

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #7 19th May 2023

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group)

Welcome to the seventh community update for the 2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater captive release. This update comes to you as we transition through autumn into an impending winter with some chilly nights and cooler daytime temperatures. Our Regents had been feasting on nectar from *Banksia* for many weeks and with a few more transmitters fitted we had some interesting movements recorded. With that said, the last of our tracked birds – and the wild birds they were associating with – did move out of the range of our receivers in late April and this update will likely be the final one for this particular release. But read on!

Acknowledgement of Country

All involved in the 2022 Regent Honeyeater captive release acknowledge the sovereign owners and knowledge-holders of the land whose country we have had the privilege of walking on for this Regent Honeyeater captive release – **the Wonnarua people**. We also recognise that sovereignty was never ceded; it always was and always will be, Aboriginal Land.



White-White with his old transmitter before being fitted with a new one in late March (Timothy Paasila/BirdLife Australia).

Extended Monitoring of Three More Birds

In the previous update we reported how the current release had an extended monitoring period past the minimum required 10 weeks (the general battery life of the transmitters). We also reported how OWKM ('Orange-White') had led us to a small congregation of Regents utilising *Banksia oblongifolia* in the Kurri Sands Swamp Woodland (KSSW) endangered ecological community. This was an exciting new observation of habitat use for Regents and also gave us the only evidence of successful breeding last season – sightings of two recently fledged birds. It also provided an opportunity to attempt to catch some birds for new transmitter fitting. In one day we found nine Regent Honeyeaters using the KSSW habitat, comprising five released birds and four wild birds. A plan was hatched and before too long the banding team were in position, setting mist-nets adjacent to the *Banksias* where the Regent Honeyeaters had been seen feeding.



Setting up mist nets in the Kurri Sands Swamp Woodland habitat – one of the flowering *Banksia oblongifolia* plants can be seen to the right of the net. (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #7 19th May 2023

This mission happened on the final day of March and it was a very successful mist-netting session, with three zoo-bred birds caught in no time at all. Each bird was carefully assessed by the banding team and it was great to note that each bird was heavier than they were at the time of release. They were also above the threshold weight for a transmitter to be attached and so the new units were fitted to this trio – BBKM, WWKM & UUKM (or ‘Blue-Blue’, ‘White-White’ & ‘Mauve-Mauve’ respectively).



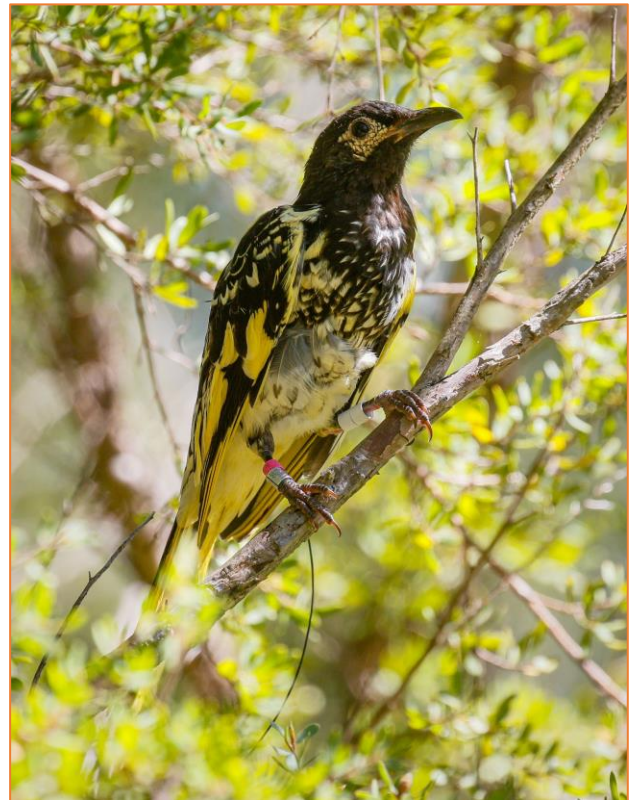
UUKM showing off its newly fitted transmitter (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

These three birds, along with other non-transmitter birds, remained in this general area for several weeks feeding on the plentiful *Banksia* nectar. Halfway through their stay WWKM and BBKM moved about one kilometre north and were briefly joined by UUKM and OWKM. It will come as no surprise that this area was also dominated by *Banksia oblongifolia*. This *Banksia* was the most reliable (and often sole) food source for all of the observed Regent Honeyeaters this autumn. This new information, gained only by having the ability to track released birds, will be followed up next autumn when we plan to search this area thoroughly for Regents when the *Banksia* is at peak flowering.

Just after Easter birds started to slowly leave the KSSW habitat, as the *Banksia* flowering started to wane. The remaining birds that were able to be

found were UUKM (which had moved to the north of Kurri Kurri) and WWKM, who was last seen briefly at Beresfield before he moved on and we lost signal.

At this time of year there is a significant honeyeater migration with many thousands of honeyeaters (in particular Yellow-faced Honeyeaters) moving in a northerly direction; some headed for habitats in Queensland, while others head to coastal sites to find winter foraging resources. The location where WWKM was last seen is less than two kilometres from the biggest ‘bottleneck’ site for the honeyeater migration (at Pambalong Nature Reserve). Could it be that some of our Regents have migrated with these other honeyeater species to spend the winter along the coast? It’s a tantalising prospect and one that can only realistically be resolved by keen observers out looking for Regent Honeyeaters in some of these coastal areas.



WWKM resting up after having his new radio transmitter fitted (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #7 19th May 2023

The Big Twitch

At around the same time that the deployment of birds with new transmitters occurred, a birder wandering around the heathy woodland south of Kurri Kurri stumbled on two of our released Regent Honeyeaters. These two birds were BBKM and UUKM, which were to later stray up to the mist-netting site described previously. It was a mighty fantastic find and news of this sighting quickly got out via eBird, Facebook and various other internet sites. Sightings of Regent Honeyeaters associated with captive releases are typically kept quiet so the tracking team can concentrate on monitoring the survival, feeding and breeding behaviour of the birds. It is best to keep disturbance of the birds to a minimum and with birds spending most of their time on private property it's not feasible to publish sightings of these birds. However, this observation was made in an easily accessible section of Werakata State Conservation Area and provided a great opportunity for the public to experience these iconic birds.



OPKM feeding on *Banksia oblongifolia* in the Kurri Sands Swamp Woodland (Rob Hynson/BirdLife Australia).

As more birders came to visit, more photographs were taken and shared. Close examination of the photos revealed one of the birds to be OPKM ('Orange-Green'), one of this year's captive release male birds that hadn't been seen for nearly two months! There was another bird associating with OPKM – excitingly this was a wild bird, judged to be a female. These birds were both feeding on *Banksia oblongifolia* and it wasn't long before a second wild bird was found in the same area.

This presented a wonderful opportunity for local and visiting birders to come and enjoy watching wild and zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters in a habitat where the birds were often feeding at eye-level (with hundreds of other small honeyeaters feeding low down in the Banksias as well!). In excess of one hundred birders visited the Kurri area the see these birds over their two-week stay. To round off this story, OWKM (the bird that was the first to have been found feeding in the KSSW) joined OPKM and the wild female for a few days in mid-April before departing the area.



One of the wild Regent Honeyeaters that were feeding on *Banksia oblongifolia* in Werakata State Conservation Area (Gordon Arthur).

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #7 19th May 2023

Birds in Backyards

Over the past six months, many of our released birds have been found feeding in suburban gardens in villages surrounding the Tomalpin Woodlands. While tracking BBKM last month one of our tracking team ending up hitting the jackpot, finding five Regents feeding in a backyard! These birds were feeding on planted bottlebrush trees in the suburb of Stanford Merthyr, only a short distance from the two groups of birds feeding in KSSW in Werakata State Conservation Area.

Of the other four birds found feeding in the yard with BBKM, two were non-transmitter release birds. These were NYKM ('Black-Yellow') and ORKM ('Orange-Red'). Even more remarkably, neither of these two birds had been seen since March 6th, when they were in a feeding flock of 9 birds feeding flowering Grey Gum inside the Tomalpin Woodlands to the south of Abermain. And to cap this incredible observation off, the other two birds in the backyard were both wild birds! Analysis of the plumage details we could get from photographs showed that neither of these wild birds were thought to have been one of the wild birds previously photographed around Tomalpin during the post-release monitoring.



ORKM feeding in a bottlebrush in a backyard in Stanford Merthyr (Timothy Paasila/BirdLife Australia).

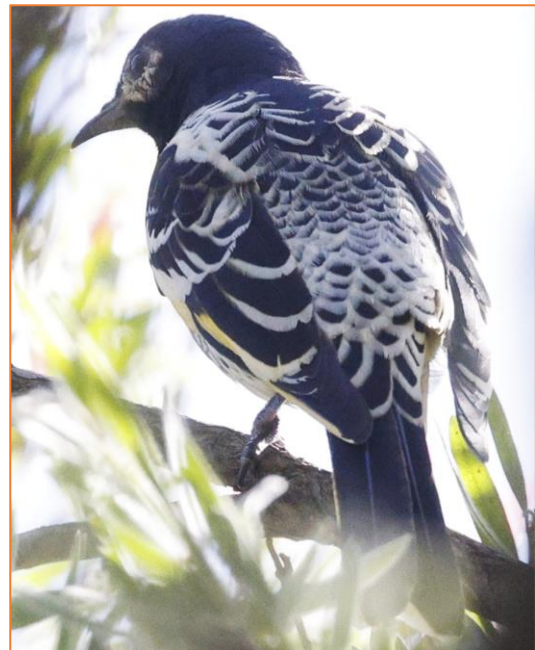
The very morning after news of these bird was received, our banding team set up their mist-nets in the backyard in an effort to capture birds to attach

our final radio transmitters to. Despite a valiant effort, none of the Regents could be captured.

Looking to the Future

Alas, this congregation in the backyard at Stanford Merthyr was the final one that we witnessed and by the end of April we had lost signal from all of our transmitter birds. It has been another very successful release centred around the incredible Tomalpin Woodlands. And although there was no confirmed breeding from our release birds, those two juveniles demonstrated that breeding had occurred successfully under the radar somewhere this season – likely nearby.

This evidence of breeding would never have been discovered if it hadn't been for the additional radio transmitters reattached to several birds earlier this year. And it was one of these birds that led us to a habitat and food source not previously documented for the species. Sightings of successful breeding give us hope there are other recently fledged birds elsewhere across the range of the species, yet to be discovered.



One of the wild Regent Honeyeaters feeding in a bottlebrush in the backyard in Stanford Merthyr (Timothy Paasila/BirdLife Australia).

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #7 12th May 2023

Acknowledgements

The 2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release is delivered by the Department of Planning & 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 Commonwealth Environment Restoration Fund, as part of the Threatened Species Action Plan – Priority Species funding, 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.

A **very special thanks** to the bird capture and tracking teams who helped monitor the Regent Honeyeaters in the Lower Hunter Valley for an amazing 5+ months! As a team, we have confirmed the short-term survival of more than 60% of the released birds, discovered evidence of at least two successful nests and hope to find evidence of longer-term survival in NSW in the near future. *Over to you to help us find the birds!!*

Please report any Regent Honeyeater sightings ASAP to woodlandbirds@birdlife.org.au or call: Mick Roderick (BirdLife Australia) 1800 621 056



NOKM photographed just before Christmas at a time when the Regent Honeyeaters were actively hunting insects low down in the forests of the Tomalpin Woodlands (Timothy Paasila/BirdLife Australia).