 in 2019-20; and they produced 88 wild fledglings compared to 37 in the 2019-20. Also, DPIPWE provided a revised estimate of 192 OBPs having departed Melaleuca and an estimate of 77 OBPs expecting to survive the non-breeding season to return to Melaleuca in spring 2021.

The captive population remains healthy and large (>500 breeding birds). Healesville Sanctuary (HS) detected psittacine circovirus in their population, but they managed to limit its spread and found no parrot beak and feather disease. Five Mile Beach (FMB) increased their breeding to cover the need to pause breeding at HS, managing 48 pairs that produced 146 fledglings (both are new records for them). Breeding also occurred at Adelaide Zoo (AZ), MS and Priam Psittaculture Centre (PPC).

OBP releases continued despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on interstate travel. DPIPWE, AZ, FMB, MS and Werribee Open Range Zoo (WORZ) managed to transfer 31 adult and 50 juvenile captive-bred OBPs to Melaleuca for release. DELWP, Zoos Victoria, AZ, FMB, MS, PPC, and WORZ managed to transfer 36 captive-bred OBPs to three Mainland Release Trial sites. We thank Par Avion for making transfers to and from Melbourne and Hobart possible.

COVID-19 pandemic had a greater impact on OBP Winter Surveys in 2020 because restrictions meant that not all our volunteers could help. Despite this, our Regional Coordinators kept communities engaged via social and traditional media; and 13 confirmed OBPs were seen across coastal Victoria in 2020 compared to only 2 in 2019.

Over the last year, the Australian Government's Department of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment (AWE) lead a statutory five-year review of the OBP Recovery Plan. The review found that several recovery activities had been partially successful and overall, the wild and captive populations are in a more favourable situation than they were 5 years ago. AWE have recommended that a new OBP Recovery Plan be developed in 2021/22, which was agreed by consensus at the RT meeting. Also, at the RT meeting, we reviewed the current release strategy and decided to continue with large Spring and Juvenile Release at Melaleuca in the upcoming season and to further review the Mainland Release Trial after its completion this year.

Friends of the OBP conducted an Autumn Migration Survey near Strahan, Tasmania, this year and spotted four OBPs on their way to the mainland. To date, seven natural OBP migrants have joined flocks of released OBPs across all three Mainland Release Trial sites.

The Winter Survey will continue on the 24th and 25th of July and the 11th and 12th of September this year. If you would like to be involved, go to the Birdlife Australia OBP webpages to learn more, and connect with one of our Regional Coordinators in Victoria or South Australia (<https://birdlife.org.au/projects/orange-bellied-parrot-recovery/volunteer-in-the-winter-surveys>).

Fast Facts:

- OBPs (*Neophema chrysogaster*) 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 breed in south-western 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 actions of the OBP Recovery Program, including collecting data on the species in the breeding and non-breeding range, 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.