

2021 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release Update #2

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group),

We would first like to acknowledge and thank the traditional owners of the land whose country we have had the privilege of walking on for this release – the Wonnarua people.

This community update comes approximately three weeks since 58 zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released into the Cessnock-Kurri Kurri woodlands. It has been a hectic three weeks post-release, but the pace has certainly eased in the last week or so with an increase in pre-breeding activity amongst the release birds. It has been very exciting and heartening to observe the continued pairing of birds and building of nests.

Another positive from the last week has been the continued and increasing opening of ironbark blossom. General bird activity has also been building as more nectarivores take advantage of flowering broad-leaved ironbark (*Eucalyptus fibrosa*) and grey ironbark (*E. siderophloia*), while there is still plenty of forest red gum (*E. tereticornis*) on offer. Many of the eucalypts in the forest that aren't flowering are heavy with bud, especially the spotted gum (*Corymbia maculata*) which is expected to start flowering in early autumn. The abundance of flower and 'flower-to-be' means that our captive-released birds could stay in the area for several more months, and possibly well into next year.



Non-transmitter male, red-metal/mauve-mauve (RMUU), posing in some spiky Blackthorn (*Bursaria spinosa*) – the bane of a bird tracker's existence! (Lachlan Hall/BirdLife Australia)



A classic view of the Kurri Kurri-Cessnock ironbark-spotted gum woodland. Filled with the sounds of small honeyeaters, cackling Noisy Friarbirds, Little Lorikeets buzzing over, Brown Treecreepers piping away, topped off with the occasional song of a critically-endangered Regent Honeyeater. (Max Breckenridge/BirdLife Australia).

Probably the best indicator of the quality of the woodland has been the increase in sightings of wild Regent Honeyeaters. As many of you would know, the wild birds tend to be a tad pickier than their zoo-bred cousins when it comes to food sources. There continues to be at least one pair of wild Regent Honeyeaters near to where a number of captive-released birds are hanging out. In addition to this wild pair, two of the tracking team (Max and Lachie) found one additional wild male Regent each in the last week – both birds in different corners of this fantastic patch of woodland.

The increase in sightings of wild birds and the return of some of the zoo-bred birds to the release site

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presents the exciting possibility of wild-captive interactions and possible breeding.

Wayward Birds

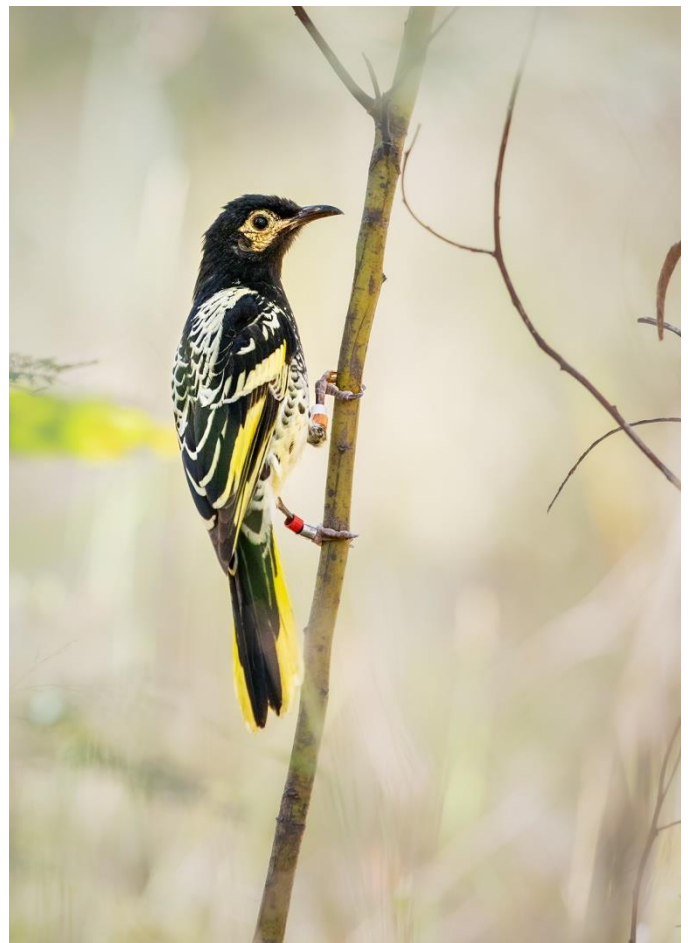
While this release has already proven highly successful, with the rapid transition from captivity to attempting to breed in the wild, there are of course those individuals who like to stretch their wings. The first fortnight post-release saw a good number of transmitter-wearing birds leaving the release site and getting acclimatised with the broader landscape. Fortunately, most of these 'worldly' birds must have realised just how good the release site is as they soon returned! There are a few birds who have continued to wander locally which makes each day's tracking interesting and serves as a great way of finding new pockets of good habitat. Some birds, such as red-metal/blue-blue (RMBB) and red-metal/yellow-blue (RMYB) had not been detected for up to a week before turning-up back at the release site seemingly overnight.

Since the last update, there has been a breakthrough with the discovery of two of the transmitter-wearing birds that had been missing since just after their release. One of our Local Land Services volunteers picked up signal for not just red-metal/white-black (RMWN), but red-metal/white-green (RMWP) too! Both birds seem to be hanging out together approximately 40 km north-west of the release site in an area that is difficult to access. Our next challenge is to lock eyes on these birds when they hopefully shift somewhere slightly more accessible!

Ruffled Feathers (Gossip Corner)

Fifty-eight zoo-bred birds set loose into the Australian bush during the spring breeding season - it certainly sounds like a better plot than some of the reality TV series out there, and with the team of us keeping close tabs on their daily antics we will be sure to keep you updated on who's getting friendly with who and who's ruffling whose feathers. So far, we have observed some controversial behaviour by one bird in particular, with red-metal/orange-white

(RMOW) (pictured below) appearing to be quite the Casanova. Indeed, he was quick to find himself a partner in RMBP and we observed the pair building a good-looking nest about a kilometre from the release site. Another female, RMBO also began nest-building nearby and we soon realised that RMOW was actually tending to both females! On many occasions we have observed him getting cosy with RMBP at her nest before immediately flying off with RMBO to be by her side as she collects nesting materials for hers. Apparently, with the ladies doing all the hard work in the nest-building department, he figured he had time for a second girlfriend! He even managed to convince RMBO to build her nest within 20 m of RMBP's, which has made his nest-defence duty of chasing off friarbirds and the like a whole lot easier.



Non-transmitter male, red-metal/orange-white (RMOW).
(Lachlan Hall/BirdLife Australia)

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One morning recently, we observed all three birds together and moving through the mid-storey as they foraged for insects amongst the foliage - apparently a perfectly happy ménage à trois. Not more than an hour later, however, RMBP swooped down from her nest and buzzed RMBO, who had been collecting materials nearby. The two females then met mid-air, snapping bills and flapping wings all the while spiralling downwards in a beautiful but angry bundle of black and gold, all the way to the ground. Is there trouble in paradise? Tune in next week to find out more!



Dave Hancock, post-release monitoring coordinator from DPIE, radiotracking a bird. (Supplied: Alex Pike/DPIE)

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