

Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Program News, April 2020

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The Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Team (OBPRT) acknowledges the unprecedented times our society is facing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We wish all those reading this update safe passage through these challenging times, and hope the good news we have to share here brightens your day.

Both wild and captive Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) had a very productive breeding season this summer, which, for the first time in over a decade, is expected to result in more than 100 wild and released OBPs migrating north from Melaleuca this year. The OBP Recovery Team (OBPRT) is therefore cautiously optimistic about the number of OBPs that will return to Melaleuca in spring 2020.

At Melaleuca, the Australian National University (ANU) and Tasmania's Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (DPIPWE) have been monitoring OBP food plant regeneration and OBP activity in recently burnt habitat. The Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service implemented a controlled burn at Melaleuca in 2017 to specifically increase OBP food plant abundance and productivity. This breeding season, ANU and DPIPWE have recorded many food plants seeding and OBPs regularly foraging in the burnt habitat. Further, examination of nestling crops confirmed that some nestlings were being fed local wild seeds in addition to the seeds provided at feed tables.

DPIPWE recorded 20 OBP nests this season, attended by both wild- and captive-bred parents, including those that were released after being ranched or head-started (i.e., temporarily held in captivity to increase annual survival) over previous winters. These nesting attempts produced at least 37 fledglings that had the highest body condition recorded since 2013. Also, this season, DPIPWE boosted the wild population with the release of 49 captive-bred juveniles originating from the DPIPWE, Moonlit Sanctuary (MS) and Zoos Victoria (ZV) breeding facilities. This brought the number of juveniles at Melaleuca close to historic sightings of 100 juveniles in late summer. DPIPWE predicts that more than 100 adult and juvenile OBPs will migrate north this year, which is the largest number in over a decade. Given OBPs are a social species, the OBPRT hopes that a relatively large group will improve overall survival during migration and the non-breeding season.

Last year, the OBPRT participated in a recent structured decision-making process in partnership with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) which highlighted the likely cost-effectiveness of larger juvenile releases compared to other possible strategies. However, releasing a large number of fledglings was only made possible through another successful breeding season for the captive population with over 200 fledglings produced among the five captive breeding facilities last summer.

On the mainland, DELWP, ZV, MS, Birdlife Australia, Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water have been preparing for autumn mainland releases. They hope that released OBPs will establish flocks at these sites and attract migrating OBPs to suitable habitat and thereby improve non-breeding season survival in the wild population. As part of the mainland release, MS has been trialling a training method to improve the establishment of released OBPs in suitable but unoccupied sites, and ZV have been trialling satellite tracking equipment in captivity prior to field trials with mainland release birds. It is hoped that this technology will ultimately help us to better understand migration pathways, habitat use and causes of mortality in wild OBPs.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic will impact some OBP Recovery Program actions. Presently, three major activities have been impacted.

The first is the volunteer-based winter surveys for 2020, which have been cancelled until further notice to comply with government requests that people do not go out for non-essential activities. While it is disappointing not to be out looking for OBPs, we will have to trust that the birds will do what they usually do, without us looking at them.

The second is planned mainland releases and associated training and tracking trials, which are proceeding in a modified manner to comply with social distancing measures. The project team will continue to monitor updates to COVID-19 containment measures and will adjust procedures and decisions, accordingly.

The third is the annual face-to-face OBPRT meeting has been cancelled for 2020, but will be replaced with a series of online meetings to address key decision points throughout the year. All other meetings, including those of the subgroups and working groups, will be held online as well. Planned face-to-face workshops have been postponed for now.

The OBPRT are undergoing contingency planning for all program areas to identify and mitigate the potential impacts created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Program areas include wild breeding, captive breeding and releases during 2020-2021. Our contingency plans will be discussed later this month in the first online OBPRT meeting.

Despite these modifications to what we do, the OBPRT and the organisations that we represent will continue to work as best we can in these challenging times, finding smart and safe ways to implement priority recovery plan actions for the OBP.

Fast Facts:

- OBPs 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 only breed in the south-west of Tasmania within 5 km of the coast. They migrate via western Tasmania, the Hunter Island Group and King Island, and winter on the south-eastern coast of Australia. Each year, OBPs fly at least 640 km across land and sea.
- The OBP is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN's Red List and under the Commonwealth's EPBC Act 1999 because of its 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. Now, OBPs face numerous interacting threats, including the genetic, health and social impacts of a very small wild population.
- The OBPRT is comprised of 30 members representing 23 government and non-government organisations as well as community groups and experts. The role of the Team is to coordinate recovery activities, provide advice to conservation managers and review progress of Recovery Plan implementation to maximise the effectiveness of recovery program.
- Volunteers contribute significantly to the conservation actions of the OBP Recovery Program, including collecting data on the species in the breeding and non-breeding locations, 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.