

2023 NSW Regent Honeyeater Community Update

December 2023

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group)

Welcome to the 2023 Regent Honeyeater community update – more than ‘just’ a captive release update too. This jam-packed end-of-year edition comes to you after an exciting few months for the Regent Honeyeater recovery team. As summer hits full swing and Regent activity starts to wind-down, we share news about one of the most successful breeding events in the Capertee Valley in recent years, reveal a mini-release of zoo-bred birds and look back at the outcomes of the 2021 and 2022 captive releases, including visits from some old friends. Read on to find out more!

Acknowledgement of Country

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

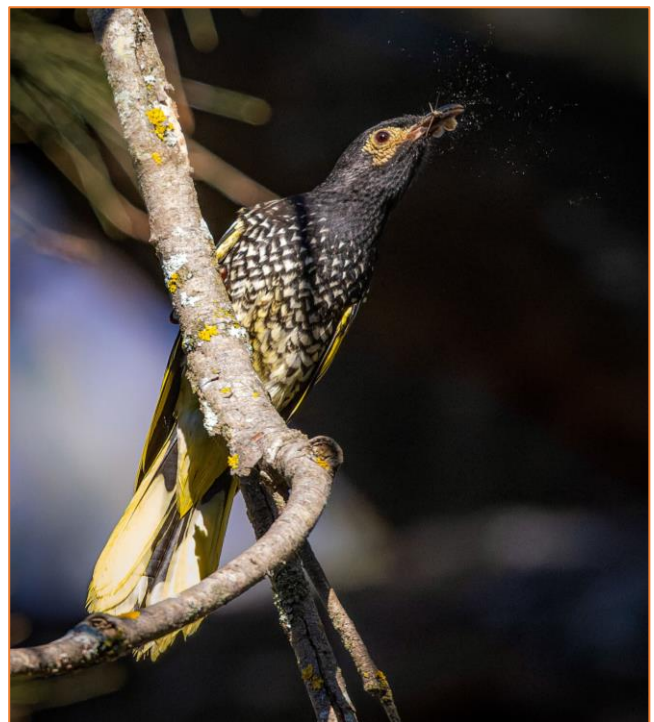


One of at least 30 Regent Honeyeaters found in the Capertee National Park this spring (Rob Hynson/ BirdLife Australia)

Capertee Valley Breeding Event

In the last community update we brought you the exciting news that two Regent Honeyeaters had been reported by observant campers in Capertee National Park at the end of August. Little did we know at the time that this pair was to be the first of around 30 birds to be found in the national park subsequently, monitored by BirdLife Australia and Australian National University as part of our annual breeding-season monitoring. Even more exciting was the fact that many birds were pairing up and building nests by mid-September.

The monitoring team recorded a steady stream of birds arriving into the national park through early September, quickly getting to work pairing up and constructing nests. By late September there were at least nine pairs of Regent Honeyeaters with nests, plus several other unpaired birds in the general area. It became clear to us early on that we had a very important breeding event unfolding and in line with recent recovery team discussions, a “warden” style approach to daily monitoring was adopted whereby we aimed to have people monitoring the birds and would-be predators on a daily basis.



A male bird prepares a flying insect meal for one of his chicks early in the Capertee breeding event (Tim Paasila/ BirdLife Australia)

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Increasing Nest Success

The last significant breeding event in the Capertee Valley was during 2017 and information gathered during that year's breeding aggregation helped guide the team to implement the best strategies for increasing nesting success this year. Each nesting pair was monitored to gather information such as incubation time, number of nestlings and birds fledged. This included the deployment of motion-censored nest-monitoring cameras at a safe distance from the nests, so as to not disturb the birds.

Nest predation has previously been confirmed as a major cause of nest failure. Nest predators include arboreal mammals such as Brush-tailed Possums and Sugar Gliders. To combat this, plastic tree guards were placed around the trunk of nesting trees and any neighbouring trees where the canopy was overlapping to reduce the possibility of arboreal mammals accessing the Regent's nests. The monitoring cameras were also placed near the tree guards to monitor their effectiveness.



A female Regent honeyeater banded in Capertee NP this spring; Green-Blue, White-Metal (Rob Hynson/ BirdLife Australia)

To further protect nests, known avian predators such as Grey Butcherbirds and Australian Ravens

were removed from the park. Noisy Miners were also controlled as this despotic species is a major resource-competitor and aggressive species known to drive Regents away from nesting sites or even destroy nests.



An adult Regent Honeyeater watches over its two fledglings in Capertee NP in early November (Tim Paasila / BirdLife Australia)

Old Faces

Most of the birds breeding in the valley this spring were wild, unbanded birds. Others, like Green-Blue, White-Metal ('PBWM') were captured and banded this season. However, there were a few birds previously colour-banded in the Capertee that had returned to breed again this year. One of the birds was missing one its colour bands, but by looking at the remaining bands (blue over a metal band on the left leg, with an orange band on the right leg) we could tell it was banded in the Capertee Valley in either 2015 or 2016. It was judged as being an adult at the time of banding (i.e. at least two years old), making this male bird a very old individual, at least 9 years old.

A second banded bird, also missing a colour band, with blue over white on the left leg and a metal band on the right, was banded in the very same location in Capertee NP during the 2017 breeding season. He was also an adult at the time of banding and nested successfully along the river in the vicinity of the campground, raising two chicks. It is always exciting

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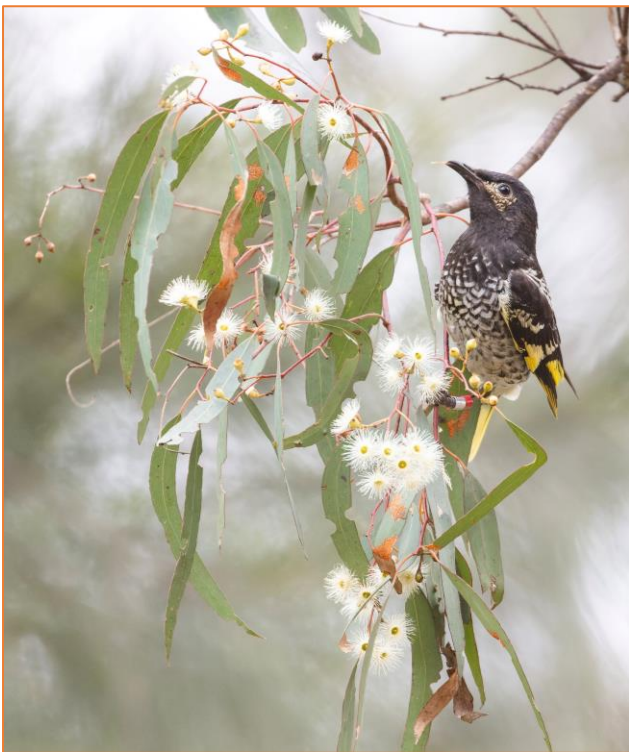
to see previously banded birds back in such important locations as the Capertee Valley, breeding once again after so many years without seeing them. Although we do prefer to see new faces, it does really make us ponder where they have been during the past few years.

From Taronga to Tomalpin to the Capertee

One set of banded birds that we are ALWAYS very pleased to see are birds that we have released from the zoo-bred population. Since mid-2020, these community updates have kept you abreast of the movements of zoo-bred birds from the three NSW Regent Honeyeater captive releases in the Lower Hunter. As we have reported, both the 2021 and 2022 releases in the Tomalpin Woodlands have been very successful but until now we hadn't seen evidence of any NSW-released birds >12 months since the time of their release. This changed on the 29th September when we found one of our 2021 released females – Red-Metal, Green Green ('RMPP') – in amongst the breeding aggregation. Not only that, but she was paired with a wild male and was busily constructing a nest!

RMPP had the dubious distinction of being part of the pair of zoo-bred birds that had made the most nesting attempts in the 2021 post-release monitoring in Tomalpin; with five unsuccessful attempts documented. She was last seen incubating eggs just before Christmas in 2021 and hadn't been seen since. She also had a rough start to the 2023 breeding season with a couple of failed attempts at securing a nest site. However, she eventually settled in to start incubating on a nest in a River Oak in mid-October, with her new wild male partner.

