



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia

Report

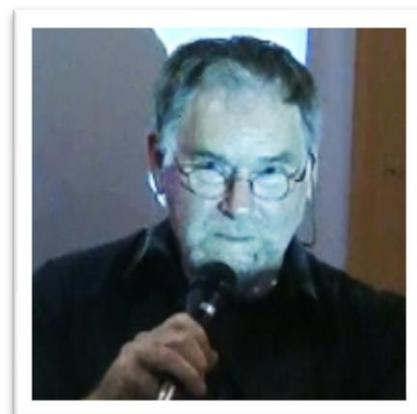
The Orange-bellied Parrot Captive Management Group Meeting (held in the Board Room at Melbourne Zoo 4th December 2012)

Presented by Graeme Phipps

(Avicultural Society Meeting - December 2012)

I flew down and attended the meeting because I was invited to do so and because they want avicultural involvement in the programme. I was a little bit disappointed in that I was invited to represent NSW and there were supposed to be avicultural representatives from the range states, namely someone from Tasmania, someone from Victoria and someone from

South Australia. In realistic terms they are a bit marginal about the breeding of Orange-bellied parrots in NSW. But I was the only one there. So part of what I did immediately afterwards was to ring up the others and say “look, when you’re asked to be there, you have got to be there – we have got to come forward and be involved”.



It was a very, very interesting meeting. About 17 people attended the meeting and it was very evident that they have been doing a lot of work. They have got geneticists, they’ve got researchers, and the list goes on and on; and then of course the people that are holding them – currently in zoos, etc. There are slightly over 200 birds in captivity and I think it’s about 36 or something like that, that are left in the wild. So they are not in a good way in the wild.

The most recent results of the captive breeding programme have been extremely good and that is a function of them catching so many of the remaining birds and putting them into captivity. They have finally realised that there is just not enough genetics. The birds that they had in the programme are too inbred and there isn’t anyone at this meeting that wouldn’t agree that you are not going to get good results if the stock is too inbred. So the big spike that has just been happening is the function of all that new genetic vigour that has just been brought into the programme.

In some ways it is a little too early, just slightly early, for significant avicultural involvement – which is people having them in their aviaries. Because where the programme is at, at the moment, is they are trying to reinforce what is called MK (“mean kinship”). When you do any of these programmes you can’t do everything. You have got to decide what it is you are going to be focusing on genetically and you can’t focus on everything all at once. So at the moment they are focussing on “mean kinship” values and to obviously limit inbreeding. So what that means is that they are focussing very much on “forced mating”. That is they need that bird to breed with that bird. They must harvest those genes. Now that is easier said than done.

The two main programme areas are Healesville Sanctuary and Tarooma in Tasmania, and they are doing very well. However what the programme is going to require is something like 340 spaces. So it is a bit akin to the Tasmanian Devil programme. They need hundreds of spaces and it is more than what the zoo community can ever expect to be able to deliver on.

The outcome of having the birds is to release all surplus birds to the wild. That in itself is going to be a major problem because they have noticed that some of the birds that have been released haven't done too well, with goshawks for example. They don't know that with goshawks if you just stay down low to the ground and don't do anything, you will be okay. So if you fly up, you are gone. So that is okay, there is still plenty of stuff we can be doing around this. We can be a part of producing the birds and then they have got to be made fitter for the release. That means they will be going into pre-release fitness camps and training camps, because you can train animals to recognise predators, etc.

I know Michael Johnson very well, who runs the Moonlit Sanctuary Wildlife Conservation Park out of Melbourne at Pearcedale on the Mornington Peninsula. That site is the only one that I know of that is right smack bang on top of Orange-bellied Parrot territory. When we were doing up the aviary with my indigenous keepers when we went down there in September, I was able to get a wheelbarrow and just go down the road about 400 metres and physically collect Orange-bellied parrot habitat and put it in the aviary. Michael is only allowed to have display birds. Now I am saying, no, he should have breeding birds, because he is right on top of it – and surprise, surprise, at the end of the day, guess who deletes from the programme but Melbourne Zoo and Adelaide Zoo, who don't want to breed anymore but they want to only display birds for advocacy reasons. So straight away, Michael said “well, why don't I get their breeding stock now, and like the sooner the better if they are not going to really do anything, and they can have my display stock?” So there's a lot going on.

Having a quick look at the Agenda, they have Breeding Season Updates and Stock Take, and I was delighted that things are much better than what I had thought they were. They talk about Husbandry Matters and the Captive Management Plan which is a cracker! It is a really good Captive Management Plan. It lacks Annual Report and Recommendations at this stage but the person that wrote the plan said she is going to provide them shortly.

Also on the Agenda is Quarantine Requirements and Psittacine Beak and Feather disease, and man was that going to be a major, major circuit breaker, or more the opposite if you know what I mean! These vets started getting into hyperspace about it! One of the papers which I read in detail (it is a very thick paper), was on [Threat Abatement Plan to do with Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease](#), but guess what? It was written in 2005 which is seven years ago! So my concern was – well what has happened in seven years? I mean how can you write a plan but not actually do any of it?

