



Trumped by Corella

The Newsletter of the
Orange-bellied Parrot
Recovery Program

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Team OBP – International Student Volunteers demonstrate their enthusiasm while they wait for local school children to arrive for a planting day

Planting Trees for OBPs *Communities Restoring Coastal Landscapes*

Rachel Sims – Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria

"When I first started this job and told people I worked on Orange-bellied Parrots, they'd respond with, 'Oh, that's a political issue'. I thought, 'No, it's a little green bird'" – Rachel Sims

With a new injection of federal funding in 2008 the OBP recovery effort in southwest Victoria found an even bigger injection of enthusiasm. Two new staff members joined the team working at the Department of Sustainability and Environment to oversee an ambitious habitat restoration project. They became known as "Team OBP". The goal was to remind people what OBPs really are and what we could do to help them. David Pitts brought with him a keen botanical eye and an excellent rapport with volunteers and landholders. Over the course of the project he also discovered he loves laying in muddy paddocks staking out parrot foraging spots. Rachel Sims brought with her a PhD in bird ecology and a tendency to say "I'm excited!" quite a lot. Over the course of the project she learnt her first lessons in on-ground habitat management.

The 2008 aims of the project included fencing off habitat to manage grazing regimes, treating hectares of environmental weeds, and planting 30,000 OBP habitat plants into largely cleared coastal landscapes. It was a steep learning curve for David and Rachel, and they received a lot of advice from experienced DSE staff and OBP experts from Birds Australia. After their first

successful planting day near Port Fairy, where 80 local school children, 20 International Student Volunteers, DSE staff and local volunteers planted 5000 shrubs, they were on their way to success!

Not only were Dave and Rach so excited by this work that they could barely calm down to sleep at night, but the local community has gained new knowledge and skills too. Local communities have learnt about the plant communities that once covered our coastal dunes and hinterland, and that they have the ability to bring these lost shrublands back. Over 700 school children and volunteers have learnt how to collect seed from indigenous plants, grow the plants, and put them into the landscape where they belong. They've also learnt about the plight of the OBP and how important saltmarshes and their hinterlands are to a range of wetland birds.

"Now children recognise me and point me out to their parents as the OBP girl they spent a fun day in the field with" – Rachel Sims

The enthusiasm and knowledge generated by the 2008 project has helped DSE secure further funding from the federal Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, the Glenelg-Hopkins and Corangamite Catchment Management Authorities to fund more work in

2009 and 2010. Team OBP is growing! Jodie Honan is working out of the Warrnambool DSE office to continue habitat restoration in the far southwest and Rani Hunt recently started in the Geelong DSE office starting a program in the Corangamite area. Between Warrnambool and Portland in the next two years Jodie, Rachel and Dave will see volunteers plant over 20,000 habitat plants a year!

As this TUC goes to press Jodie and Rachel are recovering from a hectic fortnight planting 12,000 shrubs with local and international volunteers. By the end of winter another 200 local school children will have been part of the Team OBP experience.

If you would like information on any future planting and how to get involved, please contact Rachel Sims by emailing Rachel.Sims@dse.vic.gov.au.

Funding for this project has been generously provided by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority and the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority. The Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment also makes in-kind contributions to the project.



From start to finish – students from Port Fairy Consolidated School helped DSE to grow over 30,000 OBP habitat plants in a community nursery in 2008.

'Habitat' in focus - the Coorong

Glenn Ehmke, Birds Australia

The shores of the Coorong lagoons and lakes represent one of the largest and most important environments for OBPs on the mainland. They comprise around a third of the species core non-breeding range (as predicted by the recently completed habitat models), and for years OBPs have been observed at sites like 29 Mile Crossing, Cantara, Parnka Point and the Younghusband Peninsula. In the more distant past, dozens of OBPs were trapped on islands near Salt Creek for aviculture. The demise of the Coorong (and Lower Murray Lakes) ecosystem has been much touted in recent times, but the focus has been on how the degradation is affecting species such as waterbirds, shorebirds, terns and pelicans; Coastal *Neophema* parrots have received relatively little attention.

In some ways that's not surprising, Orange-bellied, Blue-winged, Elegant and Rock Parrots in the Coorong all feed largely on samphires and other saline vegetation. So one could be forgiven for thinking that the salinisation of the Coorong may in fact have benefited coastal *Neophemas*. But there's saline and then there's hypersaline, and when salinities exceed that of seawater by six times or more, even the hardy saltmarsh vegetation suffers.

There is growing evidence though that the hydrological degradation in the Coorong is having a huge effect on OBPs and other coastal

Neophemas. We recently looked at *Neophema* numbers in the Coorong from OBP counts (your nil OBP counts being put to good use.... hint hint, return those forms!). It looks like *Neophema* numbers in the Coorong have plummeted in recent years (see below), particularly in the lower Coorong (i.e. south of Parnka Point) where OBPs have not been seen since 2005.