This pair kept the tracking team on their toes for many weeks as RMPP was seen to be sitting on the nest seemingly past the full length of incubation without any signs of nestlings being fed. After a nail-biting wait RMPP and her mate were seen feeding three nestlings and in no time at all three fledglings were bulging out of the nest. By the time we had no fingernails left, two of her three chicks had fledged! Once they had fledged she didn't seem to show a great deal of interest in them, and it wasn't long before the chicks and the father bird were not seen. We are hoping he whisked them away to feed them on his own.



RMPP feeding in Yellow Box blossom in early November
(Tim Paasila / BirdLife Australia)



RMPP and her wild male partner perform a nest-site selection display – these are the sorts of images that keep the recovery team and partners motivated! (Tim Paasila / BirdLife Australia)

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Incredibly, on the very same day that RMPP was discovered by the monitoring team, a member of the public reported a Regent Honeyeater sighting to BirdLife Australia which involved a banded bird. You can imagine the excitement when photos revealed this was a not only a zoo-bred released female bird, but one of our 2022 birds! Orange-Red, Pink Metal ('ORKM') was found along Glen Davis Road on the 29th September in the company of a second Regent Honeyeater. Soon after, the monitoring team found her along Coco Creek and confirmed she was paired with a wild male. Unfortunately they did not nest and were not seen again, but we are hopeful they did breed somewhere off our radars.

They say "things happen in threes" and that played out when a third zoo-bred bird was found. The Capertee wasn't the only location with successful breeding this season. One pair had fledged two chicks from a nest in the Widden Valley; the only successful nest documented this season outside of the Capertee Valley. During follow-up monitoring in early October a third zoo-bred female was found, again paired with a wild male. Excitingly, this was another 2021 release bird but with a very different history to RMPP.

The bird was Red-Metal, Blue-Orange ('RMBO') who had become somewhat of a celebrity after being pasted across the front page of the Newcastle Morning Herald's 'Weekender' Magazine in May 2022. She was there for good reason, as she was part of the only successful zoo-bred pair to breed in the post-release breeding following the 2021 release in Tomalpin. She was not seen on subsequent searches this season, but for the recovery team, collaborators and supporters, having three zoo-bred females found this season – all paired with wild males and one successfully fledging chicks – is exactly the sort of results we are hoping for.



RMBO feeding her fledgling, as appeared on the cover of the 'Weekender' magazine in the Newcastle Morning Herald 14 May 2022 (Lachlan Hall/BirdLife Australia)

Supplementing With a 'Mini Release'

Although the current release strategy is to focus our efforts on releasing large numbers of Regent Honeyeaters, it was decided that a supplementation of the breeding event in the Capertee was a rare opportunity and worth attempting. Our long-term plans are to give the Taronga team 'rest years' to maintain a healthy number of birds in captivity. 2023 was set to be a rest year but with such an important breeding event occurring, Taronga was able to find 14 birds from their Western Plains and Sydney facilities to be released in the national park; all done at short notice which is not easy for the zoo staff. On the morning of the 2nd November and after the final health checks were completed, the 14 birds (comprised of 8 female and 6 male birds) were released into the wild along the Capertee River not far from some of the breeding wild birds.

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The release team with binoculars trained as 14 zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters are released into Capertee NP (Lucas Grenadier/DPE)

The release team watched on as the zoo-bred birds took their first flight into the wild and headed straight for the flowering mistletoe in the giant River Oaks along the banks of the Capertee River. Five of the released birds were heavy enough to be fitted with radio transmitters (all males) which allowed the tracking team to follow these birds closely each day. The non-transmitter birds as always, are much harder to track but luckily in the first week they were mostly found along the same stretch of river as the transmitter birds. Unsurprisingly, this was the same area the wild Regents were breeding in and also in the area with the most flowering mistletoe.



Needle-leaf Mistletoe is a major part of the Regent Honeyeater diet in spring and often underpins breeding events like the one in the Capertee Valley this season (Rob Hynson/ BirdLife Australia)

This mistletoe species had experienced a major die-off in the Capertee and other areas during and after the recent drought. In some areas, such as the Capertee NP, the mistletoe has recovered, while in other areas the mistletoe is much slower to reestablish itself. An innovative project led by BirdLife Australia is implementing a planting program of Needle-leaf Mistletoe *Amyema cambagei* in areas where Regent Honeyeaters used to breed, as this plant is a key resource, both as a food source and a nest site.

After a fairly sedentary first week, several of the released birds started to wander from the release site. Yellow-Metal, Red-Black (YMRN) moved 2.5 km south of the release site in the first week and was also found feeding on Needle-leaf Mistletoe. At the time of writing, a couple of transmitter birds had moved west over the hills bordering the national park and whilst we have had signals for these birds, due to the terrain we have not been successful in locating them. While the wild Regents were busy rearing their young, the released birds hinted at getting in on the action. Yellow-Metal, Blue-Red ('YMBR') was seen behaving as if she was pairing up with a wild male on several occasions. Although a nest has not been found we are hoping they may have nested somewhere off our radar.



A wild male Regent Honeyeater displaying in earnest to zoo-bred female YMBR (Tim Paasila/ BirdLife Australia)

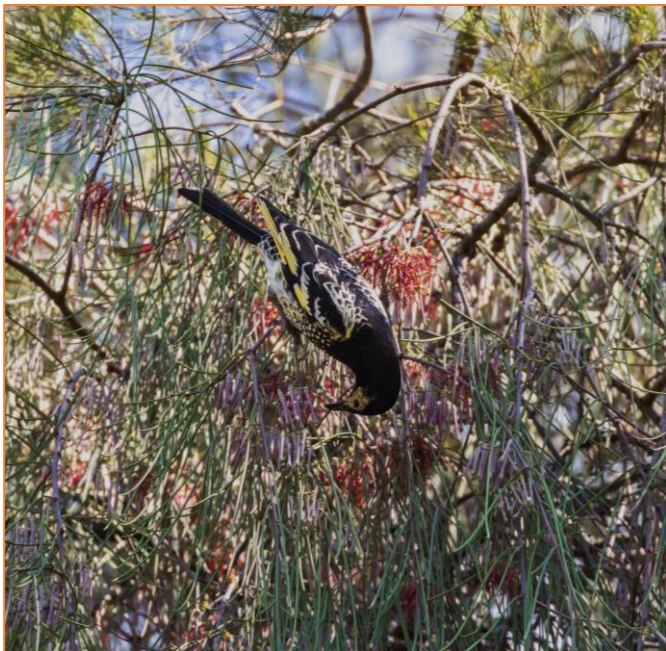
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Attempted romance occurred within the zoo cohort as well, with male bird Yellow-Metal, Black-Black ('YMNN') displaying to female Yellow-Metal, Mauve-Mauve ('YMUU') which was the only sign of two zoo-bred birds pairing post-release.

Mistletoe and Manna Munching

As mentioned earlier, observations of both wild and zoo-bred birds revealed that Needle-leaf Mistletoe was a major part of the diet for these Capertee birds; the same was recorded for the Widden birds. In these valleys, this species of mistletoe grows almost exclusively on River Oaks *Casuarina cunninghamiana*, which line the major watercourses; most notably in the Capertee along the Capertee River. For the past few years, mistletoe has featured in Regent Honeyeater breeding events more than Eucalypt blossom – what a vitally important plant mistletoe really is! So if you find yourself 'kissing under the mistletoe' this Christmas, spare a thought not for the European species associated with Christmas, but for the ~100 native Australian species and the crucial role some of them play in Regent Honeyeater recovery.



A male Regent Honeyeater getting stuck into a bounty of Needle-leaf blossom in the Widden Valley (Tim Paasila/ BirdLife Australia)

Other food sources included lerp, which were mostly being taken from the leaves of Manna/Ribbon Gums *Eucalyptus viminalis* along the river. Although there were some scattered flowering White and Yellow Box trees, the birds definitely did not subsist alone on Eucalypt blossom during this breeding event. Manna Gum is a significant species of Eucalypt, both [ecologically and culturally](#) and apart from foliage-borne food sources, we have observed Regent Honeyeaters feeding on what appears to be sap or manna from some of these trees during the monitoring.

A Busy Approach to Christmas

A great deal has happened in the past week as this update is being written; both good and bad. The good news is that a contingency from Taronga Zoo and BirdLife Australia were able to secure two 'founder' birds from the breeding event to supplement the captive population – critical to the viability of the zoo birds that are integral to the survival of the species. At the same time, the team was able to fit a radio transmitter to a wild bird; a male colour-banded as Red-Black, White-Metal ('RNWM'). Since the fitting of his transmitter we have learnt where his roost is and he has been watched busily tending to his chicks, who were the final fledglings from this important breeding event.



