

2021 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release Update #5

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 eight weeks since 58 captive-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released into the Cessnock-Kurri Kurri woodlands. The bushland where the birds were released (and where many have remained) continues to provide a reliable source of nectar as a staple food source, as well as an abundance of invertebrates which are being fed to chicks. In fact, Broad-leaved Ironbarks are just beginning to flower in some parts and these areas are buzzing with not only some of our released birds, but wild Regent Honeyeaters and a cast of nectar-feeding birds such as Musk and Little Lorikeets. It is of interest that the Muskies have only just arrived at the site; they know a good feed of nectar when they see it. With ironbark and mistletoe blossom likely to continue well into January, the Regent Honeyeater recovery team are feeling like they couldn't have chosen a better place to conduct this release. And as you will read below, this edition comes with some very exciting news with yet another milestone realised in the past fortnight.

Blue-Orange and Orange-White Create History

We have fortunately experienced a better run in the weather since our last update where we reported on multiple nest-failures due to continued low-pressure systems battering the site. The birds have been busily making the most of this and we're incredibly pleased (and a little bit proud) to announce that in the past week we have had our first fledgling leave a zoo-bred nest. Blue-Orange and Orange-White have therefore created history, being the first pair of zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters to breed successfully in NSW. This is a momentous occasion for the recovery team and all partners involved in this incredible captive release.



Fledged in the wild from parents that were bred in captivity. A first for NSW! The fledgling held this cryptic "bittern-like" posture for the entire time between feeds, hidden amongst dense acacia (Lachlan Hall/BirdLife Australia)



A successful release in one photo – captive release male RMOW feeding his wild-born fledgling (Lachlan Hall/BirdLife Australia)

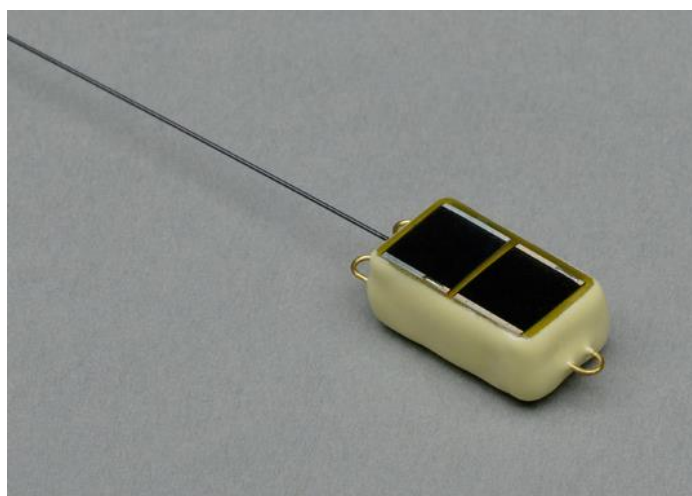
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Kissing By the Mistletoe

What could be more appropriate at Christmas time than the next successful pair of zoo-bred birds raising their young inside a mistletoe clump? As we write this update, Yellow-Yellow and Black-Blue have two chicks sitting in a nest positioned safely inside a bundle of Long-flowered Mistletoe (*Dendrophthoe vitellina*). It would truly be the greatest gift to have chicks fledge from a mistletoe nest this Christmas.

Keeping a Close Eye From Space

As we reported in the last update, two zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters (“White-Yellow” and “Green-Mauve”) have been fitted with state-of-the-art satellite transmitters so that they can be monitored remotely. As far as we are aware, this has never been done on a songbird anywhere in the world, so this is truly pioneering work. Both birds have been seen since, mostly because they are quite content in the location they are frequenting, though with Regent Honeyeater genes that are well-known for mobility, it may not be long before either bird moves off and we start proper remote tracking using satellites to guide us to their whereabouts. That will be an exciting time for everyone involved in Regent Honeyeater conservation and research.



