DEPARTMENT OF
SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT

Flora & Fauna Guarantee Action Statement

#41

Published by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria.
8 Nicholson Street,
East Melbourne,
Victoria 3002 Australia

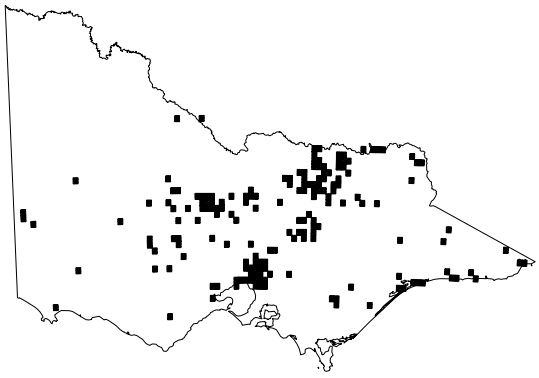
ISSN 1448-9902

Victoria
The Place To Be

Regent Honeyeater

Xanthomyza phrygia

Regent Honeyeater *(Xanthomyza phrygia)*
(Illustration by John Las Gourgues)



Distribution in Victoria (DSE 2002)

Description and Distribution

The Regent Honeyeater (*Xanthomyza phrygia* Shaw 1794) is a specialised, medium-size honeyeater (Family Meliphagidae) inhabiting drier open forests and woodlands in south-eastern Australia. Adults weigh 41 to 46 g. Plumage is predominantly black with bright yellow edges to tail and wing feathers. Body feathers, except for the head and neck, are broadly edged in pale yellow or white (Longmore 1991). The overall visual impression is of a blackish bird boldly embroidered with yellow and white, with brilliant yellow flashes in wings and tail. A large patch of bare, warty skin surrounds each eye.

Nests are constructed of strips of eucalypt bark, dried grass and other plant material. They are placed in an upright fork 4-25 m above ground and 2-3 eggs are laid. In Victoria, nesting occurs mainly between November and January but breeding has been recorded in all months between September and February.

The Regent Honeyeater was formerly distributed within about 300 km of the eastern Australian coast from about 100 km north of Brisbane to Adelaide. However, it is no longer found in South Australia (Franklin & Menkhorst 1988) or western Victoria (Franklin et al. 1989). Further, population dispersion within this distribution is now patchy. The species is highly mobile, but little information is available on movement patterns.

In Victoria, Regent Honeyeaters occur mainly in dry open forest and woodland in areas of low to moderate relief on the inland slopes of the Great Dividing Range. They occur frequently in broad valleys extending into the ranges. They also occasionally visit coastal East Gippsland.

A large proportion of their preferred open-forest communities has been cleared for agriculture, leaving only patches of natural vegetation in a predominantly agricultural landscape. These remnants are frequently growing on the least fertile sites and have been heavily harvested for timber in the past. In Victoria, large areas (400 000 ha) of immature, even-aged and slow-growing box-

ironbark forests are all that remain of the once extensive woodlands; there are no examples of uncut old-growth box-ironbark woodland remaining. A similar, though less critical, situation exists in New South Wales.

Conservation Status

Current status

Garnett (1992)	Endangered
DCE (1991)	Endangered
ANZECC (in prep.)	Endangered
SAC (1991)	Threatened

The Regent Honeyeater has been listed as a threatened taxon in Schedule 2 of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.

Reasons for Conservation Status

Taxonomic Discreteness

The Regent Honeyeater is the only member of its genus, Xanthomyza, and its morphology does not vary across its range (Shodde et al. 1992). Schodde & McKean (1976) considered that it is most closely related to the highland Papuan honeyeaters of the genus Melidectes. Therefore, on the grounds of phylogenetic distinctness alone, the Regent Honeyeater warrants high priority for conservation action.

Distribution

Recent surveys clearly indicated that the range of the Regent Honeyeater has contracted significantly. It is no longer found in South Australia (Franklin & Menkhorst 1988), is now a rare vagrant in the Bendigo area of central Victoria (Franklin et al. 1987) where it was formerly common (Ryan 1951, 1981), and is rare or absent in Gippsland where it was a regular spring and summer visitor.

The most recent survey (Webster & Menkhorst 1992) highlighted the extreme patchiness of the population. In NSW and the ACT, 77% of records were from four localities: Warrumbungle National Park, Austins Crossing, Capertee Valley and Canberra. In Victoria, 82% of records were from three localities: Chiltern Park, Killawarra State Forest and Reef Hills Park.

The current lack of knowledge of movement patterns or the whereabouts of birds when they are absent from the known sites is a matter for concern.

Abundance

Density measurements are extremely difficult to obtain, and probably have little meaning for a highly mobile species thinly spread over large areas of eastern Australia. During two years of survey, 299 sightings were recorded from 51 separate localities. It is estimated that no more than 102 individuals were observed during 1988-89 and no more than 145 during 1989-90 (Webster & Menkhorst 1992). Most sightings involved small numbers of birds - 30% of observations were of a single bird and 31 % of two; 88% of observations were of four or fewer. Flocks of 10 or more Regent Honeyeaters were found on eight occasions (2.7%) and the largest aggregations were of 23 birds at both Austins Crossing in NSW and Reef Hills Park in Victoria. Much larger aggregations were reported in the past; for example Ramsay (1866) 'in immense numbers' and White (1909) 'in thousands'.

The major concerns about the status of the Regent Honeyeater are summarised below.

- It has specialised habitat requirements with an apparent reliance on a small number of favoured sites.
- There have been significant reductions in the extent and quality of habitat.
- There has been a reduction in range in recent decades (probably ongoing in central Victoria);
- The Regent Honeyeater has a low population level based on the 1988-1990 survey (Webster & Menkhorst 1992) between 500 and 1500 is considered a reasonable estimate - and low population densities throughout its range.
- There are no obvious short-term solutions to the postulated causes of the population decline. Only long-term changes to land management, on both public and private land, will lead to a significant improvement.

In its final recommendation the SAC (1991) determined that the Regent Honeyeater is:

- in a demonstrable state of decline which is likely to result in extinction;
- significantly prone to future threats which are likely to result in extinction; and
- very rare in terms of abundance or distribution.

Major Conservation Objectives

- Retain and enhance all stands of native open forest or woodland within the range of the Regent Honeyeater that contain any of the 'key' eucalypt species Eucalyptus sideroxylon (Red Ironbark), E albens (White Box), E. melliodora (Yellow Box), and E. leucoxylon (Yellow Gum). This should include remnant stands on agricultural land, in streamside and roadside reserves, travelling stock routes, State forest and conservation reserves.
- Manage all such sites to retain the number of the key eucalypt species and to increase the number of mature trees of these species.
- Stabilise the population at least at its present level until the availability and quality of habitat can be increased through natural regeneration and revegetation works, including some habitat on high fertility sites.
- Initiate further research into micro-habitat utilisation, movement patterns, the role of inter-specific competition for nectar, and the breeding success of the Regent Honeyeater.
- Establish a recovery team to supervise all elements of this action statement and to recommend changes to management actions based on new information that may result from research.

Management Issues

Ecological Issues Specific to the Taxon

The Regent Honeyeater is highly specialised to box-ironbark eucalypt associations. The results of all studies concur strongly on the specialised dietary preferences of the Regent Honeyeater (Franklin et al. 1989,Webster & Menkhorst 1992). The species is highly nectarivorous and remarkably consistent in preferring nectar from four eucalypt species: E sideroxylon, E. albens, E melliodora and E. leucoxylon. Note that the most highly preferred ironbark species is E. sideroxylon, which occurs in Victoria only in the north-east, and not E. tricarpa, the form occurring across central Victoria and Gippsland and recently elevated to species level (Hill & Johnson 1991). Except in gardens, it rarely takes nectar from shrubs, including grevilleas and banksias which are highly attractive to other honeyeaters.
In a survey in NSW and Victoria the first three of the preferred eucalypt species were present at 75% of sites where Regent Honeyeaters were found (Webster & Menkhorst 1992). Of these species only E. sideroxylon can be considered widespread and common throughout the Regent Honeyeater's historical range. E. albens, E. melliodora and E. leucoxylon grow on fertile soils on gently sloping foothills and plains and have all suffered extensively through clearing for agriculture. Stands of these species growing on high-quality sites where nectar production is copious and relatively predictable appear to be critical to the survival of the Regent Honeyeater. These stands include small, isolated patches growing in agricultural areas, as well as patches in State forests or conservation reserves.
Reliance on eucalypt nectar from a few species predisposes the Regent Honeyeater to suffering competition for nectar from other species, including the honeybee; apiarists also consider these eucalypts to be good nectar producers.
Increased competition from other nectarivores has resulted from habitat fragmentation and a reduction in the number of high-quality sites through clearance of vegetation for agriculture. This has been postulated as a major factor in the decline of this species (Franklin et al. 1989, Franklin & Robinson 1989, Ford et al. in press).
Insects are also a necessary dietary component, especially during breeding, and are gleaned from foliage and bark, and also taken in flight. Insect exudates are also eaten (Davidson 1992), but apparently infrequently.
The need for corridors of eucalypt woodland which link these high-quality sites is unclear, but may be desirable to facilitate movement of Regent Honeyeaters between patches of flowering eucalypts.
By comparing vegetation parameters in quadrats centred on occupied trees with control quadrats located 100 m to the north of the occupied tree, a preference by the Regent Honeyeater for large emergent trees has been demonstrated (Webster & Menkhorst 1992). This suggests that past silvicultural treatment of many box-ironbark woodlands, intended to produce dense pole stands which are still immature, may have removed much favourable habitat, especially in Victoria. Tree decline in agricultural and pastoral land has also depleted the quality of remnant stands. Many eucalypts in rural areas have a limited life expectancy and seedling recruitment is suppressed by stock grazing. Further attrition of habitat by clearing, dieback and timber harvesting continues throughout the Regent Honeyeater's range. Measures to turn around this loss of habitat are urgently required.
Despite increased knowledge from studies conducted since 1985, a long-term program of research and management is necessary to ensure the survival of the Regent Honeyeater. A major need is improved knowledge of its ecological requirements, movement patterns and the role of competition from other honeyeaters and honeybees for a depleted nectar source.
Because of the complex movement patterns of the Regent Honeyeater, a given site may be used only intermittently, but may be of critical importance during its use. Thus, infrequent or irregular use of a site does not necessarily reduce the site's conservation significance.
The limited nesting behaviour data suggest that renesting after failure or completion of a breeding attempt does not occur, at least not at the same site. Thus, the reproductive potential of the species may not be high compared to many other honeyeaters which regularly undertake successive breeding attempts.

Wider Conservation Issues

Progress towards achieving the major conservation objective will be entirely compatible with the aims of several other government programs including the Native Vegetation Retention planning controls, Greening Australia, Tree Victoria, LandCare, Salinity Management and Land for Wildlife. It will also benefit several other threatened or uncommon species including Brushtailed Phascogale, Squirrel Glider, Bush Thick-knee, Painted Honeyeater and Swift Parrot.

Social and Economic Issues

Significant areas of Regent Honeyeater habitat are currently or could be used for timber extraction, mining and agriculture. Small areas across large numbers of freehold properties, as well as Crown Land, are involved.

Private Land

Regent Honeyeaters utilise remnants of box-ironbark woodland, often now of poor quality, on possibly hundreds of freehold properties in central and north-eastern Victoria. In most cases, these areas form only a small proportion of the property and are often marginal to the main farming activities. However, they may provide some grazing, stock shelter, and a source of fence posts and firewood. These activities are compatible with Regent Honeyeater protection provided mature trees are protected and stock excluded from sufficient areas to allow regeneration of the important tree species.
Clearing of box-ironbark remnants greater than 0.4 ha requires approval under Native Vegetation Retention planning controls. Whether or not particular remnants are important, Regent Honeyeater habitat is one factor influencing the deliberations of shires and CNR on applications to clear. Because box-ironbark remnants are usually growing on infertile sites it is

unlikely that there will be many, if any, properties where clearing important Regent Honeyeater habitat would bring significant economic benefits. Furthermore, the procedure for approving applications allows each case to be assessed on its merits.
Landholder interest in ensuring long-term sustainability of their land has in recent years shifted attention to the importance of retaining, restoring and replanting indigenous vegetation. The protection and enhancement of Regent Honeyeater habitat will occur coincidentally with such programs. Landholders belonging to the 'Land for Wildlife' scheme and to Molyullah-Tatong LandCare Group have already shown considerable interest in enhancing habitat for the Regent Honeyeater, and take pride in helping conserve a threatened species on their land.

Public Land

Extraction of timber and minerals, and grazing, will be excluded from small areas of public land to protect sites regularly used by the Regent Honeyeater.
Chiltern Park has a long history of timber extraction which targeted larger trees. Consequently, comparatively few large trees remain. Harvesting of large trees is being phased out in order to protect a range of environmental values, including several rare and threatened species. Therefore, economic consequences attributable to protecting the Regent Honeyeater at Chiltern are small because harvesting of all E. sideroxylon above 25 cm diameter and all box trees above 20 cm diameter is being phased out for other reasons.
Killawarra State Forest is used primarily for timber production. In this case, the costs in foregone timber production will be directly attributable to Regent Honeyeater conservation. The area unavailable for timber production is likely to be approximately 110 ha (3.9% of the 2780 ha forest).
The only timber extracted from Reef Hills Park is small volumes of firewood so exclusion of two Regent Honeyeater sites from timber harvesting will have little overall economic effect.
Protection of remnants on roadsides, including individual large trees, may affect road construction and management activities.

Management Action

Previous Management Action

Research and Survey

Concern about the conservation status of the Regent Honeyeater was first raised in the late 1970s. Details of all past and current sightings of the species were collated between 1983 and 1987. The results provided the first details of the ecology of the Regent Honeyeater (Franklin et al. 1989). The results also indicated a clear contraction of its range in South Australia and western Victoria (Franklin & Menkhorst 1988, Franklin et al. 1987) and a reduction in the frequency and size of aggregations.
Based partly on the results of this work, the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service funded a two-year field survey of the species in Victoria and New South Wales. This survey, conducted by the Wildlife Branch CNR, drew heavily on reports of Regent Honeyeaters from bird-watchers throughout south-eastern Australia. The study finished in April 1990 and recommendations based on the results of that study and the previous studies were formulated by the steering committee, and subsequently revised following extensive consultation within CNR.
These recommendations formed the basis of a guideline in the CNR Wildlife Manual. They are now being implemented at sites in north-eastern Victoria.

Habitat Protection on Freehold Land

In May 1990 staff of the Benalla Region, CNR, located up to 30 Regent Honeyeaters on freehold land near Lurg. Birds were also present in the winters of 1991 and 1992. Local landholders were informed of the significance of their land and its remnant eucalypts and the need for protection. This area was then targeted by the local LandCare group for establishment of corridors of the 'key' eucalypt species linking existing remnant stands.
In 1991 and 1992 areas of freehold land west of the Yarrambat Golf Course, which are regularly visited by Regent Honeyeaters, were acquired by Melbourne Water Corporation to be added to the Plenty Gorge Park.

Intended Management Actions

Many of these actions are dependent upon funding from ANPWS Endangered Species Program, which requires establishment of a recovery team that will assist coordination with NSW agencies. These actions should be coordinated with increased CNR and community (e.g. VNPA) focus on Box-Ironbark woodlands. Active encouragement of tertiary institutions is also required.

Recovery Team

- Establish a Recovery Team to guide, evaluate and review progress, and implement recommendations which may arise from research. The recovery team will, within two years of being established, re-evaluate the adequacy of the actions proposed in this action statement.

Public Land

- Develop exclusion areas around all sites on public land that are known to be regularly used by Regent Honeyeaters. Exclude timber extraction, mining and stock grazing from these sites. Regularly used sites are those known to have been used by Regent Honeyeaters at some time in at least three of the past six years. The research and monitoring activities proposed in this action statement will allow the Recovery Team to identify and list further regularly used sites and their exclusion zones. If use of an area is not recorded during 6 consecutive years, assuming reasonable monitoring has been conducted during appropriate seasons (see Research and Monitoring below), the area may be delisted.

- Record all regularly used sites in management plans. Exclusion areas include a 100 m wide disturbance-free zone surrounding the site, plus a further 150 m wide zone within which at least 10 habitat trees per hectare are to be retained. Habitat trees are large, vigorous individuals of the key eucalypt species.
- Exclusion areas identified to date include parts of Chiltern Park and Killawarra State forest in North East Region and Reef Hills Park in Benalla Region and are mapped in Wildlife Guideline Number 18Gu-04. Further survey on public land in the Eildon area, including Fraser National Park and Eildon State Park, may reveal regularly-used sites there.
- If Regent Honeyeaters are found to be present in an area proposed for timber cutting that is not listed as a regularly used site, the area utilised by the honeyeaters will be excluded from timber cutting until its significance for Regent Honeyeaters can be assessed by the Recovery Team and appropriate modifications to the cutting prescriptions devised.
- Undertake experimental silvicultural treatments aimed at producing an increase in the number of large, spreading eucalypts of the key species at selected sites adjacent or close to the preferred sites on public land. This may include thinning to enhance the growth of selected individuals or stems but only stems less than 25 cm diameter at breast height (over bark) shall be removed.
- Re-assess management of all public land containing the key species to ensure that the current number of mature trees is at least maintained and preferably increased over time.
- Re-assess all road reserves currently being grazed under license within the Regent Honeyeater's distribution. Where the locally indigenous eucalypts include one or more of the key species, CNR should assist the licensees by supplying trees or fencing materials or discounting the license fee. Roadsides should also be assessed and liaison with shires and interest groups established to encourage the protection and enforcement of preferred vegetation. Shires should be encouraged to develop roadside management plans.

Freehold Land

- Survey and map all stands of the key eucalypt species on freehold land within the current strongholds of the Regent Honeyeater (Map 1).
- Use all available administrative avenues to protect identified stands. Avenues include vegetation clearance controls and voluntary conservation agreements and covenants, such as the 'Land for Wildlife' scheme. In this context protection of eucalypt stands means managing them to ensure they are not cleared, to reduce the incidence of dieback, and to ensure regeneration is taking place.
- The consideration of applications under Native Vegetation Retention controls by shires and CNR and mining titles by Department of Manufacturing and Industry Development and CNR should take into account Regent Honeyeater habitat requirements. This will include strict controls on removal of any large trees of the key species.
- Use tree planting programs established by the Commonwealth and State Governments to create habitat on cleared land within the Regent Honeyeater's range and to join remnant stands into larger, more viable units. CNR staff should provide advice to land managers about the location of important sites to be revegetated with locally indigenous trees and shrubs.
- When assessing funding applications for remnant vegetation protection and revegetation works, priority should be given to projects which benefit the Regent Honeyeater.
- Inform all LandCare groups within the range of the Regent Honeyeater about the species' conservation status and habitat requirements. The groups should be given advice and encouragement to protect and plant the most appropriate tree and shrub species for the Regent Honeyeater. In particular, it is vital to plant the locally indigenous form of ironbark (E. sideroxylon) in the north-east, and to include a shrub layer in all plantings, to avoid creating further habitat for the competing Noisy Miner (Manorina melanocephala).
- Continue discussions with landholders in the Plenty Gorge area to ensure that the area is managed in accordance with the long-term conservation requirements of the Regent Honeyeater.
- A significant site occurring on freehold land near Lurg, Benalla Region, should receive particular emphasis from Land for Wildlife Extension Officers and Wildlife Planners to ensure that existing trees are retained and regeneration of the key eucalypt species is promoted. Funds will be required for fencing to exclude stock from critical areas once these areas have been identified.

Research and Monitoring

Funds need to be secured to undertake the research outlined below. Some projects may be suitable for post-graduate students to undertake.

- Establish a monthly monitoring system on population fluctuations, breeding attempts and eucalypt flowering at the important sites including Chiltern Park, Killawarra State Forest, Reef Hills Park, the Lurg district, the Eildon district and the Plenty Gorge area.
- For a thinly distributed and highly mobile species such as the Regent Honeyeater the co-operation of volunteer bird observers and local staff of the relevant government agencies is vital if a successful research or monitoring program is to be achieved.

- Determine the patterns of movement by colour banding and radio tracking individuals. This would allow the mapping of local and large-scale movements. Colour banding individuals would also indicate whether or not individual Regent Honeyeaters return regularly to certain sites.
- Further investigate the flowering and nectar production of the key eucalypt species of different age and size classes in a range of situations, including large and small patches, on ridges, slopes and gullies, and their presence and absence of grazing by stock. The results of this research can be used to develop prescriptions for habitat tree retention for Regent Honeyeaters in all production forests containing the key eucalypt species.
- Investigate the feasibility of creating a model to predict Regent Honeyeater movements by collating all available data on climatic parameters, flowering times of eucalypts, nectar production rates and honeyeater movements.
- Investigate further the theory that interspecific and intraspecific aggression may influence the accessibility of nectar, breeding success, use of optimum habitat and therefore the survival of individual Regent Honeyeaters. This may be conducted concurrently and share sites with flowering phenology and nectar production research.
- Continue to monitor breeding success at nests within Victoria to assess levels of recruitment.

Liaison

- Ensure close liaison between CNR, the Recovery Team and all agencies and individuals who manage land on which the key eucalypt species occur. This includes state, federal and local government agencies, utility providers, LandCare groups, Country Fire Authority units, the Roadside Conservation Committee and individual landholders.
- Instigate an extension program to inform land managers of the significance of regularly used sites and remnants of the key eucalypt species.
- Facilitate the formation of a Friends of the Regent Honeyeater group to assist the Recovery Team and CNR with extension, monitoring and the implementation of this action statement.

Other Desirable Management Actions

- The Recovery Team should monitor the results of current research into the effects of honeybees on honeyeater populations and, if warranted, re-assess apiary licences at critical Regent Honeyeater sites.
- A small captive colony of Regent Honeyeaters should be established so that captive husbandry techniques can be perfected and documented. A detailed captive management manual should be developed for use should the decline of the wild population continue. This project should be jointly managed between an established zoo and CNR.

Legislative Powers Operating

Species Protection

Wildlife Act 1975: regulates the taking and possession of wildlife. Xanthomyza phrygia is protected under the Act.
Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988: provides for the protection of flora and fauna in Victoria and the declaration of critical habitat if so designated.

Critical Habitat Protection

Regularly used sites occur on land managed under provisions of the Forests Act 1958 and the National Parks Act 1975. The Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987, through the Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production (DCE 1999), provides for the adoption of harvesting prescriptions that will protect regularly used sites. Habitat on freehold land is subject to clearance controls under Amendment S 17 of the State Planning Scheme under the Planning and Environment Act 1987.

Licence or Permit Conditions

Before Regent Honeyeaters can be captured or banded, permits must be obtained from the Director, Flora and Fauna Branch, CNR and the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme of Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. For work within areas managed under the National Parks Act, a further permit is required from the Director, National Parks, CNR.

Consultation and Community Participation

Many of the actions in this action statement were developed by the Steering Committee for the Regent Honeyeater which coordinated the ANPWS survey. This committee comprised representatives of CNR, Forestry Commission of NSW, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and ANPWS.
Numerous bird observers and others contributed observations during the course of the field survey and state and national ornithological organisations have supported the management recommendations.
LandCare groups in north-eastern Victoria are actively regenerating the key eucalypt species and creating corridors to link areas of remnant habitat.
Taronga Zoo, Sydney, is willing to participate in any captive management phase.

Implementation, Evaluation and Review

Implementation of this action statement should be jointly managed by the Recovery Team in conjunction with relevant CNR Regions (North East, Benalla, Alexandra, Melbourne, and Bendigo) and the Wildlife Section, Flora and Fauna Branch.
The Recovery Team will be required to oversee implementation, to co-ordinate activities and review progress towards saving the Regent Honeyeater. This Recovery Team will include Flora and Fauna Guarantee Officers from the five CNR regions plus representatives from the Wildlife Section, RAOU and LandCare groups. This team should meet at least four times per year.

Contacts

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Further information

Further information can be obtained from Department of Sustainability and Environment Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

Flora and Fauna Guarantee Action Statements are available from the Department of Sustainability and Environment website: http://www.dse.vic.gov.au

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