

## Orange-bellied Parrot (OBP) Recovery Program News, May 2022

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

The 2021/22 breeding season has ended. Overall, it was a good year for OBPs, with nearly 100 juveniles joining the captive population, and 60 wild-fledged and 50 captive-fledged juveniles joining the wild population.

Captive breeding was relatively uncomplicated; not least because our partners involved (that is, Healesville Sanctuary, Moonlit Sanctuary, Priam Psittaculture Centre, and Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania's (NRE Tas) Five Mile Beach breeding facility) work like well-oiled machines.

Wild breeding showed mixed results: a record number of OBPs migrated to Melaleuca, but the number of nests and the proportion of OBPs remaining at Melaleuca to the end of the season were both lower than average.

We had a promising start to the season, with 70 adult OBPs (34 males and 36 females) returning to Melaleuca from the Australian mainland. This was the highest adult population size in at least 15 years. Between October and November, NRE Tas released 24 captive-bred adults (14 males and 10 females) raised at Moonlit Sanctuary and Five Mile Beach in three groups to increase the number of breeding pairs.

Observations from Melaleuca suggested 38 of the 70 (54%) OBPs that returned and 3 of the 24 (12.5%) OBPs released in spring remained in the area during the breeding season. This is very different to previous seasons: since 2013, most wild returns (over 70%) and spring release adults (over 50%) have continued to be recorded at Melaleuca until the end of the breeding season.

Data on occurrence, survival and persistence of individual OBPs is gathered through daily observations at three feed tables at Melaleuca. OBPs are attracted to the tables using supplementary seed, and volunteers identify and record each individual seen at the table. The data show that in November and December, some individuals were only being seen sporadically, which was less regular than in previous seasons. A number of individuals were not seen at all after November or December.

There are several potential reasons for individuals not being recorded at the feed tables, and at this stage we don't know for sure whether they dispersed from the area and nested elsewhere; exploited abundant wild food sources resulting from planned burns at Melaleuca, and therefore visited the feed tables less often; were missed at the feed tables as it is difficult to record every individual at feed tables, with many individuals crowding the tables; did not survive the season; or a combination of any of the above.

There were no signs of predation or health issues during population or nest monitoring that coincided with when the individuals stopped being seen, but we cannot rule out an unusually high rate of mortality from some unknown cause or causes. If individuals that were not seen at Melaleuca are detected during surveys in the migration and wintering range, it will confirm that at least these individuals dispersed from Melaleuca during the breeding season. Sightings of unbanded juveniles

during surveys would show that some OBPs nested away from the monitored nest boxes at Melaleuca. If the individuals no longer sighted at Melaleuca and unbanded first-year OBPs are not seen by the December 2022 population census, we will conclude that their disappearance resulted from mortality.

The number of breeding pairs and nesting attempts was lower than we expected, most likely because of the decline in female numbers prior to the onset of nesting. However, the success of each nesting attempt was high: 18 nesting attempts resulted in 60 fledglings. Despite the low number of nests, this was the second highest number of fledglings produced at Melaleuca since 2004. Additionally, the average number of fledglings per nest, at 3.33, was the highest in over a decade.

In late summer 2022, 50 captive-bred juvenile OBPs from Moonlit Sanctuary, Healesville Sanctuary, and Five Mile Beach were released into the Melaleuca population to increase the size of the migrating flock. With 41 returned and released adults, 50 released juveniles, and up to 60 wild-born juveniles, we expect about 140 OBPs migrated from Melaleuca at the end of the 2021-22 breeding season.

Although the outcomes this season were mixed, we know that survival and breeding success for this critically endangered species will vary from year to year. The past five years have seen steady improvements in the size of the wild population. We are confident that our ongoing management actions at Melaleuca, such as population monitoring, release of captive-bred individuals to supplement the wild population, habitat management through planned burning, and management of threats such as predation and disease, which led to the recent improvement in population size, will continue to assist recovery of the OBP. Efforts to recover such an imperilled species are necessarily adaptive, and the Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Team will continue to build on its collective knowledge and experience at every step.

OBP Winter Surveys have a green light this year and our volunteers in Victoria and South Australia may spot missing and/or unbanded OBPs in their patch. In addition, the Friends of the Orange-bellied Parrot have planned several autumn and winter surveys for OBPs in western and northwestern Tasmania. With eased COVID-19 restrictions, a relatively large number of OBPs in the wild, and the chance to solve the mystery of the missing OBPs, this is a great year to survey for OBPs. If you want to get involved, visit the dedicated [BirdLife Australia OBP webpages](#) and contact the survey coordinator in your region listed there.

#### *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. 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 has undergone a recent rapid decline. It persists as a tiny wild population, breeding at a single location. There is some uncertainty about the cause of the species' decline. Habitat loss and

degradation plus introduced predators and competitors likely drove past declines. Today, several interacting threats impact OBPs.

- The Recovery Team comprises 28 government, non-government, and community groups. It develops, coordinates, and reviews the OBP Recovery Plan. It preserves expertise and advice in OBP biology, ecology, and conservation.
- Volunteers 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 the recovery actions. Government and non-government grants and individual and corporate donations provide extra financial support.