Year	Mean no. <i>Neophemas</i> observed on May counts	Proportion of nil <i>Neophema</i> May counts
2006	23	13%
2007	19	20%
2008	5	60%
2009	3	71%

Birds Australia recently assessed OBP habitat at around 30 sites around the Coorong for the South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage and what emerged clearly was that potential habitat in the lower Coorong is in the worst condition, with salinity (and possibly acidity) levels well in excess of physiochemical tolerance of all known OBP plants.

Large-scale dieback of saltmarsh is evident in many places and with the situation set to

worsen the question is; are OBPs facing large-scale habitat loss in a critical part of their non-breeding range?

While there's no getting away from the fact that the situation in the Coorong is dire, there may be some good news. Underground freshwater makes its way to the surface in some parts of the Coorong shoreline, and around these areas saltmarsh vegetation is flourishing, buffered from the hypersaline water elsewhere (see below).

The other positive is that all these freshwater soaks are on the Youngusband Peninsula, away

from disturbance pressures and they're already protected as part of the Coorong National Park so threats are relatively limited. Saltmarshes around these freshwater soaks may be 'oases' of potential habitat for OBPs and there may just be enough of them to keep the species going in the Coorong until some real positive action is taken to restore this system.

A number of these sites are highlighted on the new survey maps page of the website. <http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/obp>



Stark contrast: Little survives on the toxic shores on the salt encrusted lower (inset), while saltmarsh dieback is widespread in the dry, hypersaline southern Coorong Lakes.

Volunteer profiles

The Friends of French Island

There are few places in the core mainland OBP range that have more extensive areas of coastal saltmarshes than Westernport Bay in Victoria. (the northern French Island saltmarshes are up to 500m wide and stretch for more than 20 km). Each year the Friends of French Island, aided by Parks Victoria, cover selected areas of saltmarsh and paddocks around the island. There's about 70km of coastline in all, so it's a daunting task.

Over many years the Friends of French Island have done a wonderful job and have recorded OBPs at at least 10 sites around the island; with most of the records in the Tankerton, Tortoise Head saltmarshes in the south-west of the island.

Although OBP records have been few and far between in recent years, Blue-winged Parrots are often observed on French Island counts. 30 birds is the average flock size over the years, but they're not present year round. Neophemas are almost always recorded during May counts (and earlier) with the "Grass Parrots" seemingly all gone by the September count, most likely off at places like the Gurdies on the eastern side of Westernport where they are known to breed in large numbers.

French Island is a great place to do an OBP survey and keep an eye out for the even more elusive Superb Fairy-wren (they've never been recorded on the island).

The on-ground works for OBP recovery in South East South Australia

Ronald Bonifacio, Department for Environment and Heritage, South Australia

The recovery plan for the Orange-bellied Parrot identified the declining quality of their overwintering habitat as one of the primary reasons for the decline in the parrot's wild population. The reduction of this threat is the driving force behind several on-ground works in South East South Australia that is being implemented by DEH staff in Mt. Gambier. These on-ground works range from woody/grassy weed control, rabbit/pest control, to revegetation and fencing of potential habitat. All these on-ground works aim to protect, restore and enhance potential OBP habitat in the region, which hopefully will have a positive impact on the number of the parrots in the wild.

Conservation of such critically endangered species cannot be accomplished within the lifetime of one project. It is therefore critical that awareness for this bird species be increased and that partnerships be made with different stakeholders particularly that of the community. To increase the awareness of the OBP, DEH have just developed an interpretive sign (see Figure 1) that will be located in different coastal towns near sites where OBPs have been seen in the past

The OBP interpretive sign will hopefully increase the awareness of the public regarding the habitat of this species and help lessen the threat to them. Also, the bright photographs of the birds will aid in the parrot identification, which may result in better sighting and reporting whenever OBPs are in the region.

Bob Green, the OBP Working Group Regional Coordinator for South Australia, also regularly conducts OBP identification workshops which have been well attended. These workshops aim to increase awareness of the OBP as well as recruit volunteers for surveys. Some on-ground works such as the revegetation we conducted at Blackfellows Caves (June 3) also played a large role in raising awareness of OBPs. Sixteen students and two teachers from Mount Gambier High School volunteered for the planting of OBP roosting and loafing plants in the area.

