



REGENT HONEYEATER PROJECT – SECURING A FUTURE FOR A RARE SPECIES

Ray Thomas describes himself as an unashamed plant man with a keen interest in ecology and genetics of rare plants as well as wildlife. This seems rather counterintuitive for a man who for the last 20 years has become synonymous with the Regent Honeyeater Project in the Lurg Hills near Benalla.

Ray says his association with the Regent Honeyeater makes a lot of sense. “It is one of the rarest species in need of the most urgent help, and it’s an indicator species that tells us how the whole system is faring.”

The Regent Honeyeater Project is one of the best examples of grassroots, community-driven landscape restoration projects in all of Australia. Ray Thomas, the project founder and coordinator has worked passionately on this project for all of its 20 years, and is supported by a dedicated committee of community members.

This well established revegetation project focuses on the Regent Honeyeater, an endangered bird species that has

declined seriously over recent decades. Only about 500 - 1000 of these striking birds remain in the wild and there are just three key habitats left in Victoria. The Lurg district, as one of these, provides essential nectar supplies for Regent Honeyeaters when they arrive each winter to feed on the flowering Ironbarks.

Supported since 1997 by the Norman Wettenhall Foundation (NWF), the foundation’s trustees continue to consider the project as a model for engaging the resources of a community to achieve a clear environmental goal - in this case restoring habitat across a regional landscape so as a locally endangered species, the Regent Honeyeater, once more gains the ability to move through its territory to breed, feed and survive.

Community capacity building is an increasingly important criterion as to whether or not a project aimed at saving or restoring habitat will have a long-term, positive outcome.

Ray has helped secure the Regent Honeyeater’s future by enthusing 127 local landholders and over 28,000 community volunteers since 1994. This ongoing commitment has to date resulted in the planting of more than 500,000 trees, the rehabilitation of 1,450 hectares on farms, and the installation of 418 nest boxes that have collectively brought 15 rare birds back from the brink of local extinction.

▲ *Image: Regent Honeyeater (courtesy Chris Tsaros)*



▲ Image: Ray Thomas checks tubestock for planting in 2014

There would seem little point in planting tens of thousands of trees and shrubs without putting in place some form of ongoing custodianship of the new landscape.

1500 students from 23 local schools provide enormous support for the propagation and planting each year. Low-risk prisoners from Beechworth are also involved in the project.

The 2013-14 year alone saw 15 km of fencing constructed, 90 ha of habitat restored, and 36,000 plants established.

Ray says, "It may be a characteristic from my earlier teaching days but I believe in being very thorough in both the planning and preparation. We have become very good at the ground preparation and the planting. We use the students' tubestock for most of our planting sites, and direct seeding to establish understorey in remnants sites where the existing trees would outcompete any planted seedlings.

Even through the dry mid 1990s we achieved a 90 per cent strike rate. "We also run a coordinated rabbit baiting program. On one site given up by a landholder there was a lot of junk to be removed from in and around an old dam. A few volunteers cleared it all away and then we destroyed all the burrows in the dam bank. We were able to get 6,000 plants in the ground in just one and a half days because we did not have to guard the young trees.

"The success is self-evident. Rare birds are nesting in our sites and Squirrel Gliders are using our trees as a corridor only four years after planting."

As well as the Regents, the district supports a host of other vulnerable woodland birds such as Grey-crowned Babblers, Painted Honeyeaters, Speckled Warblers, Hooded Robins, and several endangered and vulnerable mammals like Squirrel Gliders and Brush-tailed Phascogales.

After 150 years of clearing and grazing, remnants of the former Mugga Ironbark (*Eucalyptus sideroxylon*) forest are scattered across the landscape as narrow strips on roadsides and small patches on private land. With increasing fragmentation and grazing pressure, the natural ecological balances of healthy bushland have been predominately lost.

The project aims to protect, restore, enlarge and connect the existing Box Ironbark habitat in the Lurg district of Victoria as fast as possible in order to restore the ecological balances and protect these fragile species.

The project encompasses more than just revegetation. Activities such as indigenous seed collection, native (rare) plant propagation, fencing (excluding cattle from habitat sites), direct seeding,

mistletoe removal, environmental weeding, nest box making/ placement, community education, ecological burning with the CFA and wildlife monitoring have been in full swing for the past 20 years.

The agricultural productivity benefits of the projects are numerous with nectar-rich shrubs like Sweet Bursaria, Tea Trees, Rice Flowers and Everlasting Daisies attracting a range of parasitic wasps and flies that are helpful to farmers. These wasps hunt all day for insect pests like Cockchafer Grubs and Christmas Beetle larvae that destroy the roots of pastures. In a natural woodland ecosystem, birds alone can take up to 60% of insects.

Studies and monitoring of the project sites by volunteers and university students are also integral to the project. A current project involves comparing nest box data to draw any correlations with vegetation types and landscape features.

Community education work continues with farm visits to talk about the ecological issues that are evident in each district, possible habitat protection and enhancement works, and benefits to the farmer. Community education work also extends to recruiting and nurturing the small team of regular local volunteers who work on the project for two or more days each week.

The project is funded by a mixture of government, corporate and charitable partners, including Exetel Pty Ltd, the Norman Wettenthal Foundation, the June Canavan Foundation, Goulburn-Broken CMA, Rockwell Collins, Benalla Rural City and the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme.