

# **Autumn 2016 Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Program Summary**

## **Orange-bellied Parrot National Recovery Team**

### **Summary of reports presented at the March 2016 Meeting**

This collection of summary reports has been prepared by organisations and individuals represented on the OBP National Recovery Team to update other recovery program partners, volunteers, and the broader interested community on the recovery program. If you would like to use parts of these summaries to prepare other documents, for example media releases or articles, please contact the relevant organisation to obtain their approval for this use.

### **Overall progress of the recovery program**

Fewer than 70 Orange-bellied Parrots are known to exist in the wild. The population size has varied annually over the last five years, but remains very small. No consistent trend in population size has emerged in recent years.

Variation in population size occurs as part of the annual life cycle of this migratory bird. Most years around 50-60% of the birds that migrate north for winter, will return to breed the following summer. Each year numbers will then increase again in summer as young produced that breeding season join the population, and a number of captive-bred birds are released.

The captive population remains close to current maximum capacity, which is limited to around 350 spaces. Management of the captive population has improved the genetic quality of the population, and has allowed for release of captive-bred birds to supplement the wild population.

### **Tasmanian Wild OBP Population Breeding Season**

Provided by Shannon Troy, Rosemary Gales and Howel Williams,  
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Twenty three Orange-bellied Parrots (OBPs) returned to Melaleuca for the 2015-16 breeding season. This is fewer than recorded in the previous season, but similar to the numbers returning in the four seasons between 2010 and 2013.

Annual survival of wild adults was 0.57, which is lower than the average over the last five years but similar to the longer term average. Annual survival of wild juveniles was 0.12, which is lower than the average over the last five years and the period 1991-2006, most likely as a result of the Pbfd outbreak at Melaleuca in 2014-15.

Thirteen captive-bred adults from the Taroona breeding facility were released at Melaleuca in November 2015. All released birds tested negative for BFDV prior to release. All of the released OBPs survived the translocation, and 11 (85%) survived the breeding season (until mid-February 2016). This is a marked increase in the intra-season survival of captive release birds in recent years and points to improvements in release techniques.

Female breeding participation was high, 89% of females that were known to be alive participating. These females bred at nine nests in nest-boxes, two nests in natural habitat, and one nest from

either a nest-box or natural habitat. The higher number of nests (12) than females that participated in breeding (8) is likely to have resulted from female clutches in multiple nest-boxes. Although female breeding participation was high and the number of nests was consistent with recent previous seasons, breeding productivity was disappointing this season. Average clutch size was low (3.2), hatching success was 52%, fledging success was 47%, and breeding success was 24%. Eighteen fledglings were observed at the feed tables.

To date, 18 wild OBPs (including young and adult birds) have been tested for BFDV this breeding season, and all have tested negative.

A range of new initiatives were successfully trialed this season, including the installation of 10 nestboxes on poles. Two pole nestboxes were used by OBPs, with one pole nest box fledging three chicks. Biosecurity measures, including cleaning protocols for the feed tables were enhanced this season, in line with advice from the Veterinary Technical Reference Group. The delivery system for the supplementary food was also revised to reduce the potential for disease transmission at the feed tables.

The field program, including the daily monitoring of the OBPs at Melaleuca was conducted by DPIPWE staff assisted by DPIPWE / Wildcare Inc., Friends of OBP volunteers and a Zoos Victoria staff member. Regular DPIPWE program updates reporting the progress of the breeding season were emailed to stakeholders and interested members of the public, as well as being posted on a newly launched DPIPWE OBP Program website (<http://dPIPWE.tas.gov.au/obp>).

The contribution to the program by a range of volunteers assisting with bird monitoring and management, installation of infrastructure and data entry is most gratefully acknowledged. The program was funded by the Tasmanian State Government, the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Wildcare Inc.

### **Winter Monitoring Program**

Provided by Rachel Pritchard, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.  
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In Victoria, BirdLife Australia and Nature Glenelg Trust will partner with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to deliver the winter population monitoring program. The program is funded by the Victorian Threatened Species Protection Initiative the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority through funding provided by the National Landcare Program. The four regional coordinators will work with local volunteers and land managers to search likely habitats for OBPs in the May, July and September counts, as well as opportunistically throughout the autumn and winter period. As part of this project, BirdLife Australia is developing OBP call recogniser software to trial new automated recording devices (ARD) to assist our search efforts. ARD systems can be used to record sounds in locations that are hard to visit regularly for bird surveys. The software then searches the recorded sound files for OBP calls, allowing us to identify the presence of OBPs in locations we cannot easily monitor with traditional methods.

## Winter Habitat Review

Provided by Rachel Pritchard, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.  
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DELWP's Arthur Rylah Institute is currently undertaking a new OBP habitat modelling and mapping project, funded through the Victorian Threatened Species Protection Initiative. This project will look at what changes have occurred in the extent of winter habitat in Victoria and South Australia since the 1980s and since the last modelling project in 2009. The results are intended to help focus future survey and habitat management efforts.

This winter DELWP, along with other land managers in Victoria and South Australia, will continue to monitor the condition of OBP habitats in key locations to continue to build our understanding of the drivers of winter habitat change.

## Mainland update from Regional Coordinators

Prepared by Lauren Kivisalu, Nature Glenelg Trust – Regional Coordinator South West Victoria  
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- Orange-bellied Parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*) wintering sites in south-west Victoria span across a large geographic area, from Discovery Bay Coastal Park near the border of South Australia, to Peterborough along the Great Ocean Road.
- No Orange-bellied Parrots were observed within the region over the 2015 winter period, however a number of large flocks of the closely related Blue-winged Parrot (*Neophema chrysostoma*) were recorded at several surveyed sites.
- Engaging communities in the winter survey program continues to be a focus for the region; with a large geographic area to cover, volunteer assistance is vital. An engagement workshop was held in June 2015, which provided information on the Orange-bellied Parrot ecology and conservation, including progress in the Recovery Program, as well as identification information for the species and other locally present *Neophema* species and their key food plants.
- Assessments of habitat condition at historic sites were also assessed in 2015, with avenues for habitat enhancement such as biomass management explored.

Prepared by Bob Green - Regional Coordinator South Australia  
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- No records of OBPs were confirmed in 2015, but a sighting of four birds on the Narrung Peninsula in early July was a very strong possibility with the observer able to say he was 99.9% confident, and with the observer being the former Mainland OBP count coordinator this also added weight to the observation.
- Two training workshops were held, at Pick Swamp and Hindmarsh Island with *Neophemas* seen following both sessions helping to strengthen the newly learnt skills.
- A week long survey of the Coorong in July was worthwhile in enabling multiple surveys at the hot spots and finding good numbers of Blue-wings and Elegants, showing that it seems the Coorong is starting to recover in terms of *Neophema* habitat.
- An important point to raise is the expansion in range of Elegant Parrots, with a call more similar to OBP than a Blue-wing is and in some birds an intense orange belly being present could potentially lead to incorrect reports of OBPs, so just a heads up to be aware of this possibility. We now have a small breeding population near the SA/Vic border so SW Vic records of Elegants, I expect, will become more frequent.

Prepared by Craig Morley, BirdLife Australia – Regional Coordinator Bellarine Peninsula  
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- During 2015 there were no records of OBPs on the Bellarine Peninsula. There were also fewer Blue-winged Parrots observed and reported by comparison with the wonderful records of 230 in the Breamlea Saltmarsh and of 600+ at Belchers Lane on the edge of Lake Connewarre in late July/early August 2014.
- We continue to have strong support from volunteers and supporters of the Bellarine Peninsula Regional Group and beyond, with over 60 observers taking part in at least one of the May, July or September surveys in 2015. Many volunteers willingly participated in more than one survey. Thank you to the land-owners who willingly and kindly allow access to their land. Once more, on behalf of the Bellarine Peninsula Orange-bellied Parrot Regional Group and the National Recovery Team I acknowledge and sincerely thank the Parks Victoria officers who so willingly provide transport and expertise to get to some sites for surveys.