Part of it was to do with vertical transmission. That is if you took the eggs and put them in incubators off birds that have got Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease would the offspring have it? And partly from this, did it go vertically? Then someone reckoned (and it's in the paper) that no, it could have been horizontally transmitted. I said “well that was done seven years ago so surely someone knows the answer to that by now?” I mean how can they not?

Anyway they were going to come up with all sorts of really draconian quarantine requirements and I made the point that anything that is like that will substandardly exclude aviculture. Zoos don't maintain their collections at that standard. I am very well aware of the zoo standards and they don't operate like that, because you have got an ambience. In any case the disease is in the birds, in the wild, so you have got to work out what would be the risk posed by having Orange-bellied parrots say in your aviaries, in terms of you then giving them back to the programme but they might have contracted Psittacine Beak and Feather disease from somewhere?

So I think there are a couple of steps along the way.

For example we have got to get the involvement of the avicultural people in the range states and I'm already doing that.

I think what we have got to do straight away is to relate to the existing people that are in the programme. Daniel Gowland has got some Orange-bellied Parrots in Priam and I am glad that he has because he is already doing some of this work that hasn't been done yet. Work that should have been done years ago like reviewing diet, doing that egg stuff that they do at Priam, and also he is keeping them in, guess what? Suspended cages! Because if you are going to be keeping 300 and something birds you can't be keeping them in these million dollar setups like those that Healesville Sanctuary has - you know with air-conditioned nests boxes and all that kind of thing. So I think that step one for us is to relate to the current work that is being done, such as the work at Priam and support what they are doing because it's going to help us to know how to keep Orange-bellied Parrots best. I think that the way they are going about it is better than how some of the others are going about it so far. The Victorians should help Moonlit Sanctuary. It is only a small place and I think that what they should do is not go for a grant and build some Taj Mahal like Healesville has, but to build something that would relate to us - something that will trial that level of technology.

If ever you go to Devil Ark and look at what happens with the Tasmanian Devils (and that is a winner), that is where you will see the large scale cheaper ways of doing things and that is when they got their big step forward with the Devil programme. While they were keeping them all in little tiny pens at the back of the zoo they really weren't getting very far.

So then they went on with research projects which I was impressed with, but most of the research projects were opportunistic ones that were dropping out of the programme itself. What I was concerned with was that this is a critically endangered bird. This means that the next step on its projector is extinction itself and yet the programme doesn't have a Population and Habitat and Viability Assessment (PHVA) workshop done on it. Indeed you will remember when I gave you that paper earlier in the year on Threatened Species in Australian Aviculture, and so many animals are so critically endangered, and yet they do not get even that most basic of workshops done. So I did bring that up and I said that in my view, the very next thing you need to do, like yesterday, is a PHVA workshop because that is going to identify a model. Then we can identify what our role is going to be. We can say oh okay, well we can do this, this and this. It is also going to inform what research really needs to be done. Because you don't want to be doing all this research (holds up paper) which is fair enough and it is good, but you don't want to be flipping around and doing that and find that actually it is not sensitive to the Orange-bellied parrots needs, and there is other research that is absolutely essential and critically needing to be done that hasn't been done because no one knew that it needed to be done. So you have got to deal with that modelling workshop to know exactly these things.

That was accepted.



Then they had the Wild Population and Action Plan updates.

I was successful in getting their agreement to upload the Husbandry Manual as a Wiki and that will then mean that everybody is able to contribute to the programme directly. So that is quite a step forward. So if you have got any questions I don't mind fielding them.

It was a most interesting meeting and I was concentrating all day on it. It was so intense. I had some meetings after that but I was not really at those meetings, I was at the Orange-bellied parrot meeting. Everything kept spinning around in my head. It is amazing how much work they have been doing on this parrot in the last 15 years plus, e.g., the data and that sort of thing. It is a classic case that you can have a lot of data, etc., but “meanwhile back at the ranch” a lot of it is going down the tube. So I do hope very much (and I believe that Orange-bellied parrot does have a hope actually), but it has only got a hope if they do things in a tried and true manner which is to run those PHVA workshops, make sure that the modelling is going to work well, and that they are not doing things that are not going to make any difference at all, and then definitely to have those kind of numbers (340 spaces) which is what some of their modelling already shows. They must have the involvement of the avicultural community if they have any hope of buffing that up and how we do that is going to be a little bit of a challenge. However it is the sort of thing that we are going to do really well at. We have done well with Neophemas and I think we should be quietly confident of doing well with these Neophemas as well.

Questions and Comments:

Ian Ward: David Martin kept Orange-bellied Parrots years ago.

Graeme Phipps: Where did he keep them? Near the coast?

Ian Ward: No, at Guildford.

Graeme Phipps: When I was at Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney I had a skin in the museum which was the most northerly record of the Orange-bellied Parrot. It was shot at Long Bay in 1880 something. So they did fly up that far north.

