

2021 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release Update #6

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 12 weeks after 58 zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released into the Cessnock-Kurri Kurri woodlands. About three weeks have passed since our last update, and our monitoring in the last fortnight has involved a concerted effort to record as many zoo-bred Regents as possible at the crucial period when transmitter batteries start to fail. A combination of factors, most significantly the continued nectar-availability at the release site, has meant that a good proportion of the release cohort have remained findable. Of course, as the time since release grows, there continue to be changes and challenges for the monitoring team. There has been more breeding news since our last update and even more wild Regent Honeyeaters located. In the last few days we have also witnessed a very exciting scenario playing out which has given us even more confidence that the captive-release birds are very much suited to their new free-range lifestyle.

Making the Most of the Conditions

The quest to nest and raise young has been a feature of this breeding season release. The persistence of the captive-release Regents to make numerous nesting attempts over several months now has been particularly encouraging. Their tenacity is very apparent and is something we have enjoyed watching. Readers will know we have also been reporting on the nesting exploits of a number of wild regent pairs. As many of you would know by now, Regent Honeyeater nesting is fraught with challenges and with so few nests each season, each one is precious. As such it is always a massive relief to see chicks hatch and go on to successfully fledge.

We are very pleased to report that our captive-release pair (RMBO-RMOW) fledgling is doing just fine! He is still in the company of his mum and dad, but now finding most of its own food. In other exciting news, within the last week we have witnessed the captive-release pair of RMBY-RMYP start to feed chicks in a nest huddled within a clump of Long-flowered Mistletoe (*Dendrophthoe vitellina*). This is the third nest we have witnessed that has been built within the safety of a mistletoe clump by captive-release birds during this release. On the wild bird front, we have now recorded over 20 different wild adult Regent Honeyeaters during the post-release monitoring. The wild birds have been getting just as busy as their captive-release counterparts. A total of eight nesting attempts have been recorded, and at least five wild chicks fledged. Surprisingly, there is still wild breeding activity going despite this being now very late in the breeding season; an absolute testament to this incredible patch of bushland being the perfect choice to stage this release of Regent Honeyeaters.



*Two of the wild Regent Honeyeater chicks to have fledged since our last community update
(Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)*

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Birds that Sleep Together, Stay Together?

With the breeding activities now beginning to wind down, we have noticed the non-breeding Regents beginning to congregate. Many of the birds that previously were paired and defending nesting territories are now happily foraging together in a loose flock of more than ten birds that have been centred around an ironbark blossom-filled section of creekline; remarkably only 700m from the release site! It is fascinating to witness this post-breeding aggregation of so many Regent Honeyeaters, a behaviour that is now rarely observed due to the sparseness of Regents left in the wild. It is exciting firstly to see the zoo-bred birds partaking in this natural behaviour, but even more-so because the flock includes at least two wild birds, a very promising sign for our hopes that the zoo-bred birds will be able to follow wild Regents to greener pastures (yellower treetops?) when conditions in this area eventually become less optimal.

Over the past few evenings, some of our monitoring team have been treated with a very special sight as this flock congregates more tightly on dusk and birds fly together from tree to tree before settling on a communal roosting site as darkness falls. It would seem that some birds from further afield have also been flying in to join this roosting group – we have picked up a few extra birds not seen for several weeks joining this flock to roost. This includes RMYU and RMUB who had not been seen for 22 and 17 days respectively. Our famous family (RMBO-RMOW, and their grown fledgling) had been keeping to themselves near their nesting site but have also just joined the flock in the last few days.

In more exciting news, at the time of writing, we have just located a second roosting congregation of least eight (five captive release and three wild) birds 2.5km northwest of the original roosting site. With most of the transmitter birds having now dropped their transmitter or had their batteries go flat, monitoring these roost sites is a valuable way

of keeping tabs on the release cohort and chancing upon any errant birds that might return to join the growing flock. Regardless of whether or not the birds continue to stick around, the fact that so many of the release cohort are now foraging and roosting alongside wild birds fills us with confidence for their future in the wild.



*One of the birds seen at the second roost is female RMPO, seen here about to take a drink at a puddle on a warm afternoon in early January
(Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)*

Mystery Bird

In our last update, we reported the return of RMWN from his long holiday away from the release site. He was first re-sighted in the northern section of the release site before moving south and joining up with the other captive-release birds. In the last week another bird has reappeared in this northern section of the release site. It was a very exciting find until we noticed it was missing one of the colour bands on its right leg, making identification a bit more complicated! “Red-metal-green”, as it has now been designated, could be one of several candidates that have been missing for a while. One of the theories being discussed at the monitoring team’s water-cooler is that it could be RMWP, as this was the bird that RMWN had been seen with when he went on holiday. RMWP had dropped its transmitter at this distant spot and then went missing – perhaps missing no more?

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Follow That Bird

One of the hopes when tracking the captive-release birds is that they will lead us to wild birds. This has already proven to be the case twice now during the release, with captive-release birds leading us to wild birds in different corners of the release site. After RMY- RMNB's nest failed during the holiday period, they left the area and RMY's signal was later detected away from the release site. After a bit of a hiatus, RMY was tracked down to an area of flowering Broad-leaved Ironbark (*Eucalyptus fibrosa*) on private property 10 km south-west of the release site. When he was eventually re-sighted, it was a great relief to see his partner, RMNB, with him. Even greater was that the captive-release pair were now associating with a lone wild bird! This proved to be the first record of a wild Regent Honeyeater in this particular part of the Lower Hunter Valley since August 2017.

Slowing Things Down

This community update comes at a time where the rigorous day-in/day-out monitoring of zoo-bred and wild Regent Honeyeaters in the Kurri-Cessnock area will begin to wind down somewhat. It has been nearly three months since the first cohort of birds were released from the tents on that special day when Wonnarua Elder Uncle Richard welcomed us onto, and the birds back to, Wonnarua Country. It has been a truly inspiring experience watching the zoo-bred birds not merely survive, but absolutely thrive in their new-found home in the wild. Encountering so many wild birds during the course of our monitoring has added an exciting layer to this experience, and of course witnessing successful breeding by both zoo-bred and wild bird pairings has topped it all off. We would like to once again thank the Wonnarua people for welcoming us to this very special place. It has been a privilege to walk on your Country and we know it is in the safest of hands under the ownership of the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council.



It's not just our Regent Honeyeaters that are still breeding. This Yellow-tufted Honeyeater was photographed sitting on its nest on Christmas Eve; the species was first recorded breeding here in early July so have likely been at it for at least six months (Mick Roderick/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:

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