

2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater Captive Release

Community Update #6 31st March 2023

Hi everyone (Regent Honeyeater email group),

Welcome to the sixth community update for the 2022 NSW Regent Honeyeater captive release. This update comes to you as we are well and truly into Autumn with pleasantly cooler conditions for the tracking team. There are still a few flowering eucalypts in Tomalpin but our traceable Regents have moved on from their 'home ground' woodland into a surprising new habitat (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.



PPKM feeding up before its wandering travels to the valleys near Wollombi (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia)

The Regent Wanderlust

Last month one of our transmitter birds led us to a gathering of eight Regents feeding in Grey Gums in the north-west of Tomalpin. OWKM was one of three birds fitted with new transmitters in February to track birds through autumn. This gathering didn't last long and once the blossom faded the birds soon dispersed. OWKM started to wander outside Tomalpin and went missing for several days. The second transmitter bird – RNKM was the first of our

newly adorned harnessed birds to disappear from the range of our radio receivers. Our third transmitter bird, PPKM had also left Tomalpin and had moved east towards the slopes of Mount Sugarloaf before going missing for about a week.

With most of our birds disappearing quickly from Tomalpin, a plan was hatched to search for transmitter birds from the air! A Cessna 172 was chartered for an afternoon from Cessnock Airport with the aim of tracking for birds over a larger area than can be achieved on the ground. The team started by searching for a signal for OWKM that we knew was still on the edge of Tomalpin just to confirm a signal could be detected from the air.

After a good signal was detected, a longer route was taken to search for RNKM and PPKM. Travelling north to Maitland and doing a sweep to the west yielded no signals. However, with a final sweep to the valleys south-west of Tomalpin and we hit the jackpot with PPKM detected just a few km east of the town of Wollombi! Once back on the ground, the team raced over to confirm the signal was in that area and got a strong signal from this bird not far from where it was detected in the air. With each release there are birds that move well away from Tomalpin and this new method for tracking Regents that have dispersed will be invaluable to expand upon for our next release.



RNKM not too long before disappearing from radio-receiver range (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia)

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ROKM was another released bird that had a tendency to 'bounce' around the landscape; earning a bit of a reputation amongst the tracking team. Imagine our reaction when in early March a landholder in Martins Creek – 40km from the release site – sent us a photograph of ROKM in her garden's bird bath! ROKM was last sighted in early December in Bellbird to the west of Cessnock, meaning the release team hadn't seen him in three months before being discovered in Martins Creek. We cannot stress enough the importance of reporting every Regent Honeyeater observation and are grateful to Sheree Grant for letting BirdLife know about ROKM immediately. The story attracted a bit of media attention too. You can read more about this exciting yarn [here](#).



ROKM having a drink in a garden in Martins Creek (Sheree Grant)

Shifting Sands

One of the great mysteries for Regent Honeyeater researchers is where these birds go in late summer after leaving breeding areas such as the Tomalpin Woodlands. There are many theories as to where they go, with most assuming that the birds make for habitats with flowering *Eucalyptus* trees. Up until two weeks ago we were still scratching our heads about where our released birds – and their wild counterparts – had gone, but then something very exciting happened!

Our final traceable bird, OWKM has helped reveal some very exciting new habitat-use for Regent Honeyeaters in the post-summer period. This bird has been wandering and disappearing for some time but in mid-March he was tracked down to a location east of Tomalpin. Over the following days an incredible seven birds have now been observed in this area. The most exciting aspect of these recent sightings has been the habitat these birds are using.



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

Regent Honeyeaters tend to be associated with Eucalypt forests, feeding on the abundant nectar in the blossom of these iconic trees. However, these recent sightings have been in Kurri Sand Swamp Woodland (KSSW) – an [Endangered Ecological Community](#) occurring on sandy soils endemic to Kurri Kurri. The birds have almost exclusively been feeding on *Banksia oblongifolia*, a small shrub abundant in this 'heath-like' habitat that is dominated by plants in the Proteaceae family. Although Regent Honeyeaters have been recorded feeding in forest understorey Banksias in the past, this is the first report of them feeding in this type of wet heath habitat and this species of Banksia. In addition to the seven Regent Honeyeaters feeding

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in this habitat, an incredible total of 17 species of honeyeaters have been seen feeding in this same Banksia since we discovered Regents using it. With so many Regents in the one location the tracking team are planning to catch the captive release birds and fit new radio transmitters so tracking can continue through the rest of the autumn and potentially beyond.

Breeding Under the Radar

As if having seven Regent Honeyeaters feeding in a new habitat type wasn't enough, probably the most exciting thing of all about this recent development was something very special about two of the seven birds. Whilst five of the birds found in the KSSW habitat were 'familiar faces' from the 2022 captive release, the other two birds are wild Regent Honeyeaters. These are the first wild birds to be seen since the end of February and are both feeding in the same *Banksia oblongifolia* as the captive release birds. They are also the only known wild birds anywhere at the time of writing.



A wild female juvenile Regent Honeyeater feeding on *Banksia oblongifolia* in the Kurri Sand Swamp Woodland (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia).

But the most exciting thing about these two wild birds is that they are juveniles from the 2022 breeding season – *the first evidence of successful breeding last year!* This exciting discovery shows that even in a season when Eucalypt flowering occurred much later than usual Regent Honeyeaters

were still able to successfully breed. Whether these birds bred in the Tomalpin Woodlands or further afield will remain a mystery but their presence close to Tomalpin so soon after the breeding season had ended shows again just how important the Lower Hunter region is for this species.

With the discovery of these wild juveniles, ANU post-doctorate researcher, Ross Crates, came up to catch and band these two birds. With the help of local bander, Rob Kyte, both birds were mist-netted and colour-banded. *We encourage all observers to now keep their eyes peeled for these very special birds; "Orange-Orange, White-Metal" and "Orange-Blue, White-Metal".*

Ross was able to determine the age of these birds by looking at the different age-classes of the feathers. He confirmed that both birds were born this season and that they are different ages (at about 4 months old and 8 months old) which means there were at least two successful nests in 2022. Displaced feathers from these two birds were taken and dropped at Taronga Zoo for DNA analysis to determine if either of these young birds were raised by any of our captive release birds – a super exciting prospect!



The younger of the wild juvenile Regent Honeyeaters, presumed to be a male bird (Rob Hynson/BirdLife Australia).

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We have been very fortunate to have the opportunity to track our precious released Regents for several additional weeks on top of the 'standard' 10-week period. Through this longer tracking period we have discovered Regent Honeyeaters utilising a new type of habitat and have confirmed successful breeding for the first time across the entire Regent Honeyeater range in the 2022 season. With planned deployment of even more 'fresh' trackers on the KSSW birds in the near future, our monitoring program could be extended for many more weeks and there will surely be more exciting discoveries to come.

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



White-White, Pink-Metal – one of the seven Regent Honeyeaters found feeding in *Banksia oblongifolia* in Kurri Sand Swamp Woodland during March 2023 (Tim Paasila/BirdLife Australia)