

2024 NSW Regent Honeyeater Community Update #1

September 2024

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group)

Welcome to the first NSW Regent Honeyeater community update for 2024. Following the 2023 update in December, when we reported on the Capertee Valley breeding event and 'micro release' of zoo-bred birds, this update comes to you at the beginning of what we're hoping will be a productive spring for our precious jewels of the woodlands. It also comes to you five weeks after another release of zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters into the Tomalpin Woodlands – our third release in these incredible woodlands on Wonnarua Country. As you'll read, several flocks of 'wild' Regent Honeyeaters had been observed in the Lower Hunter in the lead-up to the recent release, including a few familiar faces. Read on to find out more!

Acknowledgement of Country

All involved in the 2024 Regent Honeyeater release and broader recovery program acknowledge the sovereign owners and knowledge-holders of the land whose country we have had the privilege of walking on for this Regent Honeyeater release – **the Wonnarua People**. We also acknowledge that we walk on the lands of other People and we pay our respects to them and duly recognise that sovereignty was never ceded; it always was and always will be, Aboriginal Land.



One of the Regent Honeyeaters at the first Lower Hunter site they were found, in Werakata SCA (Rick Worthy/Oz Nature Photography)

Spotted Gum Sets the Scene

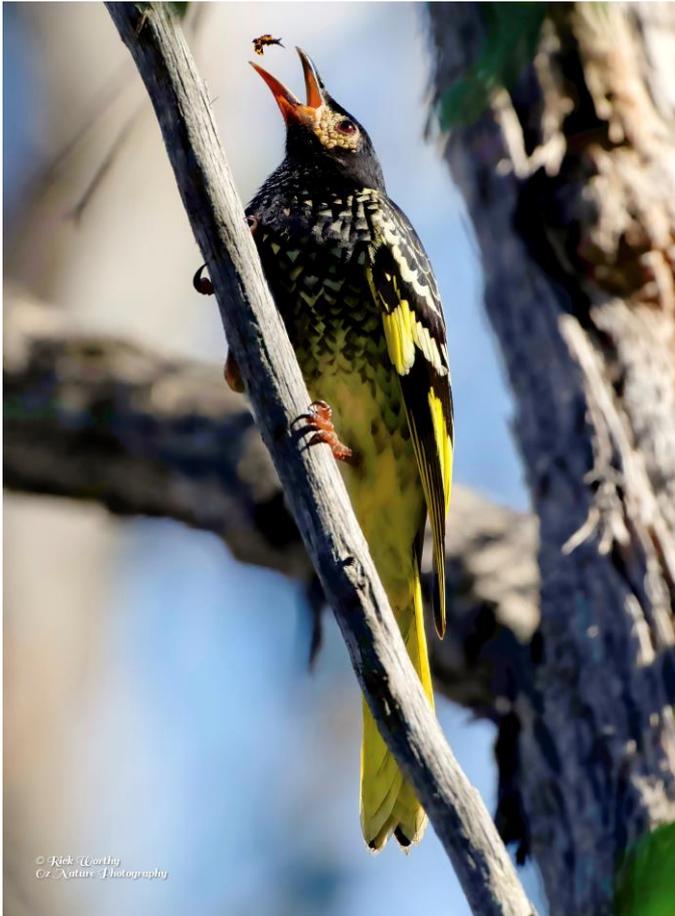
The release planning team, with support from the broader Regent Honeyeater recovery team, had already earmarked the Lower Hunter – specifically Tomalpin – for another large-scale release on the basis that it was going to be another good Spotted Gum flowering season. Spotted Gums only flower every two or three years and do so from autumn to early spring, so this was seen as a great opportunity to release on the back of the Spotted Gum blossom event; in late July. The decision was vindicated early on when in late May, Regent Honeyeaters were detected in three discreet locations; two inside Werakata State Conservation Area (SCA) and one on private property south of Ellalong. Two of these locations hosted proper 'flocks' of at least a dozen birds. A minimum of 17 birds were accounted for in Werakata SCA near the junction of Saw Pit and Quorrobolong Roads, with many-a-birder making the journey to witness Regent Honeyeaters dominating a patch of flowering Spotted Gums; some people even travelling from Melbourne to witness the amazing spectacle which was somewhat like looking back in time, when Regents would arrive at a blossom event and chase other birds away. The other exciting thing about the 'Saw Pit flock' was that every bird was unbanded.

This is the biggest single flock of Regent Honeyeaters recorded anywhere since 20 birds were present near Quorrobolong in winter 2017



Three birds from the Saw Pit Flock (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia)

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One of the male Regent Honeyeaters in the Saw Pit Flock gobbling down a ladybug (Rick Worthy/Oz Nature Photography)

Familiar Faces

It was a slightly different story to the Saw Pit flock composition at the dozen-strong flock south of Ellalong, whose ~24 legs were not all bare! This is where our familiar faces were, with no fewer than three zoo-bred birds from the 2022 Tomalpin release present within the flock. These were female bird PYKM and two males; UWKM and ?WKM (the “?” indicating that he had lost a colour band from his left leg, so although we can’t know the exact individual, we know he was a male bird). To add to the excitement, there was another familiar face with familiar leg-bands in this flock; a wild banded bird OBWM.

Astute readers might recall that OBWM was one of the wild juvenile birds discovered feeding on *Banksia oblongifolia* inside the Kurri Sands Swamp Woodland in March 2023 (as reported in the 2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #6). He was fitted with his colour bands on the 24th March 2023 in the company of other 2022 release birds (and another juvenile bird). It is impossible to know for sure, but it certainly can’t be discounted that OBWM has been associating with the other 2022 birds that he was present with now. From some of the behaviour that the team observed, it was thought that he could have also been paired with PYKM.



PYKM – a female bird from the 2022 release seen in company with two other 2022 release birds and wild birds south of Ellalong in June (Max Breckenridge/BirdLife Australia)



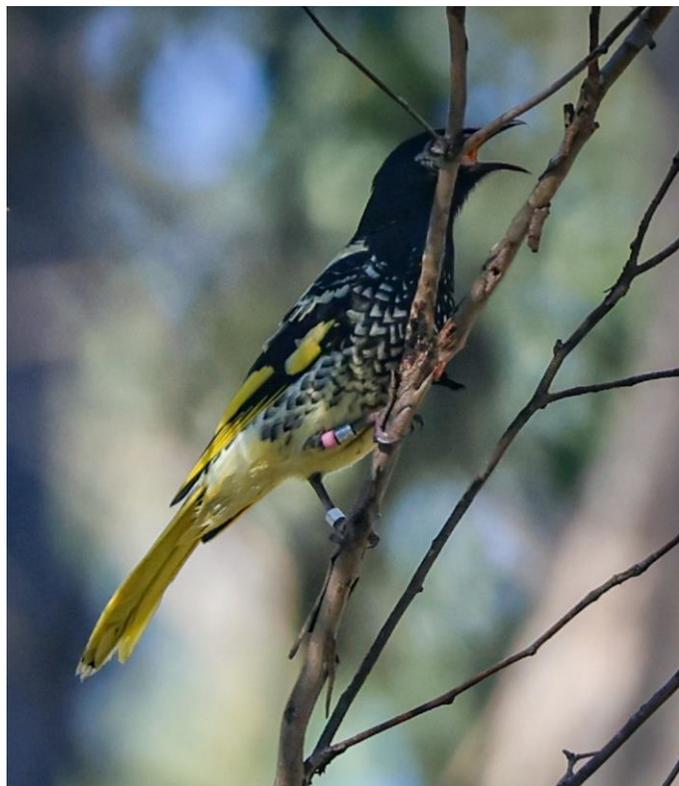
OBWM – one of the two juveniles banded at Pelaw Main in March 2023, behaving as if paired with PYKM pictured above (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

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Wild Learnings

As if the constitution of this 'mixed flock' wasn't exciting enough, there was one more surprise in stall for us. One of the challenges that the release planning team have is the fact that Regent Honeyeaters have the ability to make very atypical calls, quite unlike wild birds. This is something that Taronga and ANU are working very hard on via song-tutoring of zoo-bred birds, with great success so far. The male zoo-bred birds from the 2022 release cohort, including UWKM and ?WKM however were not tutored. So you can just imagine the excitement when we realised that UWKM and ?WKM were sounding almost exactly like their wild male counterparts – in fact they had our team fooled as being wild birds! The song-tutoring work remains a vital part of our supplementing the small 'wild' population of Regent Honeyeaters, but it is heartening to know that should non-tutored zoo-bred birds connect with their wild congeners, they can learn from them.



Although partially concealed by the branch, this male from the 2022 release (?WKM) was singing just like the wild males in the flock he was associating with (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

Release Time!

With these three flocks of Regents elsewhere doing their thing, it was time in July to turn our attention to undertaking the fifth large-scale release of Regent Honeyeaters in NSW – and the third to happen in the Tomalpin Woodlands, on Wonnarua Country. With holding tents set up, the first zoo-bred birds were barely even inside before two wild Regent Honeyeaters came to investigate. These were hitherto unknown birds, presumably attracted to the site by the throng of vocalising zoo-bred Regents – what a great start! This was perhaps due in some small part to the fact that there were some tutored males, mentioned earlier in this update, present in the tents.

Similar to previous Tomalpin releases, the birds and the people present were Welcomed to Country on the first release day by Wonnarua Elder, Uncle Richard Edwards. This was a picture-perfect morning, with Uncle Richard's words only punctuated by a rowdy Swift Parrot that had been feeding in a flowering Spotted Gum right near the tents. Remarkably, Swift Parrots called and flew overhead during Mindaribba's Tara Dever's Acknowledgment during the release of the second cohort a few days later!

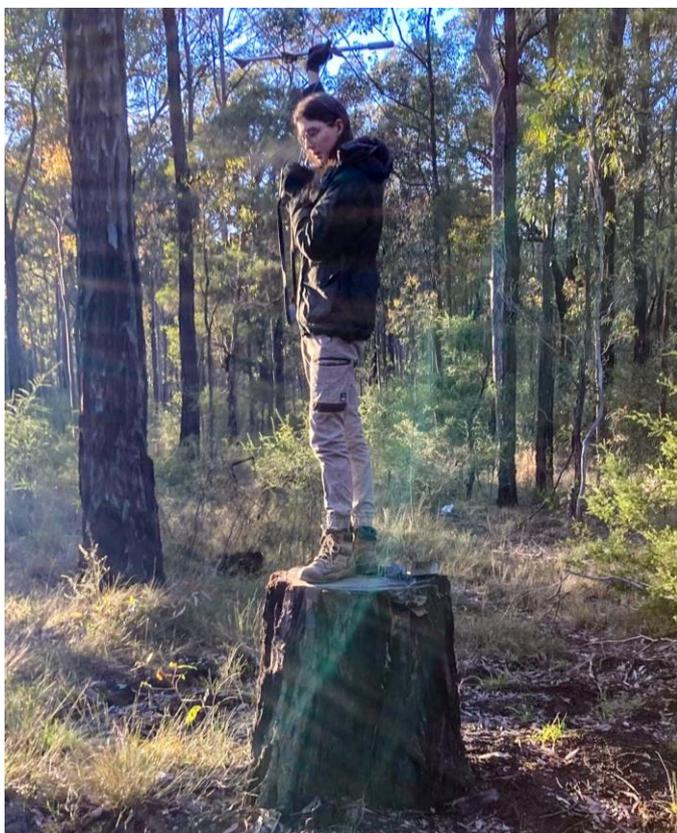


Wonnarua Elder Uncle Richard Edwards, Welcomes the zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters and the release team and collaborators and their families to Country on the release of the second cohort of birds (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

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As has been a powerful theme in the ongoing Tomalpin releases, all present were reminded of the significance of returning the Regent Honeyeaters to Country and the parallels with the struggle of the local Aboriginal people and their fight to protect their land. This was particularly poignant during the second release, where there were as many children present as adults. We walk this journey together and the future of the bird's and people's struggles are in the hands of the younger generations. A total of 49 zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released between two cohorts, with just over half of them (25 birds) wearing harnesses and tiny VHF radio transmitters that allow the tracking team to monitor them for at least five weeks.



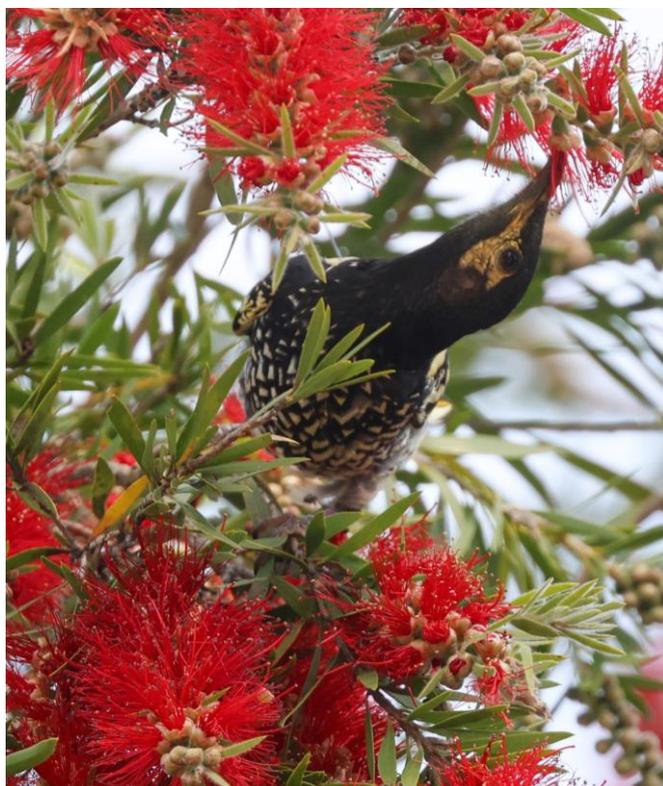
BirdLife's Tim Paasila finds a high point on a stump of a large Broad-leaved Ironbark that was cut down illegally in the Tomalpin Woodlands – an ongoing threat that the Mindaribba Community face in these precious woodlands (Rob Hynson/BirdLife Australia)

The birds were followed by a tracking team led by BirdLife Australia, who have been in the field seven days a week locating as many birds as possible. The BirdLife team were very ably assisted by staff from other organisations; in particular the Department of

Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water and Hunter Local Land Services. Field crews from NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council also helped locate our zoo birds on other days.

Restless Honeyeater

The immediate days following both releases saw the birds remain close to the release site, but it didn't take long for birds to start dispersing away from Tomalpin, keeping the tracking team well and truly on their toes. This is something that had occurred during the previous two (spring) Tomalpin releases, but on those occasions, most wandering birds returned to the confines of the Tomalpin Woodlands, with nesting occurring in the 2021 release and 'clusters' of birds in the 2022 release. The 2024 release saw a much different scenario, with many "runner" birds leaving the range of our tracking teams' receivers in just a few days. Some birds settled in and fed on the abundant planted bottlebrush trees around Kurri and Cessnock, while others found Spotted Gum blossom elsewhere.



Male UMNP feeding in a flowering bottlebrush in suburban Cessnock, where many other nectar-sipping birds were, including Noisy Friarbirds (Mick Roderick/BirdLife Australia)

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Off to School

Probably the most remarkable find of the entire release occurred a few km to the west of our release site in the town of Kearsley. While stopped at an intersection in town, BirdLife's Rob Hynson spotted two Regent Honeyeaters fly into a tree. After pulling off some rapid parking manoeuvres and executing a hop, skip, and jump across the road, it turned out there were in fact three Regent Honeyeaters together in the tree, right on the edge of Kearsley Public School grounds.



One of the 'Kearsley Trio', UMPP, feeding in a bottlebrush on the grounds of Kearsley Public School. (Rob Hynson/BirdLife Australia)

Even more remarkably, these birds were three non-transmitter birds released in the first cohort, that had not been seen since they left the release tents! The male (UMRW) looked to be paired up with UMPP with lots of singing and chasing. This pair seemed inseparable, though the three birds (which became known as the "Kearsley Trio") were seen feeding together on many occasions. This was literally a chance observation, given none of these birds were wearing transmitters. Apart from chance playing a part, it also exemplifies the skills of BirdLife-led tracking team, which we are imparting to our collaborators and the community, so we can increase the chances of detecting our zoo (or wild) Regent Honeyeaters.

Another small cluster of zoo-bred birds were located on the edge of suburbia in Pelaw Main, comprised of two transmitter birds (UMOW and UMNW) along with a non-transmitter bird UMYP. This trio were feeding together in a large flowering Spotted Gum when remarkably they were joined by a bird with bare legs – a wild bird! This was a male bird that continued to mix with the zoo-bred trio and was quite vocal. His repertoire included plenty of 'normal' Regent Honeyeater phrases interspersed with Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater calls—yet another Regent picking up the song of a larger honeyeater and not something the team really enjoys seeing. Then in an act of pure serendipity, the Kearsley Trio went missing for several days, only to then be found in the same Spotted Gum at Pelaw Main! This was a short-lived reunion though and all birds dispersed within a day or two.



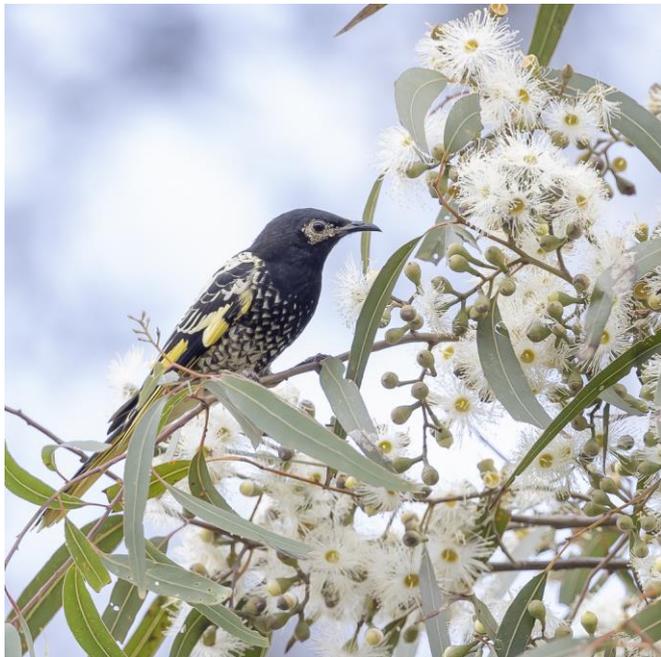
Two of the female zoo birds (UMYP above and UMOW below) that were seen in company with a wild bird and a male zoo bird (UMNW) at Pelaw Main (Rob Hynson/BirdLife Australia).

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Finding the Flock

Although watching the Kearsley Trio was very exciting and rewarding, the biggest highlight from the perspective of our aims in these releases was when one of our female birds (UMWP) joined the Saw Pit Flock. We had already concluded that this flock was comprised of predominantly male birds, as seems to be the case with Regent Honeyeaters generally (i.e. there is a male bias in the population). To have one of our female birds join this flock was very heartening and she was there for around a week before 'disappearing', hopefully departing the area with some of the wild flock. In the days after she left there were fewer wild birds remaining, so we are hopeful this is what happened.



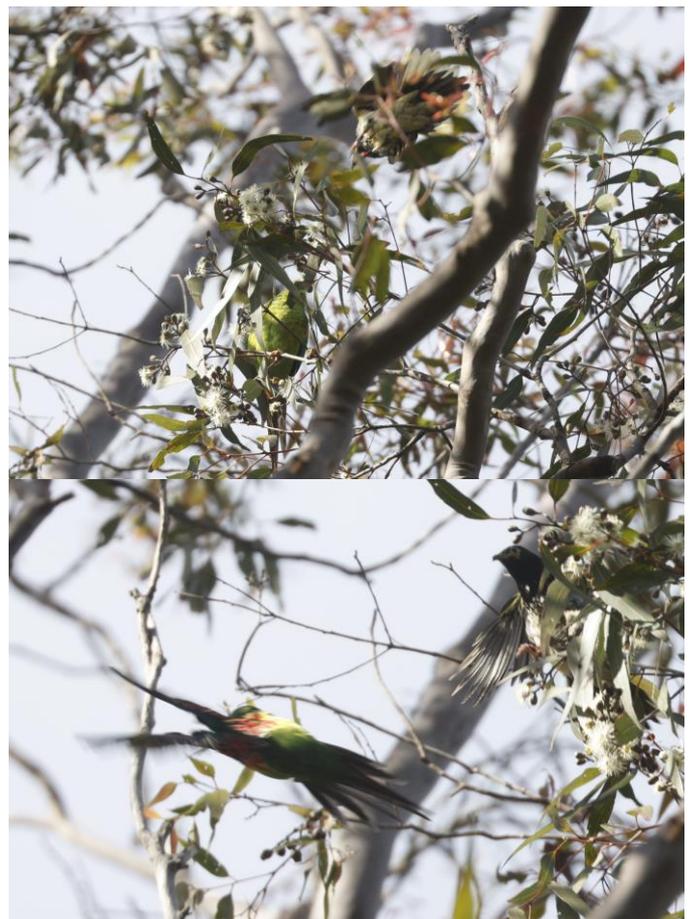
One of the wild male birds in the flock that UMWP joined in Werakata SCA near Kitchener (Rob Hynson/BirdLife Australia).

Birds Either Side

The autumn/winter period of 2024 saw some exciting Regent Honeyeater sightings in the north of its range. In South-east Queensland, a lone male Regent was present at Highfields Falls Bushland Park north of Toowoomba for three weeks from the end of June. There were some claims of more than one bird but none of these claims were able to be substantiated beyond doubt. At the same time that the Highfields Falls bird was busily feeding on flowering Yellow Box, a truly remarkable record

came in from a location that is synonymous with another Regent, the Regent Bowerbird. A Regent Honeyeater was seen and photographed at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat; the first time for 'our' Regent at this heavily birded location (and a very unlikely location too!).

Crossing south across the border but still in the north of the range, two birds were seen at the Copeton Foreshores Caravan Park in early August, not far from Inverell. Like the O'Reillys bird, these two Regents were 'one day wonders' with no subsequent sightings. It is promising to have a small number of observations coming from the north, though they are still worryingly few in number. The only report from Victoria so far this year was of an unbanded bird at Chiltern Valley in mid-March; again a bird that was only seen on the one occasion.



Don't mess with a zoo bird! Male UMRN quickly sees off a Swift Parrot from a flowering Spotted Gum in Tomalpin. Several Swifties were present at the time of release (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia).

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Acknowledgements

Regent Honeyeater recovery in NSW, including the 2024 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release is delivered by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, BirdLife Australia, Taronga Conservation Society Australia and Local Land Services in collaboration with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council. The release and other recovery work forms part of the implementation of the National Regent Honeyeater Recovery Plan, overseen by the Regent Honeyeater Recovery Team. 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 Natural Heritage Trust, Friends of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, and several generous donors and philanthropists. The release of zoo-bred Regent Honeyeaters was undertaken on land owned and managed by the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council and all partners in the recovery of the species recognises and is grateful for the immense contribution of Indigenous people to the contemporary knowledge and conservation of Australia's birds, including the Regent Honeyeater.

Please report any Regent Honeyeater sightings ASAP by visiting:

<https://birdlife.org.au/what-to-do-if-you-see-a-regent-honeyeater/> or emailing woodlandbirds@birdlife.org.au



Female UMWP flies from one Spotted Gum branch to another at Saw Pit Road in Werakata State Conservation Area This is where a flock of mostly male wild Regent Honeyeaters were; 17 birds strong at one stage, present from late May to mid-August, with UMWP joining the flock about a week before the flock started to disband. We hope she is with them, wherever they are. (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia).