

2021 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release Update #4

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group),

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.

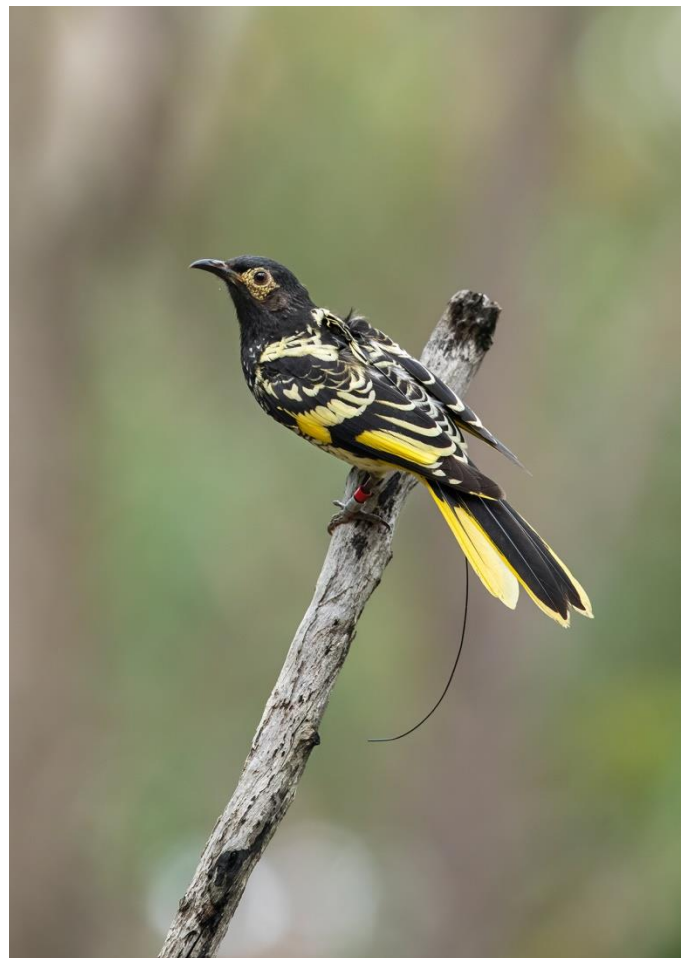
This community update comes approximately six weeks since 58 captive-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released into the Cessnock-Kurri Kurri woodlands. The cohort of released birds have continued to make the most of the excellent flowering and we are please to report that breeding activity is ongoing. The last fortnight has been a case of highs and lows, but we have some very exciting news from the last couple of days with a significant milestone reached in the story of Regent Honeyeater conservation.

A Determined Bunch

In our last update, we were overjoyed to report the first successful hatching of chicks from a zoo-bred pair of Regent Honeyeaters in NSW. We continued to observe RMNR and RMNU feeding two nestlings for at least 10 days and all seemed well. However, we regret to say that this pioneering pair were forced to abandon their nest during a recent period of particularly inclement weather as a severe low-pressure system lashed the area with heavy rain and strong winds. While this was of course disappointing, we were heartened to note the same pair building a new nest in the same tree just two days after abandoning their first nest!

This determination has been demonstrated by multiple pairs now. The natural drive to breed is certainly strong in these zoo-bred birds even despite this being their first experience at nest-building and chick-rearing. A number of pairs are up to their second, third and even fourth attempts at nest building now! Some attempts are very short-lived, but we now have at least four zoo-bred pairs incubating and another few pairs building. Being that these birds are attempting to breed for the first time it seems more than justified that they

require a few practice-runs before perfecting their strategy. It has been exciting to note at least two zoo-bred pairs choosing live clumps of Long-flowered Mistletoe (*Dendrophthoe vitellina*) as nesting sites in the last week. Mistletoe is a vitally important food-source and habitat for nesting, especially in the Cessnock-Kurri Kurri woodlands where the long-flowered mistletoe has been long utilised by Regent Honeyeaters as a food source and a nesting site.



*Radio transmitter-wearing bird RMYR. You can see just a few ruffled feathers where the backpack sits and the thin antenna extending out beyond the tail.
(Lachlan Hall/ BirdLife Australia)*

In other not-so-good news, that same low pressure system that claimed RMNR/RMNU's nest also ruined two wild nests that had chicks inside (one was carrying 'triplets'). It is extremely frustrating to follow these nests with so much hope inside, only to fall foul of the weather.

