

Helping the return of the migratory Orange-bellied Parrot

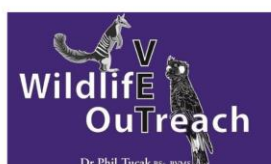


The critically endangered Orange-bellied Parrot breeds in south-west Tasmania during spring and summer before migrating across the Bass Strait to spend the cooler months in South Australia and Victoria. As part of conservation efforts to save the Orange-bellied Parrot from extinction, since 2014 Moonlit Sanctuary Conservation Park to the south-east of Melbourne, has managed a captive breeding facility for this colourful species as part of a cooperative conservation breeding program.

This is the largest threatened species captive breeding program in Australia, with over 600 Orange-bellied Parrots located across five breeding institutions. More than 300 have been bred at Moonlit Sanctuary Conservation Park, and of these over 150 have been released into the wild. Michael Johnson is the Founder and Director of Moonlit Sanctuary Conservation Park.

“As one of Australia’s critically endangered bird species, without conservation actions, including breeding and release, the Orange-bellied Parrot would likely have become extinct in the last few years,” explained Mr Johnson.

“They are one of only two obligate migrating parrots – meaning that their migration is hard-wired, pre-programmed if you like - to leave their breeding area at a fixed time of year. And they’re also unique amongst parrots for their strong association with coastal wetlands and saltmarshes.”



Mr Johnson said that in the wild, the Orange-bellied Parrot population is estimated to be about 90 individuals, which is an increase from only 17 four years ago, when the species was literally on the brink of disappearing. In Tasmania, the birds breed within five kilometres of the isolated outpost of Melaleuca in the far south of the Tasmanian Southwest World Heritage Area.

“Our captive breeding program is part of the National Recovery Program for the species which involves State government agencies, other zoo industry partners and conservation organisations. The recovery of the species in recent years appears to be as a result of the autumn release of juvenile captive-bred birds,” said Mr Johnson.

Before captive-bred Orange-bellied Parrots are released into the wild, veterinarians check release candidates for body condition, injuries, disease and pathogens.

The Tasmanian Government’s Department of Natural Resources and Environment biologists and a committed team of volunteers undertake close monitoring of the wild population and captive-bred releases at Melaleuca, including banding and testing for disease of all wild nestlings, provision of nest boxes and supplementary food.



“The continued release of captive-bred birds is vital to helping the Orange-bellied Parrot to persist in the wild, along with continued improvements to their habitat, and the creation of additional breeding locations – with only the one site existing currently,” explained Mr Johnson.

On this latter point, Moonlit Sanctuary Conservation Park has been involved in training captive-bred Orange-bellied Parrots for site retention to assist in establishing additional breeding locations away from Melaleuca. To date, captive-bred birds released at suitable alternative locations has only seen them return to Melaleuca.

Orange-bellied Parrots nest in tree-hollows and they feed on seeds, fruit, flowers and fruit of grasses, sedge and herbaceous plants that grow in the vast sedgeland plains in Tasmania, and in saltmarshes in their wintering grounds along the coast of Victoria and South Australia. Thankfully, all of the species’ breeding habitat is protected within the Southwest World Heritage Area, but more work is required to protect and expand their preferred habitats along their migratory route and wintering grounds to ensure their long-term survival.



“I think it’s critical that everyone do what they can to support the retention and restoration of wetland and saltmarsh habitats, which are vital to bird species such as the Orange-bellied Parrot. For those wanting to assist directly with the conservation effort, there are volunteer opportunities at Melaleuca each breeding season and during the winter to undertake valuable observations to better understand the survival and movement of individuals. I encourage everyone to visit and support Moonlit Sanctuary to learn about the conservation effort and so we can continue to breed more of these wonderful birds,” said Mr Johnson.

To learn more about the conservation work underway to preserve threatened species like the Orange-bellied Parrot, visit: <https://moonlitsanctuary.com.au/orange-bellied-parrot/> and: <https://nre.tas.gov.au/conservation/threatened-species-and-communities/lists-of-threatened-species/threatened-species-vertebrates/orange-bellied-parrot>



Article by Dr Phil Tucak, [Wildlife Outreach Vet](#). Images thanks to Moonlit Sanctuary Wildlife Conservation Park.

