

2021 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release Update #1

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group),

It is a pleasure to be writing to you all with the first update on the 2021 Regent Honeyeater captive release.

We would first like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land whose country we have had the privilege of walking on for this release – the Wonnarua people. This project would not have been possible without the partnership forged with the local custodians who have been instrumental in allowing us to undertake this important work with them on their Country. We want to thank Tara Dever of the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) especially.

It is incredibly exciting to be a part of another release. A process that continues to evolved from its origins in the Capertee Valley, through the box-ironbark forests of Chiltern in Victoria, and now to the spotted gum-ironbark woodlands of the Lower Hunter in NSW. This release is unique for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it is occurring during Spring, right in the middle of the Regent Honeyeater breeding season. Unfortunately, the era of COVID has now impacted two releases, but the collective might and ingenuity of the captive release team has succeeded once again in seeing this project to fruition despite the countless hurdles. It is a testament to the strength of cooperation between all involved parties that this release has become a reality; and by all early indications – a success.

This first update on the largest captive release of Regent Honeyeaters in NSW comes a fortnight since the first cohort of birds were released. As such it will be considerably lengthier than subsequent updates, which we hope to provide every week or so over the next few months.

The lead-up to this release became a rather stressful one, as much of the ironbark around the release site was slower to flower than anticipated. Successive

cold fronts and mild dry periods probably had a large part to play in forcing the release to be delayed by one week. This difficult decision turned out to be very well considered, as the bird activity and blossom improved considerably in the days leading up to the revised release date.



Michael Shiels of Taronga Conservation Society Australia responds to Uncle Richard's and Tara Dever's welcomes at the first release (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

The first release consisted of 28 out of a total of 58 zoo-bred birds, 18 of which were fitted with radio-transmitters so that we could track their movements. The release itself was an incredibly moving experience. The birds and those involved, including a group of local children, were welcomed to Country by Wonnarua Elder, Uncle Richard Edwards. Uncle Richard welcomed the birds home to Country, sharing his words in Wonnarua language – the first time that the native tongue of these forests had been spoken to a group of people in over 150 years. A smoking ceremony also took place and Mindaribba CEO Tara Dever spoke passionately about the journey to welcome these birds home, dressed in her community's possum-skin cloak. The significance of returning the Regent Honeyeater to Country has powerful parallels with the struggle of the local Aboriginal people and their fight to protect their land, and the work being done to save the Regent Honeyeater from losing its song while the Wonnarua people work to reawaken their language. This release highlights the collective struggle of this

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species and the Wonnarua people, and the positive actions now being undertaken to heal Country and Culture.

The Saving our Species (SoS) program has played a key part not only in helping co-ordinate the release but in the collective efforts over five years to protect, manage and restore the habitat of the Regent Honeyeater, so that events such as this release can occur now and into the future.



Tara Dever, CEO of Mindaribba LALC (Alex Pike/ DPIE)

Watching dozens of Regent Honeyeaters emerge from the tents into this amazing area of bushland, with the scent of gum smoke and the emotion of the ceremony, was enough to bring many to tears.

Post-release Monitoring

The first few days of post-release monitoring were unsurprisingly fast-paced! The core team of staff monitoring the birds soon set to work following their initial movements out of the tents. Most of the birds from the first release moved to the east of the release site, attracted to an area of flowering forest red gum. Over the following days, a number remained here, some returned to the release area, but a selection really stretched their wings. Within the first week, a small number of birds had travelled up to 10 km from the release site. Thankfully, the majority have stayed on site (including the birds from the second release) and are utilising the newly flowering broad-leaved and grey ironbarks.



A captive release female gathers strips of paperbark for her nest. (Lachlan Hall/BirdLife Australia)

The most exciting feature of the last week has been the breeding activity exhibited by the released birds - just two weeks after release there are already at least 9 pairs of zoo-bred Regents constructing nests. This is an outstanding result and poses the very exciting prospect of zoo-bred birds successfully breeding in the wild. The discovery of a pair of wild Regent Honeyeaters with chicks in a nest less than a kilometre from the release site was the most incredible way of vindicating that this was the right place and right time to release the zoo-bred birds. The wild pair have also been observed interacting with the captive released birds



Orange-White (male, left) and Blue-Green (female, right) at their newly constructed nest (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

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November 1st saw our best day yet for recording birds. Alongside two wild birds, we observed a remarkable 20 tx (transmitter) and 17 non-tx birds, and all but one in the same patch of bushland they were released.

The coming days and weeks will see us continuing to monitor the released birds and their respective nesting exploits, as well as working on tracking down a few of the more wayward individuals.



The male of the wild pair brings in food for its chick. (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

A small team of project staff from BirdLife Australia and NSW DPIE Biodiversity and Conservation are currently undertaking monitoring. At the moment COVID restrictions are preventing us from getting volunteers involved in the monitoring, but we expect that to change in coming weeks. We will let everyone know when that changes in a future update.

Acknowledgements

The NSW Regent Honeyeater Release is delivered by the Department of Planning, Industry & Environment, BirdLife Australia and Taronga Conservation Society Australia and forms part of the national Regent Honeyeater Recovery Plan implementation. Funding is being provided by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust and Saving our Species Program, the Hunter and Central Tablelands Local Land Services through the Australian Government's National Landcare Program, the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation – an Australian Government initiative, Friends of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, and several generous donors and philanthropists. The release is being undertaken on land owned and managed by the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council, and BirdLife Australia recognises and is grateful for the immense contribution of Indigenous people to the knowledge and conservation of Australia's birds, including the Regent Honeyeater.

Please report any Regent Honeyeater sightings ASAP to woodlandbirds@birdlife.org.au or call:

Dean Ingwersen BirdLife Australia 0409 348 553

Mick Roderick BirdLife Australia 0421 761 237