The building of partnerships and continuous engagement of community groups, not for profit organisations, government institutions, academia and different environmental organisations is also crucial in sustaining



efforts towards OBP conservation. The benefit of partnerships is best exemplified by the recent rabbit control activity DEH conducted on some islands of the Coorong (May 27-29). Representatives of the Aboriginal community participated in the rabbit control activity. Likewise, the same strong partnership was seen during the opening (March 24) of an expanded nursery by the Hindmarsh Island Landcare Group Inc. (HILG), which was attended by community members, DEH staff, Conservation Volunteers Australia, Greencorps volunteers and staff of Mission Australia. The funding for the expansion of the nursery was supplied by the OBP Project and the plants being cultivated will be used to restore the parrot's habitat on Hindmarsh Island.

The same collaboration effort was demonstrated in the meeting with the Gulf of St. Vincent Working Group on March 1, 2009. The meeting was held at the University of South Australia Mawson Campus where strong student participation was observed. Such partnerships will ensure that conservation efforts for the Orange-bellied Parrot will continue beyond the life of the project.



Participants of the rabbit fumigation activity in the Coorong, involving members of the Aboriginal community.

If you would like information on any future events and how to get involved, please contact Ronald Bonifacio by emailing Bonifacio.Ronald@saugov.sa.gov.au.

These activities have been funded by the Australian Government through the South East Natural Resources Management Board.

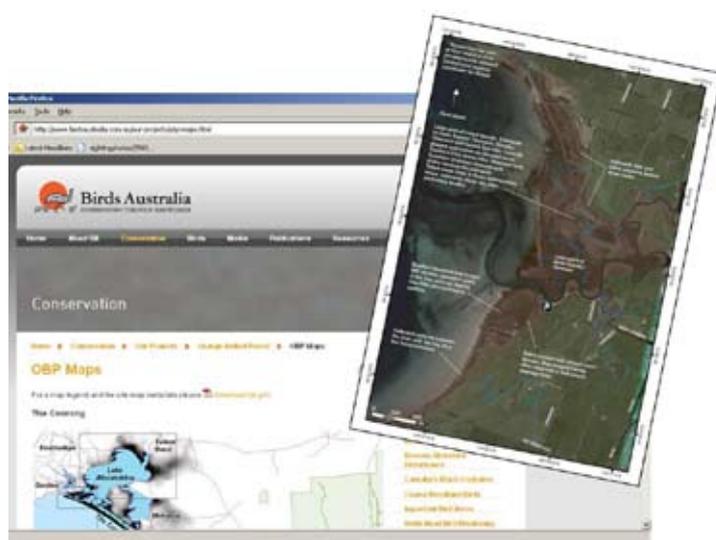
OBP Survey Website launched

It's often overwhelming turning up to an OBP survey site and trying to figure out where to start looking.

With that in mind Birds Australia and the Department of Sustainability and Environment Victoria through NHT funding Glenelg Hopkins and Port Phillip and Westernport CMA have developed a website aimed at being a one-stop shop for people to get details on exactly where to survey.

Using predictive habitat models at a broad regional scale, details of past sightings and data from fine-scale habitat analyses carried out by Chris Tzaros over the past few years the website shows the high likelihood of occurrence areas throughout the species core range in Victoria and South Australia.

You can click your way through the maps and find detailed pdf's of selected sites directing you to the best areas to survey and information on how to access the sites.



Go to www.birdsaustralia.com.au/obp

Vicki Natt - Cape Jaffa, SA

Vicki has been a long time volunteer on OBP surveys, contributing over 30 years to the conservation effort. She recently recalled her first such survey - walking from Kingston to Cape Jaffa (approx 20 km along beaches and dunes), not only being unsuccessful in finding any OBPs, but not seeing a single parrot of any description. (Something we can all relate to.)

So what has spurred Vicki on to keep looking for the elusive parrots? Apart from actually seeing OBPs during a number of her surveys, Vicki enjoys contributing to the conservation of a species and helping to understand and conserve the habitat that remains, as well as just being out there with the birds, and in the outdoors that she is so passionate about.

Vicki is also involved with a number of other conservation projects; she is the region's Malleefowl Project Officer, member of Friends of the Coorong, Friends of Little Dip CP, and Friends of Butcher Gap CP.

Thanks, Vicki, for all your contributions!

Happy 5th anniversary

Glenn Ehmke, Birds Australia

Adult female Green left/Black Y (let's call her Sally) was first seen at the Western Treatment Plant in Victoria in 2005 by observers Len Robinson, Paul Hackett and Craig Thompson. It was Sally's first trip to the mainland having been banded at Melaleuca earlier that year (Sally was progeny of a one year old female who herself had been banded at Melaleuca one year prior). Just before the May count this year we were excited to learn she had returned to the site for the 5th year straight! She has also been seen at the Melaleuca breeding grounds every year since 2005 making her one of the most well documented birds in the wild population.

Sally also has a number of good friends. Since 2006 she has returned faithfully to one patch of saltmarsh at the treatment plant (the Borrow Pits) with a number of other birds, some of whom have made the pilgrimage to the site multiple times themselves. One of these birds is an adult male OBP banded Green/Black Q (let's call him Harry). Back in March of 2005 Harry (then only a few months old) and Sally were spotted together, and long time observer Len Robinson recalls Harry squaring his shoulders to Sally (a common courtship gesture for OBPs). Harry and Sally were observed together again at the Borrow Pits in again 2006 and 2007 and band readings at Melaleuca confirm their presence there as well.

Today Harry is nowhere to be seen, but Sally still makes the journey from far south-west Tasmania to that one patch of saltmarsh at the Borrow Pits. Sometimes she is seen with other experienced Western Treatment Plant birds and encouragingly, juvenile birds are also regularly observed with the adults at the Borrow Pits.

Throughout the years, Sally has been the common thread at the Borrow Pits. Perhaps she is the great matriarch of the birds there, showing others that way to a good consistent feeding site in a world in which such habitat is ever dwindling. Perhaps we're humanising a bit too much, but it's a nice thought anyway, and not impossible.

Regional working group activities in Port Phillip Bay have been funded over a number of years by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust through the Glenelg Hopkins and Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authorities and the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Green/Black Y (Sally) with her friends foraging in Beaded Glasswort and Austral Sea-blite saltmarsh in May 2009.
Photo Geoff Jones.



OBPs visit the Borrow Pits early in the non-breeding season. They are always gone by the end of July once the Austral Sea-blite and Beaded Glasswort they feed on has finished seeding. That leaves the big question of where they go after this? None of the birds observed at the Borrow Pits have ever been seen elsewhere on the mainland....

A health scare occurred in the winter of 2006, when Chris Tzaros observed a small amount of blood oozing from either Sally's nostril or her beak. There is uncertainty as to what caused this but she was observed over the following days without any trace of blood and in seemingly good health. Photo Chris Tzaros



New Accommodation for Captive Bred OBPs

Jocelyn Hockley, Senior Keeper, Department of Primary Industries and Water

With the rapid approach of the breeding season we thought that it was time to give you an update about the OBP Captive Breeding Program. There are currently 46 breeding pairs of OBPs held in captivity at three facilities across South-East Australia. Adelaide Zoo has several pairs housed in off limits breeding facilities as well as several post-breeding birds on public display. Healesville Sanctuary, outside of Melbourne in Victoria, also houses about 18 pairs in an off display breeding facility as part of their endangered species programs. They also display OBPs to the public in one of their exhibit aviaries where visitors can observe the birds and learn about their plight. The remainder of the captive population is housed at the Department of Primary Industries and Water (DPIW) Wildlife Conservation Centre outside Hobart.

The last 12 months has seen a lot of activity in the program, most of which has not been from the birds. Federal funding was secured that enabled the 2 main holders of captive birds (Healesville and DPIW) to construct new aviaries for housing their OBPs. In July of 2008 construction of 2 new complexes, each consisting of 12 aviaries, began at the DPIW Wildlife Conservation Centre. The design for the new aviaries involved consultation with a variety of experts including avian vets, private aviculturalists, keepers from all 3 institutions and commercial parrot breeders. One of the main factors considered, particularly for Healesville Sanctuary, was the extreme heat conditions often experienced during the breeding season and the effect it

has on chicks in the nest. The new aviaries were therefore constructed with a double roof that allows circulation of air over the aviaries to assist in keeping temperatures down. They will also be easier to clean with concrete floors instead of the old sand and gravel floors the old aviaries had.

The captive birds are usually paired with their mates in October. The pairing of birds is chosen by a studbook keeper and is based on achieving the best genetic variation possible. We were hopeful that the new DPIW aviaries would be finished on time, but, unfortunately this was not the case, and we were forced to pair half the birds in the old facility so that we did not completely miss the season. Construction of the aviaries finished in late November and the remainder of the pairs were immediately moved in. The new aviaries are noticeably cooler than the old facility and breeding did occur, even with the late start to the season. It is planned that all breeding pairs will be housed in the new aviaries for the 2009/10 season. Construction has begun on the new aviaries at Healesville, and it is expected that they will be completed in July/August just in time for the next season.

Overall, we bred 50 chicks last season. Once we have added to the captive population to increase it to 50 breeding pairs and replaced birds that are being retired from the program, we hope to have about 30 birds to release into the wild later this year.

Stay tuned for more updates on captive breeding in upcoming issues.

Articles Wanted

We are interested in your experiences! If anyone has any stories, poems, photos or other items of interest for the next issue of "Trumped Up Corella" please contact Bob Green on 0407 649 909 or email: shriketit@bigpond.com.

Surveys

For more information on the OBP project and details of how to get involved with surveys please visit www.birdsaustralia.com.au/obp for details of your regional coordinator.