**Episode 2 Transcript – A captive release**
Narrator/Interviewer: Mary-Anne Scully (MS)

Glen Johnson (GJ)

Neville Bartlett (NB)

Liz Wemyss (LW)

Janet Chapman (JC)

Jane Roots (JR)

00:00 [upbeat music playing]

00:16 [regent honeyeater calling]

00:26 Mary-Anne Scully: Do you recognise that bird call? It's a regent honeyeater that was bred in captivity. Regent honeyeaters were once commonly seen along Australia’s east coast, stretching from Brisbane to Adelaide. Now these birds are only found in small numbers in Victoria and New South Wales. With an estimated 400 birds in the wild. In this podcast series we are exploring the challenges this bird faces, meeting people who are striving to bring the species back from the brink of extinction and taking a virtual walk through Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park, a biodiversity hotspot in north east Victoria that’s a feeding and breeding ground for the regent honeyeater.

01:11 [low bass music playing]

01:16 MS: When a bird species reaches the point of being critically endangered in the wild, recovery programs often implement captive breeding as part of a package of interventions to stave off extinction. That is exactly what is happening with the regent honeyeater. Since 2008, a total of 307 captive bred regent honeyeaters have been released into the wild. All but 20 of these birds, were released in the Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park in north east Victoria. Glen Johnson from the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning explains behind these releases.

01:56 Glen Johnson: The idea of the releases can we supplement to hold sway to maintain some viable numbers in parts of the landscape, so we don't drop over the edge.

02:08 MS: So, what does a release look like? Let's find out from Neville Bartlett, an avid birdwatcher and photographer, and also president of the friends of Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park group.

02:21 MS: Can you paint a picture for me of what it actually looks like when the captive release is happening?

02:28 Neville Bartlett: It's a quite an interesting ritual. They have all the birds in tents they've brought in for several days, and they’re left there to settle down so they get used to the new environment. But all the people are kept away to give the birds a bit of space, then they open the tents and the birds fly out. It's not a case of someone standing around holding a bird and they let it go, you just have to stand back 50 metres away and wait for the birds to fly out. The last release in 2017, you think oh well, they've now flown up into the trees and they're up the top of the tree somewhere but no, no, no we went back to where the cars were parked and there are some of them flying around an looking at themselves in the mirrors on the cars. [laughs]

03:15 [chime playing]

03:18 MS: So, what happens to the captive bred regent honeyeaters after they are released into the wild. Here's a few clues from Liz Wemyss, who was part of the regent honeyeater research effort. Liz also works with the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

03:34 Liz Wemyss: I've been involved with the regent honeyeater since 2015 as part of a joint project with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and Birdlife Australia and Taronga Zoo, there was a captive release and community monitoring program. This got me working with local volunteers as well as people form further afield out and about monitoring these birds that were captively breed in Taronga and then released in the Chiltern forest and surrounds. We tracked and monitored these birds from about April to November in 2015, and then it was done again in 2017. It's a beautiful bird. It's charismatic, it's a beautiful golden and black. It's one of those birds that got me into the forest. It kick-started my love of birds and the research of these species.

04:24 MS: Regent honeyeaters are a highly mobile species. Liz explains how the recovery research team uses tech to help with tracking of the birds.

04:34 LW: So, in each release, some birds have been fitted with radio-trackers. So, we spend a lot of time in the forest with radio-tracking gear which looks like an antenna, an aerial, which is directional so you're pointing that around listening for beeps and then when the beep gets louder obviously the bird is in that direction so you following this. So, you spend a lot of time listening to beeps but when you're not listening for beeps, you're listening for the call of the regent honeyeater and I became very good at listening just for regent honeyeaters. There were just two things in the forest, just regent honeyeaters or everything else. I was interested in one call and one call only. You spend a lot of time walking around the forest just listening and waiting and then when you hear that call you're like ‘that's it!’, let's go toward that bird and then usually what happens is you find one, two, maybe a couple more depending on the time.

05:25 [regent honeyeater calling]

05:29 MS: Radio-tracking shows that regent honeyeaters will travel up to 20 kilometres a day across Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park. This is only part of the picture. People have recorded sightings of banded release birds as far as Gippsland, Sydney and Melbourne. Here's Glen Johnson again.

05:50 GJ: Some of our banded birds, our release birds, have inevitably travelled thousands of kilometres over years and only recently, just recently, we had Blue-Yellow Red-Metal, which is one of our 2015 release birds which has been off the radar for five years. It is suddenly now been observed for the first time in five years and you think, where has that been all this time? And its miles over the other side of the Great Divide, like for a 40-gram bird it's pretty amazing how they've been able to survive and move successfully across a fragmented landscape.

06:28 MS: A huge groundswell of volunteers have come together to support the monitoring of regent honeyeater releases especially in Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park. In 2017, volunteers from Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia used radio-tracking and a smart phone app to monitor and log the movements of the regent honeyeaters. When the birds are tracked, volunteers put details of the bird and its location in a specially created regent honeyeater app.

06:58 GJ: All spectrums, um, kids, older people inclusive and the key thing we offered by providing an opportunity to do some monitoring through radio-tracking was that people were not just parts of process they were absolutely intricately involved and hands on and at the cutting-edge of making monitoring work or not. It wasn't that you were really having to be guided by someone else with more expertise but once volunteers got a little bit of experience, they were the key people involved because particularly with the last release, in 2017, when there was over hundred birds released and we had a huge demand, I suppose, we had up to 40 or 50 birds that had radio-transmitters on at one time. There was no way in the world that a few staff were able to keep up with that. Volunteers were really pivotal and were at the foremost of knowing what to do and how to do it and one of those rare opportunities to have a meaningful role in a threatened species monitoring program, not just holding the clipboard.

08:12 MS: Janet Chapman is part of this spotto force. She's a health professional by day and a passionate birdwatcher after hours. Janet was excited by the opportunity to be involved with the monitoring of captive-bred regent honeyeaters released in Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park.

08:31 Janet Chapman: I think the first year that we got involved was 2013 and through both the birding group and my husband's part of Friends of Chiltern, we heard about this program to do the monitoring. Sometimes birdwatching is a challenge, you know, 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 on them, so we had to learn how to track them. I'm sure people who are interested in hunting would share some of that excitement about looking for your prey, recognising where they might be tracking the prey, the advantage of this one is that of course the prey lives [laughs] and all we do is write down the name of the bands. We did three releases, generally out in the forest most Sunday mornings over the period from when the birds were released to when we started to just not know where they were anymore or couldn't track them once their transmitters stopped working. It was a fantastic part of winter in Chiltern forest [laugh].

09:37 [low bass music playing]

09:44 JC: For me the monitoring was an extra step, I guess, I have spent many years birdwatching. It just added another dimension. Rather than going out and looking for a variety, which is what we often do, we go into a place and try and find how many different types of birds there are. This was focusing in on one type of bird and so we go into the forest on those days but the goal was to try and find the regents. It's just a different way of birding, a different way of getting to know a particular species better and feeling like we were making a contributing to the knowledge about that species. Probably the most exciting moment was when we saw a little fledgling actually leave the nest, so you get that sense of feeling like almost ownership of it being our regent because we had followed the regents since they been released and through building nests to having young and then a young actually hatching and fledging and flying away. They are in desperate danger as a species and anything we can do to help keep that population going is so important.

10:48 MS: Community groups are also a key part of the monitoring program. Neville Bartlett from Friends of Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park group describes his experience.

10:59 NB: If you were out monitoring regent honeyeaters, you’d spend ages tracking one that you didn't see and then eventually it would show itself. You knew from the signal that it was up in a certain tree but getting a sight of it was another challenge, but every now and again they would come down quite low. They were relatively used to human beings because they’re captive bred and they would give you a little show. That's what gets people hooked at that point.

11:25 MS: While many people associate Landcare with tree planting, members of Landcare also joined in the regent honeyeater monitoring effort. Jane Roots, President of Chiltern Landcare explained how Landcare fits in.

11:39 Jane Roots: Landcare supported it because there was such a big volunteer element to tracking the birds and keeping an eye on things. We were keen to get members involved and to contribute what we could to that volunteer effort. A lot of our members were interested because regents are a pretty amazing species. And I think that's grown over time as we’ve learned more about the birds and where, you know, the habitat and things they need. Planting bird friendly, you know, species in your garden, keeping an eye out for birds, doing a bit more to create more habitat for these species and certainly some of the more recent findings of where were find birds literally and how birds travel around the landscape has really encouraged that of people, you know, planting flowering bushes like we have a few here, that's what we want people to do.

12:30 [chimes playing]

12:33 MS: While there are plenty of challenges for the regent honeyeater, the good news is that birds that are being released into the wild have the capacity to survive and most importantly, they're breeding too.

12:44 GJ: Some of the captive release birds have bred with themselves. So captive release males and females have successfully recruited young into the population. There's been breeding with ex-captive bird with wild birds, so wild females have selected males. And wild males have selected ex-captive females and have been able to produce young. These regent honeyeaters are reasonably long-lived species and we've got documented cases in the wild of 11 almost 12 years of age, captive birds we know they can live longer. So if you say the birds were released in 2017 that we're still monitoring at the moment in 2020 are still going to be potentially in the environment and still us able to detect and pick up colour bands of those birds in another seven years. So, 10 years after the 2017 release, by 2027 we might not only be still seeing some of those birds that were released but their progeny and their progeny’s progeny.

13:47 MS: The regent honeyeater is Australia's most threatened songbird. Thanks to the ongoing efforts of people and organisations involved in regent honeyeater captive breeding, release and monitoring programs, there's hope its voice will endure. Here's some final thoughts from Liz Wemyss.

14:05 LW: Regent honeyeaters, as well as a lot of Australian birds are mimics. So, what that means is that they can pick up calls from elsewhere and pretend to be another species. So the regent honeyeaters that were bred in Taronga, they had been in captivity for so long they started to sound different to what you would expect a wild regent honeyeater to sound like, to the point where I know captive bred regent honeyeaters and what they sound like. But for me to pick up a wild regent honeyeater I wouldn't pick it up straight way. So there was a little bit of worry that maybe we were releasing these bird out into the forest and they can't actually speak the same language as the wild regent honeyeaters, but since our worries have been 'deworrified', I guess, because we've been able to record a number of different breeding events where captive bred males have bred with wild females and where captive bred females have bred with wild males so obviously it just might be like an Australian being able to talk to a Scottish person. So they can still understand each other.

15:11 MS: Please join us for episode three where we meet some locals from Chiltern and discover the many ways that this community in north east Victoria is flying high for the regent honeyeater.

15:23 [upbeat music playing]