

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #1 – 25th November 2022

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group),

Herewith the first instalment of our community updates for the 2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater captive release. For the second consecutive year, the remarkable Tomalpin Woodlands have played host to a large release of zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters. This update comes a fortnight since the first cohort of zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released and 10 days since the second cohort was released.

And it has been an action-packed two weeks!

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 and the successful 2021 Regent Honeyeater captive release – **the Wonnarua people**. We also recognise that sovereignty was never ceded; it always was and always will be, Aboriginal Land.

This project would not have been possible without the local custodians who have allowed us to undertake this important work with them on their Country. We want to especially thank Tara Dever of the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). As Tara writes:

“This story isn’t just about a successful release of zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters. It is about Aboriginal culture and connection to Country. The Tomalpin Woodlands are deeply significant to Aboriginal people. Our community has at the forefront of our minds the importance of protecting this place for the Regent Honeyeaters and all other creatures in perpetuity. This is a place that all community can identify with.”

Similar to last year, the 2022 Regent Honeyeater captive release commenced with a smoking ceremony (thanks to Uncle Leon Hammond) and a

Welcome to Country delivered by Wonnarua Elder, Uncle Mick Chenery. With the sounds of Regent Honeyeaters eager to leave their tents in the background, and with an audience that again included family members of those involved in the release, Uncle Mick respectfully reminded us of the significance of returning the Regent Honeyeater to Country has powerful parallels with the struggle of the local Aboriginal people and their fight to protect their land. We walk this journey together.



Wonnarua Elder, Uncle Mick Chenery, welcomes us and the birds back to Country at the first release (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

Spreading Their Wings

The first release consisted of 26 out of a total of 50 zoo-bred birds, 19 of which were fitted with radio-transmitters so that we could track their movements. The second cohort saw 24 birds released, of which 20 were wearing radio-transmitters. With a total of 39 ‘trackable birds’ in 2022 we are hoping to gain an even greater insight into the machinations of our precious released Regents.

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Community Update #1 – 25th November 2022

The first few days of post-release monitoring were certainly the easiest, with just 19 birds to account for, and on one of those days every transmitter-wearing bird was observed. Following the release of the second cohort things “got real” for the small tracking team comprised of staff from BirdLife Australia, specialist contractors and the NSW Department of Environment and Planning. Without a particularly widespread flowering like last year, birds have been far more dispersive and this has given the tracking team a proper challenge; not only are there ~50% more birds to track, but the birds are spreading their wings and exploring the area!



BirdLife Australia’s Beau Meney tracks one of the transmitter birds. (Alex Pike/DPE).

Although many birds have remained inside or on the periphery of Tomalpin, some birds have ventured to surrounding areas, though always within striking distance of the release site; the farthest afield bird has been found about 10km south of Tomalpin. A couple of individuals have even been seen getting stuck into Silky Oak blossom in residential areas. And as always happens with captive releases of birds, we have had a couple of “runners” that were last tracked heading north away from Tomalpin. These birds are hopefully finding their way and seeking out blossom and other Regent Honeyeaters wherever they are, though we have some recent evidence that one of our runners could be on her

way back and we are starting to see some other ‘wanderers’ return to Tomalpin in the past couple of days. At the time of writing we have found two birds deceased. One was found intact on the ground; the other was recovered with just remains left and was possibly predated. While both deaths are being investigated, all indications suggest these are isolated incidents.

Kissing by the Mistletoe

After last year’s “one-in-thirty year” Eucalypt flowering event, no one was expecting a blossom bonanza to rival that. We were, however expecting the many Grey Ironbark trees that are carrying heavy bud to have been in blossom by the time of the release. However, presumably due to the extremely wet winter/spring, they have been a bit slow in opening up. Even so, almost all of our birds have been observed feeding in the scattered Grey Ironbarks that are flowering, as well as White Mahogany and Forest Red Gums. We have also noticed a great deal of feeding in our local ‘woodland-supercharging’ plant – the Long-flowered Mistletoe. The fact that the vast majority of the birds found these scattered resources within a day of release is extremely encouraging, suggesting the captive birds are skilled at finding blossom of tree species that area likely completely new to their life experience.



Non-tx bird (female Blue-Yellow Pink Metal) feeding on the flowers of a Long-flowered Mistletoe (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

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Community Update #1 – 25th November 2022

The Long-flowered Mistletoe is one of the two most important habitat features in Tomalpin that keeps the wild Regent Honeyeaters coming back to breed (the other being the ironbark trees). The mistletoe not only serves as a source of sustenance, but also provides a physical structure for the Regents to build their nests in. And of course, it's not only the Regents that use the mistletoe – just about every nectar-sipping bird in these forests feed on the flowers and the majority of arboreal nesting birds build nests inside it. It is however killed by severe fires, which have occurred here in recent years. See [here](#) for some media on the work that BirdLife Australia and Mindaribba LALC are doing to fast-track the recovery of this vital habitat resource.

Where the Wild Things Are

The most exciting find since the start of the post-release monitoring has arguably been the discovery of wild birds, which hadn't been detected in the lead-up to the release. The discovery of these wild birds has also come with one or two exciting twists (so please read on!).

For context, there had been wild Regent Honeyeaters occupying the Tomalpin Woodlands since mid-August 2021 and breeding attempts were noted from the first week of September. From that point there were at least nine successful wild nests detected. As some of you may recall from our later 2021 community updates, we had two roosts of mixed zoo and wild birds (including both wild and zoo pair juveniles) over summer. At their peak these roosts had nearly 40 Regent Honeyeaters between them. As 2022 progressed we lost the ability to track birds using radio transmitters and unfortunately the satellite-tracking that we also reported on in last season's updates didn't result in us being able to follow birds for very long (we are revisiting our plans with the satellite transmitter work). Nonetheless mixed flocks of wild and zoo Regent Honeyeaters were still found during on-ground searches in the Tomalpin Woodlands throughout autumn/winter and up until early August when no less than 17 birds were found in a small part of the forest feeding on

prolific Spotted Gum blossom (there were 50 Swift Parrots present at the time as well). This demonstrates nearly 12 consecutive months of occupation of the site – an astonishing period of time for Regent Honeyeaters to occupy a single patch of bush.



Red-Metal Blue-Blue – a female from the 2021 release, seen amongst a flock of 17 Regent Honeyeaters in early August 2022 (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

However, we hadn't seen any wild (or 2021 release) birds since early August so the discovery of wild Regent Honeyeaters in mid-November was a significant find. Not only did the team discover wild birds – at a time when we knew of no other wild birds anywhere in NSW – but very excitingly we have been witnessing the pairing of a wild male bird with a 2022 release female. And this female was released literally ten days before being found with a wild male! This is precisely the result everyone involved in these releases looks for and has given an enormous lift to the monitoring team. It is also the first evidence of a wild/zoo pair from a NSW captive release. The female bird (Blue-Yellow) is pictured on the previous page and the wild male is below. Recent studies have suggested that there is a distinct male bias in the population (and/or lack of females) so having a wild male find a released female is directly addressing one of the many threats that Regents face and proof that these captive releases are worth the effort we go to in planning and implementing them.

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #1 – 25th November 2022

Wild About White Metal

One of the other twists in the discovery of wild birds was the fact that one of them is a female bird that was banded in either the Capertee Valley or along the Goulburn River (Upper Hunter Valley) in November 2017. She has lost one of her colour bands on her left leg, so we can only narrow it down to two individuals. Her band combination is 'U?WM' (Mauve-[missing] White-Metal) but we are calling her 'White-Metal'. This is the first resighting of White-Metal since she was banded more than five years ago and even more excitingly, she is also paired with a wild male bird. White-Metal has also begun thinking about nest-construction and was watched busily stealing nest materials from a seemingly active Noisy Friarbird nest! She did this four times before the friarbird returned to investigate.



The wild male that has paired with 2022 release female Blue-Yellow Pink-Metal (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).

The coming days and weeks will see us continuing to monitor the released birds and their interactions with their wild counterparts, as well as working on tracking down a few of the more wayward individuals. With the arrival of wild birds, early signs of breeding and evidence of released birds coalescing in discreet patches of forest we have every reason to be optimistic at this point in time.

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.

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



The wild-banded female White-Metal cheekily steals material from a Noisy Friarbird nest. The owner of the nest reappeared not long afterwards (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia).