

Regent Honeyeaters on the loose

Title

The captive-breeding-and-release program formulated to boost the population of Regent Honeyeaters in Australia has just set 38 more birds into the wild, where they have become reacquainted with an old friend. The Regent Honeyeater is a **Critically Endangered** bird endemic to Australia. It feeds on nectar and insects within eucalyptus forests. Recent genetic research suggests it is closely related to the wattlebirds.

Australia's national Regent Honeyeater recovery team recently released 38 captive-bred Regent Honeyeaters in the Chiltern–MtPilot National Park in north-eastern Victoria in a project being led by BirdLife Australia (BirdLife Partner), the Department of Environment and Primary Industries (Vic), Taronga Zoo and Parks Victoria. This is the third such release, and now brings the total number of Regent Honeyeaters released in Victoria since 2008 to just over 100. The birds were bred and nurtured at Taronga Zoo, and then flown south in aeroplanes before being acclimatised to their new surroundings for two days. Of the 38 birds released, 25 were colour-banded and fitted with radio transmitters so that researchers can follow their movements throughout the region, with the remainder fitted with colour bands only. Within minutes of release the Regent Honeyeaters were foraging and behaving like veterans of life in the wild, hawking insects from mid-air and indulging in the blossom in the canopy of ironbark trees. As with previous releases, a team of volunteers are assisting project staff to radio-track the birds to assess their habitat use, movements and welfare.

For the first few days, most of the birds stayed within a kilometre of the release site, with few birds venturing much further, but within three weeks, many of the birds had dispersed over an area of several kilometres. Thanks to their radio transmitters, we know that at night they have been congregating at communal roosts in the treetops. As yet the captive-released birds have not interacted with any wild birds, a honeyeater that was released in the park in 2010 has been seen back again this year, and has become integrated into a flock of recently released birds. This bird, nicknamed "Blue-Mauve" (thanks to the bands he is wearing), was last seen in 2011 and has now thrived in the wild for three years after being released! As the long-term survival of captive-bred birds and their integration into the wild population is the aim of the program, Blue-Mauve adds another feather in the cap of the captive-release strategy. The release is being conducted under BirdLife Australia's Woodland Birds for Biodiversity project, which is funded by the Australian Government's Caring for Our Country program.