

Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater surveys in 2010

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The monitoring program for Swift Parrots and Regent Honeyeaters is continuing in 2010 as part of Birds Australia's Woodland Birds for Biodiversity Project. Now in their 16th and 17th years respectively, Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater surveys continue to captivate an enthusiastic network of dedicated volunteers and the data generated from the program is as useful as ever and being used for a wide range of purposes. One such application has been to use Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater data, along with data for other threatened and declining temperate woodland birds found across south-eastern Australia, to generate a report and mapping product showing areas of highest reporting rates of these species. The focus of this project is to identify critical local landscapes for threatened woodland birds, which will form the basis for targeted private land management initiatives such as voluntary conservation agreements and covenants. Mapping and prioritising sites on this scale has never been attempted before and is largely possible due to the large volume of data that has been collected over the duration of programs such as the long-running Swift Parrot-Regent Honeyeater surveys.

As the autumn survey for 2010 approaches – to be held on the **15-16th May**, the following is a synopsis of what the two species have been up to in recent months and where they have been seen so far this season. The map below also indicates the location of all sightings received to date. If you know of other records or are still to submit record forms, now is the time to lodge all sightings.

Swift Parrots

In October 2009, the first ever comprehensive survey of Swift Parrots in their Tasmanian breeding range was conducted. Involving around 50 people, surveys were completed at over 700 potential foraging sites in eastern and north-west Tasmania. Swift Parrots were recorded at 71 of the 700 sites. Over half of these records were from Bruny Island where Swift Parrots were recorded at 39 of 86 sites surveyed. In contrast, Swift Parrots were recorded at only 32 of the remaining 600 or so sites in eastern Tasmania. Throughout the course of the breeding season, Matt Webb from the Biodiversity Conservation Branch of the Dept. of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, Tasmania, monitored nesting swifties which remained concentrated on Bruny Island. Generally, the breeding season results were considered poor. Despite the fact that locating swiftie nests is no easy task and there is a good chance that many other birds nested successfully and went unrecorded, the same survey methods as used previously were repeated and commensurate survey effort went into season 09-10 yet the number of nests found was still low. This was undoubtedly due to the poor flowering event of Tasmanian Blue Gum - the nectar of which forms a critical part of the parrots' diet during the breeding season. Blue Gum did not commence flowering until quite late and the resource was patchily distributed across just a few regions. South Bruny Island appeared to sustain the most significant Blue Gum flowering of any location in eastern Tasmania in Spring-Summer of 2009-10, and correspondingly that is the region that supported the greatest amount of Swift Parrot breeding activity.

Throughout early autumn, swifties have begun arriving on the mainland. The first sighting this season was of two birds near Swan Reach, East Gippsland, on 29/01/10. Apart from a few groups of birds that turned up around the Bellarine Peninsula and Greater Melbourne regions, including a flock

of up to 80 birds in the You Yangs Regional Park north of Geelong, it appeared that the bulk of the swift population had not migrated from Tassie until around the Easter weekend (3-4 April). Over that extended weekend, over 20 records were received from a range of sites in central and north-east Victoria and there has been a steady stream of reports since. At the time of writing (late April), 70 Swift Parrot reports have been received on the mainland (67 in Victoria and 3 in NSW) and there are still reports of several large flocks (up to 100 birds) in south-east Tasmania, which is very unusual for such large numbers to remain in the breeding range. Forest areas around St Arnaud, Talbot and Muckleford in central Victoria are currently supporting the greatest number of swifties that we know of, with the birds taking advantage of late blossoming Grey Box and early flowering Yellow Gum and Red Ironbark. Smaller numbers of swifties are currently present in north-east Victoria around Killawarra and Chiltern where they are primarily foraging on Mugga Ironbark blossom and lerp on Grey Box foliage. Other areas throughout central Victoria and the inland slopes of NSW probably also contain a number of Swift Parrots as there are reports of widespread eucalypt flowering throughout these regions, but swifties remain to be seen/reported.



Mugga Ironbark-Grey Box woodland in Killawarra Forest (Warby Range State Park), used by a number of swifties throughout the month of April



Yellow Gum blossom – prolific flowering of this very important eucalypt is currently providing swifties with a nectar source at a number of sites on central Victoria's box-ironbark region

The landscape across the south-east Australian mainland has been subject to a completely different set of climatic conditions to last year and indeed for most of the past ten years! Most of Victoria and southern NSW has received average rainfall since the beginning of 2010 and there were some handy localised rainfall events late in 2009 that triggered bud formation on some of the key eucalypt feed tree species. Grey Box flowered prolifically throughout much of central and north-east Victoria during February, March and April and currently Yellow Gum (which normally flowers late winter) and Red Ironbark (normally a mid-winter flowerer) are blossoming heavily. In north-east Victoria and on the NSW south-west slopes, Mugga Ironbark is flowering well, Grey Box blossom persists in pockets and White Box is in heavy bud, perhaps due for a significant flowering around July-August. There are even localised areas of Yellow Box flowering (normally a summer flowerer). In coastal NSW, the south coast region is experiencing moderate Red Ironbark flowering but little Spotted Gum (compared with last years' bonanza!). Swamp Mahogany, a species used heavily by swifties in past years, appears to be coming into flower on the central coast while the Hunter region has only scattered light level flowering at present but high lerp loads.

So, the scene is set for an interesting May survey. Will the inland woodlands contain such a significant proportion of the population, as one might expect with such abundant food resources, or will birds have become accustomed to a sea change and take a holiday on the NSW coast? Your participation in the survey will help us answer this question.

Regent Honeyeaters

Well what a difference a year can make! As you've read above conditions for nectar feeders like Regent Honeyeaters and Swift Parrots in Victoria at the moment are the best they have been for a long time, thanks largely to some great flowering of Grey Box and Yellow Gum. In north-east Victoria the Mugga Ironbark has also flowered better than expected, although also a little earlier than normal. This is vastly different to last year when the majority of this habitat failed to flower at all!

Regent Honeyeater sightings for 2010 started in earnest on the 2nd of January when a single bird was found in Nurragingy Reserve in Doonside, NSW. This bird remained for a week or two and allowed quite a few birdwatchers the chance to start their new year of birdwatching with a bit of a rarity! Around the same time we had a couple of reports from nearby that were tantalising – a pair of birds from Windsor Downs Reserve, and another report of a bird being chased through someone's backyard by a Red Wattlebird in Umina Beach. Unfortunately none of these birds were seen again. In early January a family group (2 adults and a juvenile) in Gippsland were seen for the last time, presumably before some post-breeding dispersal. The adults were banded just before Christmas so we hope to run into these birds again soon.

Things then went quiet (as per normal) until mid March when the first Hunter Valley birds for the year were found. Over a couple of weeks a maximum of 8 birds were seen at Kitchener in Werakata NP. Interestingly this was a site where 20 birds were seen in July last year, again supporting the fact that at times the species demonstrates very strong affinities for certain sites. In early April a Regent was heard calling near Bendigo in central Victoria, but follow-up surveys have failed to locate the bird.

But perhaps the most exciting news for the year so far has come from north-east Victoria. As mentioned earlier the Mugga Ironbark has produced the goods this year and the nectar-sippers have responded...including Regents. At Easter a group of three birds were found in Killawarra State Park (at the northern end of the Warby Range National Park, Vic). Follow up surveys located these birds, and another individual wearing colour-bands. It took quite a while (and two visits!) to confirm the bands, but it was an adult male which had been banded in Chiltern NP in 2006 – making it now at least 6 years old! Since then there have a sprinkling of sightings in the north-east, from here and places like Chiltern. Fingers crossed the conditions stay good enough for a few to join forces and produce some of the next generation!

At the time of writing, the largest flock of birds for the year had just been found at Milbrodale, NSW. This area is at the 'start' of the Howes Valley in the Upper Hunter Valley and an area of historical significance (150+ birds were found in Howes Valley in 1994). Interestingly, the birds seen recently were only taking lerp from the foliage of some flowering Ironbarks – the same as the birds did in 1994. Perhaps this is a coincidence, or maybe it's a feature of mobile flocks? One to ponder...

Finally, volunteers are reminded that reporting sightings of Regent Honeyeaters as soon as possible after finding them is greatly appreciated. As mentioned above we have a long-running banding program in place and results like these are still teaching us a lot about the movements of these often unpredictable birds. The sooner we know about sightings the greater our chance of being able to confirm sightings (or colour bands) and/or investigate the possibility of banding more birds. Further

to this we also urge people to check any Regents they find for leg bands, in particular to look out for those wearing pink bands. All birds released in 2008 in Chiltern NP in Victoria had at least one pink band on their legs to denote they were a captive-bred bird. We are yet to see one of these bands in subsequent years (though not unexpectedly) but are holding on with baited breath for the first one to be seen again. If you think you've found one, please let us know! Happy Regent searching!!



May surveys

With conditions in woodlands across Victoria and parts of NSW as good as they've been for a few years, it is with great anticipation that this years first national Swift Parrot-Regent Honeyeater has come around. We are calling on our volunteers to once again venture into areas of potential habitat to conduct SP/RH surveys: the first will occur on **15-16 May**, with the second on **7-8 August**. The surveys are co-ordinated under Birds Australia's Woodland Birds for Biodiversity (WBfB) project. If you wish to participate or report sightings of either species, please contact Dean Ingwersen (Regent Honeyeaters) d.ingwersen@birdsaustralia.com.au or Chris Tzaros (Swift Parrots) c.tzaros@birdsaustralia.com.au, or call them on 03 9347 0757. The WBfB project is funded by the Australian Government's Caring for our Country program and further information on it can be found here: www.birdsaustralia.com.au/wbc.

Best wishes to all observers and good luck with the survey.