

Orange-bellied Parrot (OBP) Recovery Program News, April 2024

Prepared by Kerri Duncan, OBP Recovery Program Coordinator, on behalf of the OBP Recovery Team.

The 2023/2024 breeding season began with the return of 82 Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) to the Melaleuca breeding grounds by mid-December 2023: 50 males and 32 females. Confirmed by Tasmania's Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE Tas) staff and volunteers, this number continues to follow an increasing yearly trend, up from 77 last season and 70 the year before.

The OBPs at Melaleuca had a fruitful breeding season, producing a total number of 74 fledglings as of March 14th, 2024. The youngsters were raised in 21 nests out of the 33 attempted by breeding pairs, which constitutes an unusually high rate of nest failure. Despite the 12 unsuccessful nests—most of which failed at the egg stage—the high number of resulting fledglings categorised the successful nests as highly productive. Fledging success, defined as the proportion of fledglings produced from hatched eggs, was 94%; greater than the historical average of 85%.

With the breeding season now considered over, 87% of the returned birds survived until expected migration time. This is higher than last season's survival rate (77%) and within the range of previously recorded seasons (74%-96% from 2013/14 to 2022/23).

Happily, the high rates of bird disappearances recorded in the past two seasons were not seen this year. Twelve adult females (29%) were known or presumed dead at Melaleuca, which is consistent with earlier years (2013/14-2020/21). However, four adult females were found deceased in failed nests, while another was found without signs of nesting activity. This represents a higher proportion of the missing birds being found this year, rather than an actual increase in mortality.

The causes of these deaths are unknown; there was no evidence of predation. So, while the return to lower disappearance rates is positive, the unexplained losses still warrant greater understanding to avoid the risk of significant losses in the future.

The Recovery Program's five participating captive breeding institutions (NRE Tas's Five Mile Beach (FMB), Zoos Victoria's Healesville Sanctuary, Zoos SA's Adelaide Zoo, Moonlit Sanctuary and Priam Pscittaculture Centre) produced a total number of 140 fledglings this season. Of these, 40 birds (20 females and 20 males) from FMB, Healesville and Moonlit were released into the wild at Melaleuca over three release periods between January and early March. The remaining 100 birds will be maintained at the breeding facilities to provide an insurance population and contribute to future generations.

The 40 released captive-bred juveniles were first introduced to large purpose-built aviaries for a few days, allowing them to acclimatise to their surroundings and safely socialise with the Melaleuca population. When staff deemed them ready, they were released to join the wild flock, learning wild behaviours from their peers in preparation for their first migration to the mainland together. All but one survived the season (98%), which is within the usual range of survival rates for this group since 2017/18 (92%-100%).

The wild flock also included 18 spring release birds (9 males and 9 females) that were added to boost the wild breeding stock in October 2023. This brings the total estimated number of OBPs migrating to the mainland this year to 188; the second highest number in over a decade.

The mainland team was excited to report that three of these migrants have already been spotted on Victoria's Bellarine Peninsula. On April 12th, two adult males and one adult female were observed eagerly feeding on Beaded Glasswort, Austral Seablite, Southern Sea-heath and Sea Barley-grass. The two males were identifiable by their leg bands, and the female is presumed to be one of the six documented unbanded birds to have departed Melaleuca this season.

May these be the first of many sightings this year, as we continue working towards unravelling the migratory mysteries of this unique species.



Above image: A juvenile Orange-bellied Parrot stretching its colourful wing at Melaleuca, Tasmania, preparing for its first migration to the mainland. Photographed by Kerri Duncan, February 2024.



Above image: Three adult OBPs sighted on the Bellarine Peninsula on April 12th, 2024, feeding on Sea Barley-Grass stalks. Photographed by Craig Morley, April 2024.

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.

The Recovery Team comprises 30 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.