

# Habitat loss threatens Regent Honeyeaters

By Sophia Year1

**The Regent Honeyeater is critically endangered because its habitat, the Iron Bark Forest is being destroyed.**



Regent Honeyeaters are critically endangered in Australia. Photograph: Dean Ingwersen

The arrival of the First Fleet was the starting point of the Regent Honeyeater's decline. These critically endangered birds like to live in woodlands with deep, fertile soils because the trees that grow there produce a lot more nectar. However, when the settlers arrived in the 1700s they needed homes to live in so they began to chop down the Iron Bark Forests that the Regent Honeyeaters lived in. Years later, they continue to lose their precious habitat because of farming and logging.

The loss of habitat has also caused the Regent Honeyeater to lose their food source. Their source of food was the Iron Bark Forests because those trees produced more nectar than most other trees. Unfortunately, "those same spots with deep fertile soils are the places where the early settlers cleared for growing wheat and sheep... cause they are the best agricultural areas," said David Geering from the Office of Environment and Heritage. Now there are only 85% of the Iron Bark Forests remaining and of these they are only small pockets located far away from each other. The Regent Honeyeaters have to travel very far to get to one of

these forests and most of the time they are unable to get between these small pockets. “They’ve got a problem with loss of habitat and what we call fragmentation,” said David.



The captive breeding program has seen successful live births from the released birds in the wild. Photograph: Dean Ingwersen

After the Regent Honeyeaters get to these small pockets they have to compete with other, stronger birds. “Regent Honeyeaters are rather shy little birds and there are lots of birds that are bigger and bossier and now that there’s not that much habitat, guess who gets all the food!” said Ray Thomas from the Regent Honeyeater Project. Their main competitor is the native pest known as, the Noisy Miner. “What they do is they chase all other birds out of their home territory, so Regent Honeyeaters can’t live in places where there’s Noisy Miners,” said David Geering. Over the years the number of Noisy Minors has risen, making it easier for them to outnumber the few Regent Honeyeaters left in the wild. The Noisy Minors attack the Regent Honeyeater in groups by swooping in.

Regent Honeyeaters like to nest in large groups. Most birds like to nest alone, but Regent Honeyeaters breed best when they live with other Regent Honeyeaters. As there are only about 300 to 500 Regent Honeyeaters in the wild, it is difficult for them to find others of their kind. “If we release 70 birds altogether they all stay together and they all nest together and they tend to produce more young,” said David Geering. After four releases and about 180 birds, monitoring has shown that Regent Honeyeater numbers are going up.

In recent years, organisations have realised that Regent Honeyeaters need support their long-term survival. “If we don’t protect them they will go extinct like the Tasmanian Tiger,” said Michael Shiels from Taronga Zoo. Taronga Zoo has started a captive breeding program where they will release them into the wild.

Farmers can also benefit from providing homes for Regent Honeyeaters. Without adequate places to hide like shrubs, Regent Honeyeaters are easily spotted by bigger and bossier birds. Farmers who plant trees with shrubs underneath create places for Regent Honeyeaters to hide and also help to create a wind break for livestock. By planting shrubs, farmers are also working to prevent dieback. As the shrubs drop their seeds which eventually grow and create a denser undergrowth. This dense undergrowth attracts more birds who eat the bugs who would normally destroy the trees.

For those that are interested in helping the Regent Honeyeater they can research their current situation. This can be done by visiting the Taronga Zoo website and the Regent Honeyeater Project website. There are also special tree planting sites where volunteers can go along and plant native trees that Regent Honeyeaters can eventually live in. People can also visit Taronga Zoo and look for the Regent Honeyeaters so they can tell their friends all about the Regent Honeyeater.



During August, September and October bird watchers go out and count the number of Regent Honeyeater sightings in their monitoring sites. Photograph: Dean Ingwersen