Close up image of the satellite transmitter, showing the solar panels on the top of the transmitter body
https://www.microwavetelemetry.com/solar_2g_ptt

Wanderer Returns to Where the Wild Things Are

Not all of the released Regent Honeyeaters have been satisfied with dwelling in the safety and security of the bushland where they were released. Some birds have travelled to other areas to sample those habitats and the Eucalypt blossom on offer there – in true Regent Honeyeater fashion! One such bird is “White-Black”, a radio transmitter-wearing male that, along with fellow adventurer “White-Green”, had found a patch of planted gum trees 40km from the release site where they had spent nearly six weeks. Both birds appear to have now dropped their transmitters (a common occurrence at eight weeks post-release – see image on last page), but remarkably White-Black was spotted back in the release bushland late last week, just a couple of kilometres from where he was released. The location where he was found is really starting to increase in activity, with abundant Broad-leaved Ironbark blossom on offer. Of interest, White-Black was photographed by the authority on Australian tadpoles, Dr Marion Anstis. In our last update we reported on the ‘rediscovery’ of Green-thighed Frogs (*Litoria brevipalmata*) in the vicinity of the release site. Excitingly, Marion was able to confirm Green-thighed Frog tadpoles are present at the site – another threatened species making the most of favourable conditions at present.



White-Black captured in action seeking out Broad-leaved Ironbark blossom near the release site, nearly two months after wandering off to a site 40km away (Marion Anstis)

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In a way, the return of White-Black to the release bushland block is testament to having chosen the right place to perform this release, which seems to go from strength-to-strength. This is even more compellingly validated by the fact that the very place that White-Black has returned to is currently home to at least two pairs of breeding wild birds. Further, one of these wild pairs has already successfully fledged a chick and is now building nest number two (with the semi-dependent fledgling still in tow!) in a real testament to just how good the conditions are.



One of the wild male birds seen in the vicinity of where White-Black was rediscovered near the release site (Marion Anstis)

Pre-Christmas wrap-up (Gossip Corner)

RMOW: Casanova becomes a family man!

You may have forgotten, but our celebrity couple Blue-Orange and Orange-White (who are parents to our very first fledgling) also made an appearance in our very first Gossip Corner! Back in early November, RMOW was ruffling some feathers by getting cosy with two separate females at the same time and he ended up leaving his original partner (RMBP) for the new girl, RMBO. Well, it turns out

that was a great decision (at least for the species), and Orange-White has since settled down and become a model partner and now father! Fathering the first ever wild-born fledgling in NSW from captive parents is a sure-fire way to boost your public approval rating.

The many-nesters: When we last caught up with Green-Green and Red-Mauve, their fifth nest attempt had made it to incubation after many failed earlier attempts. Unfortunately, that nest did not manage to hatch chicks but we are happy to report that the female (Green-Green) is now incubating again on nest number six. They have certainly gotten better (and more efficient) at it.

'Miss Mauve-Yellow': Our fickle female seems to have finally found herself a keeper in RMOR. In the last update we shared the gossip of mauve-yellow's three previous failed relationships, with Orange-Red (RMOR) now being boyfriend number four! This pairs last nest attempt didn't produce any chicks but the two have since been seen together still, and are defending territory so things are looking promising. Let's see if she sticks by him through the festive season...



A relationship born in controversy becomes the greatest success story so far! RMOW (L) and RMBO (R) feed the very first fledgling of the release (Lachlan Hall/ BirdLife Australia)

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See you Next Year!

There will be members of the tracking team keeping tabs on birds through the Christmas – New Year's period but this will be the final community update for 2021. Expect another update in the New Year towards the middle of January. Thanks for joining in on all the excitement thus far and here's hoping for more good news in the New Year. Merry Christmas to all!



The harnesses which attach the radio transmitters have a weak link, made of cotton linen, sewn into them. When this breaks it allows the harness and transmitter to be preened off by the birds. (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



Regent Honeyeaters frequently come to water to drink and bathe, which can make monitoring (and taking photos) just that little bit easier. (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).