

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

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

The OBP Recovery Team is excited to report another year of increased return numbers: 81 OBPs arrived in Melaleuca to breed. This beats last year's record of 77, making it the greatest number of returnees in the last 16 years.

As of the census date of 15th of December 2023, NRE Tas staff and volunteers recorded 29 female, 49 male and three unknown returnees. The three unbanded birds are thought to consist of one adult male that has returned for several seasons and two first-year birds that fledged prior to banding. An additional 12 OBPs (three female, nine male) were recorded once but did not fulfil the criteria for confirmed returns.

Of the 78 confirmed banded returns, 49 fledged from nest boxes at Melaleuca and 29 fledged in captivity. The 29 captive-fledged birds were released as 20 juveniles pre-2023, six juveniles in 2023, and three adults in the spring of 2022. Approximately half of the wild-fledged OBPs (25) were over one year old, while the other approximate half (24) made their first journey back this season.

NRE Tas added to the Melaleuca flock with the release of 18 captive-bred adults (nine female, nine male) as part of their annual spring release in October-November 2023. These birds were provided by NRE Tas' Five Mile Beach breeding facility and Zoos Victoria's Healesville Sanctuary. Eleven survived the translocation (six female, five male), bringing the total number of OBPs known to be alive at Melaleuca as of the 15th of December 2023 to 92 (i.e., 81 wild plus 11 freshly released).

Breeding at the captive institutes is off to a promising start, with almost 80 fledglings already as of January 4th, 2024. There are plenty of nestlings still to emerge from their nests over the next few weeks. Early wild nest inspections at Melaleuca have also suggested a strong start to the breeding season.

Staff and volunteers continued working over the holiday season to monitor the wild population at Melaleuca, while our five captive institutes—Five Mile Beach, Healesville Sanctuary, Moonlit Sanctuary, Priam Psittaculture Centre, and Zoos SA's Adelaide Zoo—tirelessly continued caring for an ever-growing population of OBPs in breeding, holding and flight aviaries.

Captive breeding facilities will soon be busy preparing juveniles for release, while NRE Tas's field team will begin banding wild nestlings. Captive-released juveniles will mingle and learn from wild birds at Melaleuca, bolstering the population before migrating north together in autumn.



Above image: An Orange-bellied Parrot flying in to land at Melaleuca, Tasmania, photographed by Justin McManus, 2022.

Fast Facts:

OBPs (*Neophema chrysogaster*) are small ground-feeding parrots. 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.

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; and 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 recovery actions. Government and non-government grants, and individual and corporate donations, provide extra financial support.