

## THE ORANGE-BELLIED PARROT IN TASMANIA

by DAVID MILLEDGE\*

The Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophema chrysogaster* is one of Australia's rarest parrots, being listed in the *I.U.C.N. Red Book: Wildlife in Danger* (Fisher, Simon and Vincent 1969). Its present distribution (notably breeding range) and movements are not well understood owing to its scarcity and also to confusion in the literature, particularly in some recent publications. Forshaw (1969) gives the best treatment of the bird's distribution, status and movements, although I do not agree with some of his speculations. Eastman and Hunt (1966) describe the Parrot as rare and show its distribution in Tasmania confined to the northern half of the State, including King Island and the Furneaux Group. Lendon (1968) more accurately summarises its present-day range and for Tasmania states, "it has been widely but sporadically reported, mostly along the northern and western coasts." He also records the parrot from King Island but not the Furneaux Group. Forshaw in Slater (1970), as in his own work, depicts the bird as occurring all around the Tasmanian coast and also on King Island and in the Furneaux Group.

The Orange-bellied Parrot is known to winter in coastal areas from Salt Creek in south-eastern South Australia (Glover 1968) through western and central Victoria to the western edge of Port Phillip Bay (Jarman 1965, Lendon, Forshaw)—see map 1. Jarman states "it is absent from its mainland haunts from November until March" and poses the question "obviously the bird is breeding, but where?" However, Condon (1969) says of its distribution in South Australia "... coastal islands (breeding)", on the basis of a report, by a local fisherman, from the Baudin Rocks, off Robe. Unfortunately Condon (pers. comm.) has no additional information on this record.

The original theory was that the Orange-bellied Parrot migrated to the Australian mainland from Tasmania after breeding. This has been rejected by Forshaw on lack of evidence, as he was not aware of recent

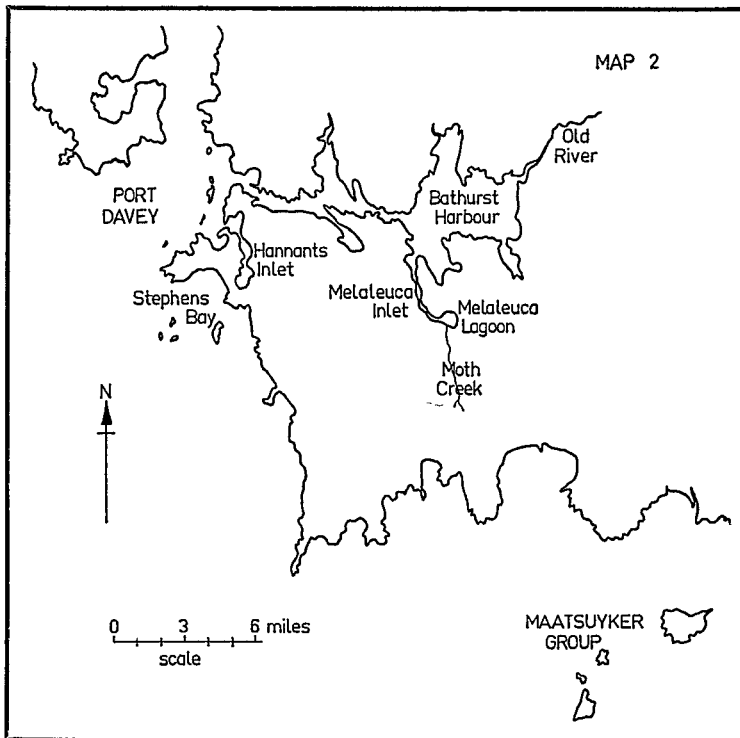
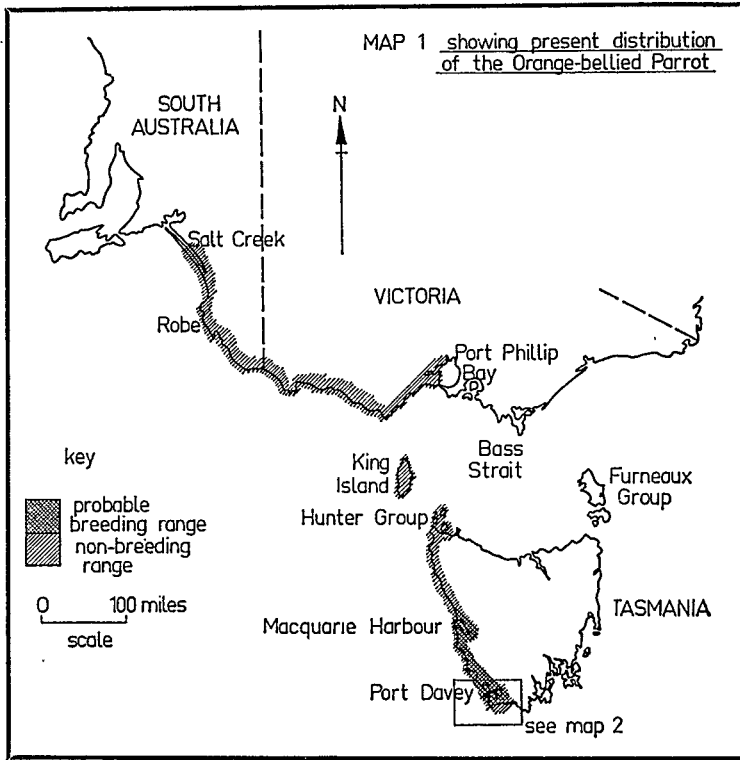
records from Tasmania in summer. However, my observations, together with several other recent reports, support the earlier argument.

During the years 1966, '67, '68, and '69 I spent about three weeks each summer at Port Davey in south-western Tasmania. On these visits in December and January I was able to observe numbers of Orange-bellied Parrots in the area. Sightings were of single birds, pairs and small groups of up to six. The Parrots were seen about Melaleuca Lagoon and Inlet, the Old River area, at Hannants Inlet and near Stephens Bay (see map 2).

The vegetation of Port Davey is classed as sedgeland (Jackson 1965). This consists mainly of dense, matted tussocks of Button-grass *Mesomelaena sphaerocephala*, which grows from one to six feet in height and forms pure stands on the wet, peat plains along the coast and in valley floors. Button-grass plains are the favoured haunt of the Ground Parrot *Pezoporus wallicus* in Tasmania's south-west and also, at least about Port Davey, of the Orange-bellied Parrot. At Melaleuca Inlet I frequently flushed pairs of Orange-bellied Parrots from Button-grass close to the edges of creeks. When disturbed, they rose high in the air giving their peculiar and characteristic, almost mechanical, buzzing call and invariably flew out of sight. On several occasions I was able to view the parrots at close quarters while perched and there was no doubt as to their identity. The overall impression was of a small emerald-green parrot with yellow-green lower breast and belly, cobalt-blue wings and an electric-blue frontal band. I was only able to pick out the orange belly patch when the birds were in flight.

From discussions with local resident Denis King, it is apparent that Orange-bellied Parrots are regular summer visitors to the Port Davey area. They evidently arrive in September and leave again in February. This is obviously the species referred to by Green and Mollison (1961), but wrongly listed as the Blue-winged Parrot *Neophema chrysostoma*. To my knowledge, the Blue-winged Parrot does not occur on Tasmania's west coast or in the south-west.

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Although I spent much time searching, especially about Melaleuca Inlet where the birds were most commonly seen, I was unable to find any nests. In fact, the only evidence of breeding activity was that most Parrots were in pairs. I saw no immatures. Possibly my visits were too early to detect breeding.

In an effort to locate breeding Orange-bellied Parrots, in February 1971 I visited the Maatsuyker Group Islands which lie a few miles offshore to the south of Port Davey (see map 2). Several writers have suggested that the parrots may nest on offshore islands but I could find no evidence of this in the Maatsuyker Group. I failed to sight a single bird; and after discussion with the families who man Maatsuyker Island Lighthouse, it seems that the parrot is only a casual visitor to these Islands. Admittedly there are many other islands off the south-west coast, but I consider that if the Parrot nested regularly on any of these, there would be a few definite records. The offshore islands of Tasmania's south-west receive, from fisherman, more attention than the adjacent coast. Probably the Orange-bellied Parrot nests as solitary pairs along the western and south-western Tasmanian coast from Macquarie Harbour to Port Davey. This assertion is made on the evidence that there are few summer records north of Macquarie Harbour (see map 1). Whether the species nests in trees or on the ground is still open to speculation, but, as all the old records are from tree sites (Forshaw), it would be surprising to find any on the ground. There is no great shortage of suitable nest holes in the south-west as *Eucalyptus simmondsii* provides these and is well distributed in the area.

The Orange-bellied Parrot is at present restricted in its Tasmanian distribution to the western part of the State. There are no recent records from central or eastern Tasmania. It certainly does not occur in the Furneaux Group—the only *Neophema* parrot recorded for this area is the Blue-winged Parrot *N. chrysostoma*, which is a rare visitor (only two certain records to date). Lack of competent resident observers in the west, and the extremely remote and rugged nature of the region, are probably the reasons for the very sporadic reports of its presence there. Recent records from visiting observers are:—one bird near Strahan, June 1956 (Sharland 1958), another single bird near Strahan, April 1970 (Wheeler 1970) and several near Marrawah, January 1970 (Ian Abbott, pers. comm.).

Summarising, I would treat the Orange-bellied Parrot as follows—

distribution: south-western, western and north-western Tasmania, King Island, coastal central and western Victoria and coastal south-eastern South Australia.

status: very rare, population at present probably static.

movements: breeding in south-western and western Tasmania and migrating to the Australian mainland via far north-western Tasmania, probably the Hunter Group Islands and King Island (McGarvie in Jarman). The parrots leave Tasmania in February-March, returning in September-October. Possibly small numbers winter in Tasmania and on King Island.

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