One of the male Regent Honeyeaters that successfully fledged chicks in Capertee NP this spring (Tim Paasila/ BirdLife Australia)

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In fact, one of RNWM's chicks has been observed feeding on the sap-like substance previously mentioned. It is fascinating to watch these birds feeding on a variety of food-sources, which has been a highlight of being able to track birds and observe them.



A recently fledged Regent Honeyeater hovering to get its tongue in sap-like substance for a sugary feed (Tim Paasila/ BirdLife Australia)

Burning Times

Some not-so-good news has come out of the Tomalpin Woodlands where very large and intense bushfires have raged in the past few days. The fires were concentrated north of the actual release site, but badly burnt some of the areas where birds were breeding in 2021, including nesting zoo birds. These fires have also greatly affected the local community of Kurri Kurri and adjacent suburbs and we wish the community well as it rebuilds in the wake of these fires. At the time of writing is not yet safe enough to access the woodlands and assess damage to Regent Honeyeater habitat, so we can only hope that it is not as severe as we fear. The fires have also come at a time when the local ironbarks (Broad-leaved and Grey) have both commenced a heavy blossoming, so we are also hopeful that no Regent Honeyeaters were present in Tomalpin at the time.

2023 at a Glance

Recovery work for the Regent Honeyeater is always something of a roller-coaster ride. 2023 has had its ups and downs, though there were plenty of ups to focus on in NSW this year, including:

- Low mortality demonstrated by the end of the 2022 captive release monitoring;
- A new Banksia-dominated habitat discovered, guided by 2022 release birds;
- The longest distance ever travelled by a NSW-released bird (350km by OPKM found in Red Rock in July);
- The most successful breeding event in the Capertee Valley since 2017, with at least 16 juvenile birds recruited into the wild;
- Two crucial founder birds added to the captive population;
- Three zoo-bred females all partnered with wild males that may have otherwise been unpartnered – one which successfully fledged chicks in the first wild/zoo pairing in NSW to do so; and
- Fitting a radio-transmitter to monitor the movements of a wild Regent Honeyeater for the first time in NSW for 21 years.

And so as the scorching sun sets on 2023, we look ahead to continuing recovery work for the Regent Honeyeater, the *Jewel of the Woodlands*. We also wish all of our readership and their friends and families a safe and enjoyable Christmas break and a prosperous start to 2024.



Zoo-bred male bird, YMUW sings from a perch before flying away from the tents during the 'mini release' of Regent Honeyeaters in the Capertee NP in early November (Mick Roderick/ BirdLife Australia)

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Acknowledgements

The 2022 and 2023 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Releases have been delivered by the Department of Planning & Environment (DPE), BirdLife Australia and Taronga Conservation Society Australia and forms part of the national Regent Honeyeater Recovery Plan implementation. The monitoring of 'wild' Regent Honeyeaters, nest-protection and guardianship of the Capertee breeding event has been undertaken by BirdLife Australia and the Australian National University, assisted by DPE and facilitated by the Blue Mountains Branch of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, to whom we are most grateful for their assistance in many logistical support aspects.

Funding has been 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 2022 release was undertaken on land owned and managed by the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council on Wonnarua Country and the 2023 Capertee release was undertaken on Wiradjuri Country. *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.*

We would also like to acknowledge the many years of outstanding contributions to Regent Honeyeater recovery by co-chair of the Recovery Team, Glen Johnson. Glen will be winding up in that role just before Christmas. He has been involved in every major Regent Honeyeater release and was a key organiser for all of the Victorian-based ones. We will miss his expertise, knowledge and enthusiasm and wish him well in future endeavours.

Please report any Regent Honeyeater sightings ASAP [here](#) or email woodlandbirds@birdlife.org.au



The 'star of the show', RMPP tending to her fledglings in Capertee NP after becoming the first zoo-bred Regent Honeyeater seen in the wild >12 months post-release in NSW, as well as being part of the first successful zoo/wild pairing in NSW – and all ~130km and two years after her release into the Tomalpin Woodlands (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia)