**Episode 1 Transcript – A glorious bird in trouble**
Narrator/Interviewer: Mary-Anne Scully (MS)

Liz Wemyss (LW)

Glen Johnson (GJ)

Janet Chapman (JC)

Mark Cairns (MC)

00:02 [upbeat music playing]

00:14 Mary-Anne Scully: If you travel by car or train from Melbourne to the New South Wales border, your journey will take you right through the heart of a national park. Established in 2002, Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park is a natural gem in Victoria's north east. It's a biodiversity hotspot that is home to many different plants, reptiles and animals including the critically endangered and much-loved bird species.

00:44 [captive bred regent honeyeater call]

00:49 Liz Wemyss: It's a beautiful bird. It's charismatic, it's like a beautiful golden and black. It's one of those birds that got me into the forest. It really kick-started my love of birds and the research of these species.

01:02 Glen Johnson: In some respects, I think them of as being mischievous because they’ve got the capacity to turn upside down, do 360s in their absolute zeal and zest for trying to get nectar out of an upside hanging eucalypt flower so they’re amazing in their dexterity and their capacity to do cartwheels in the canopy.

01:25 Janet Chapman: They're distinctive. They may not be the most attractive bird in the world, but they make up with that with their tail. [laugh]

01:33 MS: The voices you've just heard were describing the regent honeyeater. A bird once commonly seen along Australia's east coast stretching from Brisbane to Adelaide. Regent honeyeaters are now only found in small numbers in Victoria and New South Wales. So what's going on? In this series we'll explore the challenge this bird faces, meet people who are striving to bring the species back from the brink of extinction and take a virtual walk through Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park - a critical feeding ground for the regent honeyeater. We'll also unearth the story behind the painting of a mammoth mural at a local sports ground that celebrates this special bird.

02:15 [upbeat piano music playing]

02:23 MS: The regent honeyeater was called the warty-faced honeyeater. A terrible name choice as it is one of Australia's most handsome honeyeaters with striking yellow and black plumage. Regent honeyeaters were once regular visitors as far north as Rockhampton, west to the Riverina region of New South Wales and south to the suburbs of Melbourne. But no more. Numbers are now estimated to be as low as 400 in the wild due to the clearing of their woodland habitat among other threats. Habitat clearance has also encouraged a proliferation of more aggressive spaces of honeyeaters such as noisy miners. The regent honeyeater is a species in trouble. As Glen Johnson, from the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning explains.

03:11 GJ: It's a critically endangered species which means its numbers are low. Their numbers are below 400 animals in south east Australia. We know they have declined. They used to be all the way through to Adelaide and they're no longer there. They struggle to get into the burbs of Melbourne where they used to be prolific going back into the 1800s and early 1900s. So, we have a diminished population and it's declining.

03:37 MS: Marks Cairns from the North East Catchment Authority agrees. Mark has worked in threatened species recovery for most of his career and now leads up a program called Bush for Birds in north east Victoria.

03:53 Mark Cairns: Regent honeyeaters are really our yellow canary. It’s ringing the alarm bells that the system is in trouble. We’ve got an estimated 400 birds left in the wild, essentially distributed between the New South Wales/Queensland border all the way down to central Victoria. To give you the indication of the habitat the winter flowering eucalypt Box-Ironbark habitat that these birds rely on during late autumn, winter and early spring, it's capable of supporting the numbers that are there. Which are only 400 birds. Historically there was thousands, hundreds of thousands of birds potentially, prior to European settlement. They will be finding life very, very difficult. They will be finding that outside of the bird world they have a lot of friends, but inside the bird world it's you know, it’s cutthroat and they're at the sharp end of the stick. They would probably be pretty stressed. You know, they are used to having other people around. I mean, historically they used to move around in larger flocks, and you know, nest in sort of larger loose aggregations and they had the capacity to push the unlikeables out because they had the numbers but they don't have that now. So, they are probably a bit of a loner.

04:59 [captive bred regent honeyeater calling]

05:04 MS: Regent honeyeaters will move large distances in search of flowering events in key tree species. Glen Johnson describes them as grey nomads.

05:14 GJ: These birds are resident, but only for a short period of time. They are habitual, in that they might come back to where they might have been born, and so that there is some regularity in certain times of the year in certain locations but in between times, but in between times they are a highly episodic species. They can move large distances across the landscape in search of nectar essentially. If you imagined the landscape pre-settlement times where there was this continuum of rolling woodlands and forest environments which had great diversity and great continuity, and so there was this ability to pick your way through the landscape and follow flowering. I've got bees at the moment and I think about bees and how they’re faring from one week to the next and how they struggle a little bit in the, at certain times of the year. If it's really, really hot or really cold and there's no resources, it's the same with the birds. A pure nectivorous bird, something that relies on your carbohydrates is nectar every day of the year. You’ve got to put yourself into a patch which is rich or you've got to move to that resource and so I suppose, the grey nomad philosophy, is where we travel to those parts of the landscape where we're comfortable and where we can get food and shelter and that’s essentially what the birds are doing too. It's critical for them to be able to find rich sites that they can persist but that they can also ultimately breed in as well.

06:50 MS: Regent honeyeaters are lured to Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park to feast on rich nectar provided by tree species like Mugga Ironbark that flower in north east Victoria during autumn and winter.

07:02 GJ: For us in the north east here, the reason why swift parrots and regent honeyeaters call our part of the world home is that in the colder autumn through winter and early parts of spring our forests are doing their thing at that time. They're flowering. Migratory birds from northern Australia come down to our part of the world specifically to utilise the relatively rich resources of our biodiversity hotspot. There is diversity and there's a key period when otherwise it's pretty cold and miserable if you're a nectivorous species, you wouldn't think it's a great spot that's when mugga ironbark flowers, the hybrid box flowers, the white box flowers and so you have this real window of it being a really important time. Spring is fantastic. The whole year has many gems to reveal.

07:56 [regent honeyeater calling]

08:00 MC: I see them as a nectar nomad. Always on the move but they're doing it out of necessity. There is an underlying driver. They've got their space in the environment that they have evolved to occupy, so that means they have to visit many site to get what they need. Honeyeater species hate each other. So, you'd have a whole range of honeyeaters people not getting along very well but the regent honeyeater would be one that would try and avoid conflict. You know, they’d be passive aggressive in the honeyeater world given that they are highly mobile and can move hundreds of kilometres within a short space of time. They avoid fights and that's to their detriment because the food they’re seeking, you know they’re nectivorous. It's the nectar they’re focusing on, it's gold in the bird world for honeyeaters and you've got to protect it. They would rather bug out and go find something else but that's to their detriment. They are having trouble finding the next patch, the next supermarket. There's a long distance between towns and locations. You can imagine a green carpet landscape that had little LEDs that would shine on when the flowers are in flower and the birds would move to one place to another.

09:06 MS: In the next podcast, we'll explore regent honeyeater conservation efforts in Victoria, we'll meet volunteers who are contributing to captive breeding and release programs organised by the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Taronga Zoo Conservation Society and Birdlife Australia.

09:27 JC: Sometimes birdwatching's a little bit of a challenge. You're going out into the environment seeking and looking and trying to find the birds in the environment. This added another dimension. The birds were there, you knew they were there, they had radio transmitters, so we had to learn how to track them.

09:44 Neville Bartlett: The regent honeyeater is one of these birds, it looks a really classy creature; it's got presence about it. The black is black and the yellow looks magnificent. It is a very regal member of the bird family. So, anybody that comes and sees them for the first time down at Chiltern or anywhere else is most impressed and they're hooked from that point on.

10:10 MS: Until next time here are some closing thoughts about the regent honeyeater from Glen Johnson from the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

10:18 GJ: I think of them as being a really resilient species for a bird that can travel hundreds and hundreds of kilometres across landscapes which would might otherwise be alien in terms of cleared open spaces. They've got amazing resilience and I think they're got the capacity to hang in there and ride through the bumps and come through the other end. Hopefully with the help of community and landholders we can get there too.

10:47 MS: Please join us for part two, a captive release. A story of science, birds and people.

10:56 [upbeat music playing]