



Orange-Bellied Parrot

Neophema Chrysogaster

The orange-bellied parrot is a migratory bird, which breeds only in Tasmania and spends the winter in coastal Victoria and South Australia. On the brink of extinction, the orange-bellied parrot has been ranked as one of the world's rarest and most endangered species.

Why is it endangered?

Orange-bellied parrots are endangered because they are so rare (only 200 birds remain) and their habitat is continuing to disappear. The wild breeding population is estimated to be approximately 50 pairs. They only breed in Tasmania's southwest and rely on the buttongrass plains for their food.

Their overwintering habitat is restricted to coastal saltmarsh in Victoria and South Australia. This habitat, although well protected, has declined and is often degraded. Rabbits and stock have damaged these areas.

The loss of this overwintering habitat and changed burning patterns in their breeding habitat has had a big impact on these birds.

Why is buttongrass so important?

The orange-bellied parrot is a migratory bird, which breeds in Tasmania and spends the winter in coastal Victoria and South Australia.

Its breeding distribution includes most of coastal southwest Tasmania — west of the Ironbound Range on the south coast, including Port Davey, Bathurst Harbour and north to Macquarie Harbour. It nests in hollows in eucalypt trees which grow adjacent to its feeding plains. In early October the birds arrive in the south west and depart after the breeding season, usually in March and April.

The orange-bellied parrot breeds in areas of extensive coastal buttongrass plains, where it prefers a low lying, poorly drained habitat. It feeds on the seeds of several sedges and heath plants, including buttongrass. Its main food preferences are found in sedgelands which have not been burned for between 3-15 years. Also included in the diet are seeds of three *Boronia* species and the everlasting daisy *Helichrysum pumilum*.

The orange-bellied parrot mates for life, occupying a nest for up to five years. Presently 40-50 pairs each lay up to 6 eggs each breeding season.

When the parrots migrate, the flight across Bass Strait can be hazardous, especially for the juvenile birds who seem to cross unaided in a separate flight from the adults.

Movements

After breeding, migrating birds move gradually northwards up the west coast, through the Hunter Group and King Island in Bass Strait and on to the mainland. On the journey the birds usually feed on beach-front vegetation including salt tolerant species such as sea rocket *Cakile maritima*. They also eat various coastal native and introduced grasses.

Most birds winter in Port Phillip Bay and southeast South Australia. On the north coast of the State, on King Island and in Victoria birds primarily feed on seeds of various plants which grow in the saltmarshes, in particular beaded and shrubby glasswort. In South Australia they feed along beaches and nearby vegetation taking the seeds of sea rocket and buzzies.

What does it look like?

The orange-bellied parrot is approximately 20 cm long, a little larger than a budgerigar. Its plumage is bright grass-green above and mostly yellow below with a bright orange patch in the centre of the lower belly. It has a bright azure blue patch on the outer wing and a blue bar across the forehead above the nostrils.



The first view of the bird is usually when it is flushed from the ground, calling sharply. It calls as it flies away and on most occasions when it is seen in flight. It appears quite sleek as it flies in a dipping or undulating manner.

The 'alarm' call is given when the bird is disturbed or upset. It is a harsh, rapidly repeated 'zit-zit-zit', usually given whilst the bird is rising from a perch or the ground. In level flight, a single 'tseet' note is given each time it dips.

The call is one of the surest methods of identification as the appearance of the plumage often varies according to the light.

A similar parrot

The blue-winged parrot is very similar to the orange-bellied parrot. It is generally the same size and shape, but the green of the upper parts are more olive than bright green. The blue patch on the wing is very much larger and covers almost half the width of the wing. The 'alarm' calls of the blue-winged parrot are much less harsh, more of a tinkling call and the flight call is a double syllable call, 'sl-eet'.

Distribution is also a helpful guide. In southwest Tasmania it is the orange-bellied parrot which is most likely to be seen — the blue-winged parrot is quite rare. Elsewhere in the State the orange-bellied parrot is far rarer than the blue-winged parrot.

The only other bright parrot to be found in the southwest is the ground parrot. This parrot is larger than the orange-bellied parrot (300 mm). When disturbed, it flies swiftly just above the ground before dropping back into the vegetation again. It lives on the ground, never perching, and is silent in flight.

Threats

Since European settlement the orange-bellied parrot has had to cope with the loss of saltmarsh habitat through fire and clearing, the introduction of other seed-eating birds such as sparrows, goldfinches and greenfinches and competition with the native blue-winged parrot. Predators such as foxes and feral cats have also taken their toll on the population.

What's being done?

Regular counts are undertaken during winter when the population is least mobile. Winter counts are useful in helping to locate banded birds and determine their annual use of habitat. It is estimated that two thirds of

the population winter in Victoria, principally on Port Phillip Bay and the remaining third further west to South Australia. The rate of breeding is recorded in southwest Tasmania. Since 1986, nearly 200 young have been reared to independence. Over 50 captive bred parrots have been released. Many have successfully bred and some have returned to Tasmania in subsequent years.

Over the past 12 years two recovery plans have been implemented for this parrot and a third is being prepared for 1997. The recovery teams include wildlife authorities of the three range states and bird conservation organisations.

These are funded by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency. Some recommendations include:

- The protection of existing habitat from destruction and detrimental development, especially of mainland Australia.
- Protection of the bird from predation throughout its range.
- Habitat management to ensure maximum food resources are available.
- The management of other suitable habitats to provide for an expanding population.
- The establishment of a captive breeding and release program to boost the wild population.

Can I see an orange-bellied parrot?

For bushwalkers and those who are able to fly into the Tasmanian southwest, there is a good chance of seeing orange-bellied parrots. At Melaleuca a bird hide has been built especially for observing the birds. From mid-October until the end of March, the birds are regular visitors, coming and going throughout the day. However the best times to see them are in the early mornings or late afternoons. There are two bushwalkers' huts with room for up to 20 people.

How can you help?

During the summer the Parks and Wildlife Service run a volunteer warden system to obtain banding information and make regular orange-bellied parrot counts. If you are interested, telephone the Nature Conservation Branch.

Contact

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