

OBP Mainland Release Trial Program 2023

Update – 16/6/2023

DEECA, Zoos Victoria, BirdLife Australia, Deakin University, Corangamite CMA, the Tasmanian Government, Parks Victoria and local landholders, are partnering to deliver the Mainland Release Trial this year, with the hope of once again having flocks of OBPs in Victoria's coastal habitats.

This year the release program involved two releases in late autumn at Lake Connewarre, with a focus on the trialling of a new type of tracking technology.

Nearly one month ago, the first group of six Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) were released, with the second group of 13 being released around two weeks later.

This year the released birds were sourced from NRE Tasmania and Healesville Sanctuary and each group spent eight days in on-site aviaries before release.



Birds exploring saltmarsh adjacent to release site. Image Madeline Chincarini.

Immediately after release, for both groups, some individuals entered the nearby Melaleuca shelterbelt and stayed there for a period of time before taking flight to explore the local area, while others flew immediately around the local area.

Using the new ATLAS tracking system (see below), we were able to see the birds explore a large area of the Lake Connewarre system and return to the release area for around three days post release.

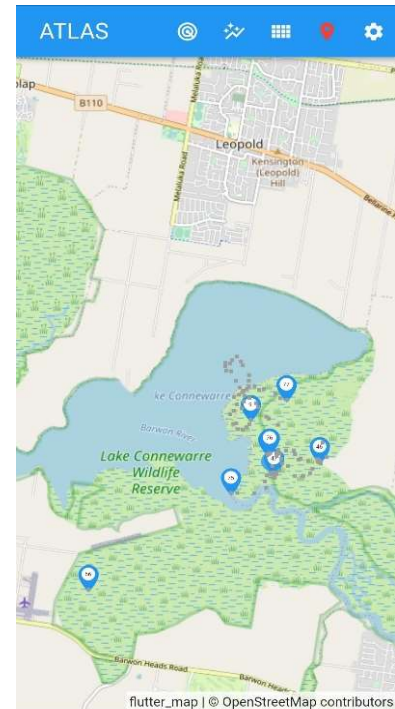
Unfortunately, one signal was tracked to an area where feathers were found under a tree and this individual is presumed to have been predated.

Currently the released birds have moved away from the release area, and transmitter batteries are now expected to have reached the end of their life. The team are expanding search efforts to cover more of the available habitat with traditional visual searches.

A primary objective of these releases was to trial the effectiveness of a new fixed-receiver-station tracking system, known as ATLAS. Four receiver stations were constructed by our partners at Deakin University and positioned around the release area (about 1.5-3.0 kms apart). Each of the 19 released birds were fitted with a 1.1g UHF transmitter mounted on the base of their tail (that will come off at latest when the bird moults). This tracking system is different to the system we used at this site in the previous two years, with the main advantages being that the ATLAS system can determine and store (i) detailed information on the location of individual birds and (ii) relay these locations to a phone app in real time.

Image on right shows example of ATLAS Tracking System phone-app output. Blue flags showing location of some birds shortly following the second release.

Image: Johanne Martens



In addition to these tracking activities, monitoring at Lake Connewarre since early April has identified three wild migrants that have been seen at this site:

- Silver Green E, a wild adult male, returning for his second year at the site, first seen on the 11th April.
- Red Gold J, a wild-born adult male, returning for his second year at Lake Connewarre, first seen on the 3rd May.
- A Gold White banded individual, part of the captive bred juvenile cohort released at Melaleuca, first seen on the 10th May.

Two previous mainland release individuals Blue E Blue (released in 2021) and Red X Purple (released in 2022) have also been observed with the wild migrants, and were both first seen on the 9th April after having not been observed since August and September last year.

These five individuals were observed visiting the second release group in the aviaries and interacting with them prior to the release.

In mid-June Red X Purple was observed to be in ill health and was brought in from the field for assessment and treatment by the Werribee Zoo veterinary team. Unfortunately, he only survived for a few more days and investigations into the cause of death are underway.

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DEECA and Zoos Victoria have committed funds and resources to the trial in 2023, along with the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (Corangamite CMA), funded by the Australian Government's National Landcare Program. The project team is working with a range of partners to implement the project.

Birds for release were supplied by Tasmania's Department of Natural Resources and Environment and Healesville Sanctuary.

We are encouraging all public sightings of OBPs in Victoria to be reported to OBP.Release@delwp.vic.gov.au.

Social media updates are being shared by Zoos Victoria and DEECA this season – so keep an eye out on each of these platforms.