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Armchair Monitoring

The last week saw a very exciting event in Regent Honeyeater conservation take place at the release site. A collective effort involving staff from BirdLife Australia and Taronga Zoo saw a small team of us come together to carry out the first ever fitting of satellite transmitters on an endemic Australian passerine. Our fearless leader, Dean Ingwersen, made his long-awaited exodus from Melbourne for the occasion, bringing with him some very light and technologically-advanced satellite transmitters. Over two days of (unusually) dry weather the team were successful in catching a small number of wild and zoo-bred regents in the vicinity of the release site. Two zoo-bred regents were fitted with satellite transmitters – one (RMWY) giving up their radio-transmitting backpack for something a bit fancier. It was a delicate operation, but we are relieved to report the transmitters are working and now sending daily reports of the birds' locations to Dean's laptop! This is a truly momentous step forward for Regent Honeyeaters and Australian bird conservation in general. The capability to remotely monitor the movements of regents in the wild is now a reality.



Regent Honeyeater recovery coordinator Dean Ingwersen about to release the first ever Regent Honeyeater (RMPU) wearing a satellite transmitter that he just fitted (Mick Roderick/ BirdLife Australia)



The second satellite transmitter-wearing Regent Honeyeater (RMWY) in the process of being fitted out (above) and ready for release (right) (Mick Roderick/ BirdLife Australia)



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Without getting too carried away, the next two weeks will prove to be the test of these new satellite transmitters and how the bird's wearing them fare. If all goes well, there is indeed scope for more fittings in the future, including on wild birds – fingers crossed!

A Wild Male Gets Some Bling

The area where we were working to capture zoo-bred birds for fitting satellite transmitters had also been hosting a wild pair that have been hanging around the zoo-bred birds in that part of the forest for several weeks now. The male has a distinctive call and we can track his progress to some extent with our ears. But he too will move on soon, so it was wonderful to be able to colour-band him with a unique combination – Yellow Yellow (left leg) / Blue Metal (right leg). We had weighed him, hoping he'd have been a candidate for carrying a satellite transmitter, but alas he was just too light to take that on. This was the first Regent Honeyeater that Dean has been able to band since July 2019, so we will be keeping an eye out for him in future.



*The wild male colour-banded YYBM ready for release
(Mick Roderick/ BirdLife Australia)*

Fourth Time's A Charm (Gossip Corner)

Last update, we introduced you to the 'Clumsy Couple' – RMPP & RMRU. Well, it seems their numerous attempts and failures were all worth it, as their fifth nest is holding up very well with the female now incubating for over a week!

This week we bring you the sordid tale of our zoo-bred female RMUY. 'Miss Mauve-Yellow' has been seen very regularly since being released despite not carrying a transmitter. This is largely due to the fact that she has been paired up since the last weekend of October, shortly after being released. Like many of the other zoo-bred females, in that time she has made several nesting attempts. On face value, there's nothing noteworthy about her nesting exploits. However, what is unique and interesting about RMUY is her penchant for switching partners – at the time of writing she is now onto her FOURTH zoo-bred male! After blowing off her first beau RMYN when he couldn't support her two nesting attempts with him, she shifted 2km northwest and was found partnered up with RMYW. Unfortunately for RMYW it was to be a short-lived dalliance and within four days she decided that RMOB was a better option. Their partnering looked promising as RMUY quickly got started on a new nest. However, there was soon another player in the mix. While building her nest with RMOB, a very vocal RMOR moved onto the scene – singing his best song from a safe distance nearby. Lo and behold, when we returned to check the progress of her nest just a few days later, there was a new male following her back and forth as she feverishly collected material! Clearly RMOR was the superior bachelor, and not wanting to waste a good nest, RMUY continued to build the same one she had started with RMOB.

We will wait with anticipation to see whether RMOR can satisfy our picky girl – first signs appear promising as she has just started incubating.

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Things That Go 'Croak' in the Night

Working in these forests has some added benefits for the ecologists undertaking the post-release monitoring. Occasionally we stumble across some other very special flora and fauna as we move about the landscape. One such example of "biodiversity bycatch" came in the form of the rediscovery of Green-thighed Frogs (*Litoria brevipalmata*) in the vicinity of the release site. A somewhat enigmatic species, Green-thighed Frogs are listed as a vulnerable species in NSW and only vocalise after significant rain – and significant rain we have had! Whilst assisting Dean and others trying to (unsuccessfully) capture a released male regent as a satellite tag candidate, Mick Roderick heard the distinctive "accelerating croak" of a Green-thighed Frog, confirmed by recording the call and sending it off to frog experts. Some of the team have returned to the site and found "many" individuals in the area. These are one of the only records of this species on the floor of the Hunter Valley in dry eucalypt forests and come twenty years since the last record made in the vicinity of where this Regent Honeyeater release has occurred.



A Green-thighed Frog photographed "after hours" in the same patch of forest where we released the Regent Honeyeaters – only a handful of records in the Hunter Valley catchment (Steve Roderick)



RMUU low down and keeping guard as his partner, RMPO collects spiders' web on the ground nearby (Lachlan Hall/ BirdLife Australia)

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