Ian Ward: I think there was one found out at La Peruse a few years ago too.

Graeme Phipps: I thought we would only do well with them mainly on the coast because they really don't like heat. The Orange-bellied and Kakarikis and Swift Parrots are in the same basket in a sense.

The analogue is not Rock Parrots by the way. I thought that it would be, but it is not. It is Blue-wings. So if anyone wants to really get into the programme in anticipation of it, get into Blue-wings. How available are Blue-wings?

Member*: There aren't very many.

Graeme Phipps: Why? Do they not do well in NSW or are they not all that popular anywhere anymore? Because some of what they need to do is analogue work using Blue-wings as surrogates and work like that. One of the immediate steps for aviculture, that I want, is for them to give up some of the birds that they have already written off and let us surrogate them. There are some where the parents are pluckers and they just cannot get the chicks out. Because of this I suggested that they give the eggs to Priam, or surrogate them under Blue-wings, but everything needs to be considered very carefully because we can't afford to lose any.

Member*: With blue-wings now, the Blue-wing mutations are popular. That's what they have been breeding.

Graeme Phipps: Blue Blue-wings?

Member*: Yes, blue Blue-wings. A lot of people are putting the Blue-wing eggs under Red-rumps because the Red-rumps are better parents.

Graeme Phipps: Maybe we need to be putting Orange-bellied parrot eggs under Red-rumps?

Member*: Yes, they rear most of the Neophemas.

Paul Henry: What about Budgies as well? I had a friend that was breeding Scarlets and he put eggs under Budgies. I know that for about two weeks they were still okay. I don't know if they finished up rearing them. Would some of the Budgerigars rear them?

Bruce Bradford: I don't think so. It's a battle for them to breed themselves.

Graeme Phipps: Yes, some of the show budgies today are big birds, much bigger than the bush budgies. You are talking about the big ones aren't you?

Member*: Budgies will sometimes throw out the young ones, they are sometimes totally unable to feed them, and they will let them die.

Graeme Phipps: So there is a behavioural thing straight away.

Okay, well it is good for us to be thinking about this and open this up for further input because obviously at this stage the avicultural coordination is going to be from us until the others get on board; which of course they need to. They were invited to be at the meeting and they should have been there.

Member: How does the Orange-bellied Parrot relate to the Elegant Parrots? They look similar.

Graeme Phipps: They certainly do.

I happened to be down at the Werribee Sewerage Farm to look at Orange-bellied parrots (this was years and years ago), and there was this Elegant Parrot flying around. I was surprised but thought, well maybe it is within range or maybe it is an aviary escapee. I was following the Elegant and then it dropped down into the Sarcocornia (the plant that they all eat), and it dropped down into a mixed flock of Blue and Orange-breasted Parrots. If I had had a good camera I had three Neophemas just in the one shot. It would have been a good photo.

However, I think you are right, I think we could look at Elegant Parrots as well. They fly with Blue-wings. That is why the Tasmanians are interested in the Blue-wing as a surrogate because they are available and they have got them. It is a good point and aviculturally we should go with whatever works. That might be Red-rumps or it might be Elegant Parrots as well.

So we had better open up a little think tank on it and start planning our future involvement and how that might work.

Some aviculturists have been pretty rude to them really, saying things like - you guys don't know what you are doing, etc., etc., just give us the rights and we can breed them. A lot of it has been due to the incredible inbreeding of the population, they just weren't going to give them to anyone anymore and then of course it turns out using modelling that they definitely had to get more birds. So now when we are asked to be involved, may we be involved, and may we not be like zoos that just talk about it but they are not going to substantially be able to offer any spaces, etc.

**Where it was unclear who asked the question the question or response has just been recorded as from a "Member".*

Summing up

These meetings will be held at least twice a year. I have got to co-ordinate this and I have started by sending a couple of papers to the Veterinarians that were involved. One paper on Quarantine in Translocation which I teach in my course and one on the Closed Aviary Concept that Brian Spears wrote, that you may already know about. My point is that if there are high quarantine requirements, we are all ready doing this sort of thing and I want you to look at that and tell me why yours would need to be any higher than that, because I don't believe they need to be. I also made it clear that if that is the risk, then there is another risk. The other risk is that if aviculturists aren't involved and then you lose the parrot, what is the gain for the parrot?

The ASNSW invites all readers of this article who would like to comment or put forward suggestions in relation to any of the above, to write to us or send us an email (details on our 'Contact Us' website page).

The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW): <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org>

Membership Secretary: PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia

E-mail: aviculturalsocietynsw@yahoo.com.au

Join us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AviculturalSocietyNSW>

Follow us on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/AvicultureNSW>

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the Avicultural Review and/or on this website do not necessarily represent those of the Avicultural Society of NSW. No responsibility is accepted by the Society, the Editor, the author/s, Webmaster and/or Administrator/s for the statements, opinions and advice contained herein. Readers should rely upon their own inquiries in making any decisions relating to their own interests.