Prepared by Steve Davidson, BirdLife Australia – Regional Coordinator West Port Phillip Bay  
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- In 2015 all the OBP action was in Werribee (apart from a tantalizing report of four birds in the Coorong, SA by Jonathan Starks), with a total of 4 birds observed between the dates of 20<sup>th</sup> April and the 5<sup>th</sup> August.
- The four birds spent the majority of the winter together. The birds for the most part have been quite sedentary, spending most of their time feeding in saltmarsh and on pastoral weed plants.
- Three official winter surveys were carried out in conjunction with the national effort, and a hardy band of volunteers, both seasoned and new, braved the Melbourne cold in an effort to locate Orange-bellied Parrots. Over the course of the May, July and September counts a total of 43 volunteers took part; alas no birds were located. This was not due to lack of team effort or ability however, it simply happened that the birds known to be in the area over the course of the winter (as mentioned above) were for the most part inaccessible areas.

Prepared by Jon Fallaw – Regional Coordinator West Gippsland  
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- No OBPs were reported in West Gippsland. There appeared to be low food availability due to the flooding of much of the coastal saltmarsh habitat in April 2015, including back flooding of the Harmers Haven and Powlett River estuaries. Volunteer's therefore searched alternate feeding sites however no OBP's were seen despite locating a number of flocks of BWPs.
- Volunteers participated in all three winter surveys, covering the east and west sides of Western Port, Phillip Island, Bass Coast, Inverloch and Venus Bay, many hours were also spent checking at other times and chance sightings of BWPs were a particularly valuable source to target alternative feeding habitat. The July and September surveys appeared to indicate that there was low food availability close to the coast with the only flocks of BWPs seen up on Cape Woolamai and in paddocks inland from Bass. An ongoing issue is the difficulty recruiting and holding volunteers.

## **Orange-Bellied Parrot Insurance Population Update April 2016**

Provided Claire Ford, Zoos and Aquarium Association  
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The captive population continue to track well with the population increasing over the past 5 years and improvement in both the demography and genetics of the captive population; with observable increases in representation of wild-sourced genetic diversity, decreases in inbreeding and mean kinship.

Our current captive population is slightly below the 350 full capacity due to the release of 13 birds in September 2015, and unforeseen health related events in late 2015 and early 2016 which have impacted our 2015/16 breeding outcomes. Every effort has been made to resolve these events and mitigate any future risks to the captive population. Release birds were selected based on a number of factors then quarantined and tested for Pbfd prior to release.

Breeding over this season will continue to concentrate on equalising our founder representation, achieving target captive population size and providing birds for translocation into the wild. We will continue to work with all holders to provide optimal space to breed birds for release while maintaining captive population genetic and demographic targets.

### **Veterinary Technical Reference Group**

Provided by Tiggy Grillo, Wildlife Health Australia  
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In 2016, a proposal was submitted to the OBP National Recovery Team Strategic Action Planning Group, by Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) to trial the development, implementation and administration of a Veterinary Technical Reference Group (VTRG) to support and provide advice on health, disease and biosecurity related management actions and issues in relation to the broader context of the OBP National Recovery Plan. This group was established in August 2016 and the 14 members include veterinarians, veterinary pathologists, avian ecologists and virologists from universities and includes representatives from institutions, agencies and organisations currently involved in the OBP recovery program. The group has already progress a number of guidelines for the recovery program to assist in managing OBP health.

### **Recovery Plan Update**

Provided by Simon Nally, Department of the Environment.  
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The 'National Recovery Plan for the Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophema chrysogaster*' was submitted to the Department of the Environment in late 2015 and the Minister for the Environment will soon receive a brief to formally consider the recovery plan for adoption under the EPBC Act.