

Update on the Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Program

An update prepared by Rachel Pritchard
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July 2012

The Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Team held their annual meeting in Adelaide in late May 2012. The meeting was an opportunity to discuss how the wild and captive populations fared through the breeding season and review progress of priority work. The Recovery Team is heartened by the continued stability in the numbers of adult birds returning to breed at Melaleuca between December 2009 and December 2011, and the captive breeding contributions from the new founders collected from the wild in 2010 and 2011.

Wild population update

The 2011/12 breeding season was again productive at the only known wild breeding site at Melaleuca. At least 22 adults arrived in spring, which compares favourably with recent years (at least 23 in 2009/10 and at least 21 in 2010/11). Of particular note, the proportion of banded adults that left Melaleuca in autumn 2011 and returned in spring 2011 (0.94), exceeded the average for the last 10 years (0.65) indicating that the wild population has had excellent winter survival. In other encouraging news, it appears that for the second year in a row, all known females at Melaleuca participated in breeding. This is an important improvement from recent years of low breeding participation.

Five nests were found in nest boxes, and three pairs were suspected to nest in natural nesting habitat based on the behaviour of three females. Some nestling losses were observed. While this is not unusual, any losses from the very small population are disappointing.

The table below outlines the minimum number of adults and juveniles observed at Melaleuca in the 2010/11 and 2011/12 breeding seasons. The numbers are a minimum estimate because not all birds in the population are banded, and the numbers of unbanded birds are limited to the maximum observed at the same time.

	2010/11	2011/12
Min. adult males returned	13	14
Min. adult females returned	8	8
Minimum breeding pairs	8	8
Female breeding participation rate	100%	100%
Fledglings from nest boxes	11	11
Min. Juveniles produced from natural nests	16	3
Total juveniles	27	14
Total known to be alive	48	36
Founders collected	21	0
Total presumed to have migrated from Melaleuca in autumn	27	36

Importantly, despite the production of fewer juveniles this year, the combination of a high return rate of birds to Melaleuca with no requirement to collect founders, has resulted in an increase in the number of birds presumed to have migrated from Melaleuca this autumn.

Recent analysis of sightings of banded birds has shown that there are definitely still some birds spending summer beyond the Melaleuca observation area. An 8-year-old male, observed early this winter around west Port Phillip Bay, was banded at Melaleuca as a nestling. This bird has been seen on the mainland over several winters, but has not been observed as an adult at Melaleuca. His breeding season location remains unknown.

While we know that it is likely a small number of birds are not sighted at Melaleuca, it is unlikely that there are large numbers and the wild population is still estimated to be less than 50 birds.

Captive population update

The captive breeding program has expanded to facilities at Melbourne Zoo, and Priam Parrot Breeding Centre (NSW). They have joined Tarooma, Healesville Sanctuary and Adelaide Zoo to increase capacity and diversify techniques to increase the population. The captive population has grown to 208 birds towards a target of 350 birds by 2016/17.

At the end of the breeding season, a total of 48 juveniles had been produced. Importantly, this was the first breeding season in captivity for the new founders collected from the wild in early 2011. The founders were shared among the three core institutions with previous OBP breeding experience (Tarooma, Healesville Sanctuary and Adelaide Zoo), and were paired with existing captive birds to begin spreading new genes through the captive population. Nineteen of 21 pairs with founders produced eggs, and across all the institutions, 31 fledglings were produced from these new pairs. This is an encouraging start to the program to introduce new genes through the captive population.

Important work for 2012

In addition to the need to continue to monitor and manage the wild and captive populations, the following strategic tasks are underway this year:

The Recovery Team is currently finalising a Translocation Strategy to guide future decision-making around the release of captive-bred birds and collection founders from the wild should these be necessary. The Translocation Group of the Recovery Team are working on a proposal to release a small number of birds at Melaleuca this breeding season, to supplement the wild population.

The new draft Recovery Plan is expected to receive Recovery Team endorsement in early August, before being presented to each government for their formal consultation and endorsement processes.