

Song tutoring can help save the regent honeyeater

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Credit: Any Lane from Pexels

Playing recordings of regent honeyeater songs to young honeyeaters before they are released can significantly improve the critically endangered species' chance of survival in the wild, a study involving UNSW has found.

The research has been published in the journal *Frontiers in Conservation Science*.

Research teams at Taronga Conservation Society Australia led a review that looked at a decade of data from the Zoo's successful regent honeyeater breeding program to establish what best equips them for life in the wild.

The research team analyzed a range of data to understand what factors contribute to the success of released birds, including who their parents were, how they were housed in the Zoo, and the released birds' age and weight.

As well as the importance of song tutoring, the research reveals that raising young regent honeyeaters in aviaries with other species of bird also increases their long-term chances by allowing them to practice the interactions they would experience in the wild, such as competing for food.

With approximately only 350 regent honeyeaters alive in the wild, the breeding and releasing of birds is crucial to the future of the species.

"Taronga's breeding program has been credited with slowing the decline of the regent honeyeater," report author Dr. Joy Tripovich, behavioral biologist at the Taronga Conservation Society and adjunct associate lecturer in UNSW Science's School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, said.

"Conservation [breeding programs](#) are an absolute last line of defense for a species that is on the brink of extinction.

"These projects are complex and resource-intensive so we need to make sure they are the very best they can be.

"Few breeding programs have ever been reviewed in such an extensive way before and this research will help us shape it in this critical period as

we fight to save the regent honeyeater from extinction."

The research team also found that the birds have a better survival rate if they are born to parents that produced only one clutch in a year.

For parents that produce more than one clutch a year, there was a significant drop in the long-term chances of their young in the wild.

"Zoos are increasingly becoming essential in the survival of critically endangered species," Taronga's Conservation and Recovery Programs manager, Andrew Elphinstone, said.

"With only 350 regent honeyeaters left in the wild, it's important that conservation and research experts work together to improve their chances as much as possible.

"The findings of this research will not only benefit regent honeyeaters but will inform other [conservation](#) and breeding programs at Taronga's Zoos and around the world."

The regent honeyeaters have declined significantly in recent years, from 1500 in 1992 to current estimates of less than 400 adult birds, largely due to habitat loss and predation.

It once had a range from Rockhampton in Queensland to Adelaide in South Australia but is now confined to parts of Victoria and New South Wales.

Since 2008, nearly 300 birds have been bred in zoos and wildlife parks and released into the wild.

The majority of these [birds](#) have been bred at Taronga Zoo in Sydney, with a new purpose-built facility developed at Taronga Western Plains

Zoo in Dubbo opened in 2019 to support the [program](#).

More information: Joy S. Tripovich et al, Born to Be Wild: Evaluating the Zoo-Based Regent Honeyeater Breed for Release Program to Optimize Individual Success and Conservation Outcomes in the Wild, *Frontiers in Conservation Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fcosc.2021.669563](#)

Provided by University of New South Wales

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