



This visual essay can be read on screen,
but we recommend printing on A4 paper
(double-sided, long-edge binding)



12.01.2021

10 sec. sketches.
Japanese brush pen

Conversations *with* Regent Honeyeaters

PART ONE —

An expanded conversation between

Dr Zoë Sadokierski and Dr Timo Rissanen

with appearances by Dr Monique van Sluys, Michael Shiels
and Dr John Martin from Taronga Conservation Society as
well as various birds and insects.



10 SEC.

This visual essay was commissioned by artist Fernando do Campo, as part of the Reader accompanying the first iteration of his TO COMPANION A COMPANION exhibition at Contemporary Art Tasmania, 23 Jan.—28 Feb. 2021.

Timo Rissanen (DESIGN SCHOLAR, LIFE-LONG TWITCHER, CROSS-STITCHER) and **Zoë Sadokierski** (DESIGN SCHOLAR, AMATEUR NATURALIST, ILLUSTRATOR) are both based at the School of Design, University of Technology Sydney.

PRECARIOUS BIRDS is an ongoing collaboration through which we process and document our reaction—mostly grief—to the precarious circumstances of birds in the Sixth Extinction. The project aims to give form—through drawing, writing, collage and cross stitch poems—to accelerated and irrevocable losses, but also to draw out stories of seeming resurrection and hopeful recovery. We frame the collaboration as an ‘expanded conversation’¹ which blends qualitative and quantitative, professional and personal, written and material outcomes in response to the entangled relationships of humans and birds. Through this expanded conversation, we think through moral and ethical responsibilities in a time of ecological crisis, and invite others to join the dialogue.

The Regent Honeyeater is one of thirteen critically endangered or extinct bird species we are responding to in the project. The following conversation is an edited transcript from our first field trip to visit the captive Regent Honeyeaters and their carers at Taronga Zoo, Sydney on 11 January 2021.

1. Our definition of ‘expanded conversation’ draws from the Phenomenology and Imagination Research Group (NITZAN-GREEN *et al.* 2019), as well as a Research through Design (RtD) methodology in which research aims and questions emerge through critical documentation of iterative creative practice. (SADOKIERSKI 2020; LAMBERT & SPEED 2017; DURRANT *et al.* 2017)



1

The Understory

IN WHICH, due to holiday-season miscommunication, Timo and Zoë arrive at Taronga Zoo an hour before it opens, uncertain whether they will be interviewing Monique and Michael today or just visiting the birds. They conduct a planning session seated on large, flat rocks in the middle of a rambling pathway in the scrubby National Park fringing the Zoo. Birds and cicadas drown out traffic noise from the road above. Houses are just visible at the end of the path.

REGENT HONEYEATER

Anthochaera phrygia
formerly *Xanthomyza phrygia*
Critically Endangered.

Nomadic songbird, follows
flowering Eucalypts, to which
it is an important pollinator
— COMPANION SPECIES.

1. Vicki Powys is a wildlife sound recordist who has been writing about birdsong since the 1980s. She lives in Capertee Valley, one of three known breeding sites of Regent Honeyeaters.
2. Later, I find I'm not the first to make this connection:
Similar to loss of languages in Indigenous societies, it is sad to think that the severe population decline which the Regent Honeyeater has undergone may now be impacting the ability of the remaining population to maintain their song culture.
(CRATES 2019)
3. Ross Crates (2019) hypothesizes that rather than deliberate *mimicry*—when a bird sings a song of another species for advantage, such as to sound like a larger bird to deter predators—Regent Honeyeaters are more likely to be *interspecific singers*—learning the song of another species with no clear advantage; young captive-bred birds may learn to sing other birds' songs in the aviary, or due to population decline in the wild, young birds fail to locate other Regent Honeyeaters during their song-learning phase, and therefore learn songs of other species such as RED and LITTLE WATTLEBIRDS, LITTLE FRIARBIRDS or NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATERS.
See FIG 3.

TARONGA is an Aboriginal word that is said to translate to 'beautiful view'. Taronga Zoo Sydney is located on the land of the Cammeragal people.

ZOË— So. Why did we choose the REGENT HONEYEATER?

TIMO— It is a local, critically endangered bird that has some resonance with our location; the other birds we've been working on [*in the Precarious Birds project*] are in faraway places.

I'll also own up to the fact that the Regent Honeyeater is a beautiful bird, and I was attracted to it aesthetically.

But one of the things that came to me reading the Powys' piece¹ was the idea of lost languages, the idea that the language of vocalizations, the repertoire of the birds, shifts when they're in captivity.

In Australia, the idea of lost languages is an important cultural aspect of extinction, for obvious reasons.² At the risk of anthropomorphising, there's something important about the idea that in addition to losing species, we lose songs, musical diversity. I want to ask at Taronga about mimicry in captivity. Even though they're not generally known as mimics, some mimicry seems to happen, they pick up parts of the songs of other captive species.³ Field workers in the Chiltern site refer to 'Sydney slang', implying it was picked up at the zoo. (POWYS 2010) I wonder which species?

There's suggestion that they pick up other songs through social interaction. Thinking about how to make people consider loss and preservation, considering that we're looking at more than just one bird, that this species has a social network and environment.

Culture?

Yes.

We often don't think that there is culture beyond humans, and in fact, a lot of non-Western cultures don't even separate the human and the nonhuman. And a lot of Indigenous cultures know that our nonhuman relatives have culture. And that's how I tried to arrive at the questions to the birds. This may just be a first round of questions, they are very broad and there'll be other questions that come later.

They're really questions to help us orient to being with the birds.

My first question is:

I wonder, do the birds in captivity experience home and is the Regent Honeyeaters' experience of a home quite different from ours, especially given that they're nomadic birds. Except the ones at Taronga can't be.

What is a HOME?

And I also have a question:

Conservation work is about a future but, well, what is the future for a bird in captivity? Can we even fathom what a future for a nonhuman is?

What is a FUTURE?

And my next question is:

Some of these questions are probably more for us than for the birds. And these came from the reading of the interview with the River Dean (FLETCHER 2020) and then Co-creating With a Tick (BERTULIS 2019).

What is the LESSON TODAY?

The next one is:

I do wonder, what is the sense of precarity that these birds have? Or do they have any? And it's something that I've been thinking of ever since reading *The Last of the Curlews* about the Eskimo curlew, where you have the last male making the migration to South America back. And then it meets the female on the way, but then gets shot as soon as they reach North America.

What do you WORRY ABOUT?

But then also:

And of course, that's assuming that these creatures actually experience joy. I watched a video yesterday of a dog pulling a toboggan up a hill and then riding it down the hill. And also, I think John [Martin] posted, a LITTLE CORELLA eating a nut on its back on the ground. It was lounging: *I'm gonna eat this thing, and I'm gonna enjoy it.*

What brings you JOY?

The next question is, and I really should have started with this, like,

Anyway, I forgot to be courteous.

HOW ARE YOU TODAY?
and HOW IS YOUR FAMILY?

We can put that down as question one.

And this, actually I wrote just now, as you were talking about the lost languages:

I don't mean it in a human way, like there's a love song about some relationship. We could assume that all of the song is just kind of instinctive and almost automated. But then when we read about these

What are you SINGING ABOUT?

learned songs, and also lost songs, it does raise questions; what are all the things that the birds are bringing to their songs? Is it just an automated call? And it's also knowing that birds can recognize individuals from their calls—like that SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO that's screeching somewhere very close by. It just sounds like screeching to us but presumably its peers would know which individual it is.

Sometimes I wonder about the kind of scientific methods we use trying to document songs. What do we not pay attention to when we pay attention to the things that we do?

So not all of these questions are in any way answerable in verbal terms. I was trying to come up with things to help us to be with the birds. As we try to relate to nonhuman research participants. Eugenia Bertulis, who wrote the 'Co-creating with a tick' chapter, bluntly put it that we can take familiar design research methods and carry out investigations with non-humans as the participants and co-creatives. And to me, that's really interesting. What happens when we bring in the Regent Honeyeater not just as a research subject or a participant, but also as a co-creator?

So your framing of the questions is helping us orientate ourselves, along the line of decentering the human in research practice; how do we make ourselves more empathetic, where possible, to the experience of these birds in captivity?

Yeah. I guess there could literally be endless questions and we should come up with more questions as we get to know them, but it's also like I'm thinking back particularly to Kimmerer (2013), to the way that she writes about being in the woods and being with all kinds of nonhuman life around her. And the way that she experiences that is quite different to how most people experience.

Where's the ant that looked like a spider

It did look a lot like a spider. And for a second, I was like, if that's a REDBACK we need to go somewhere else immediately. You still look a little nervous.

Because I can't see it anymore.

Well, it went that way. But I have just noticed that my feet are on an ants' nest.

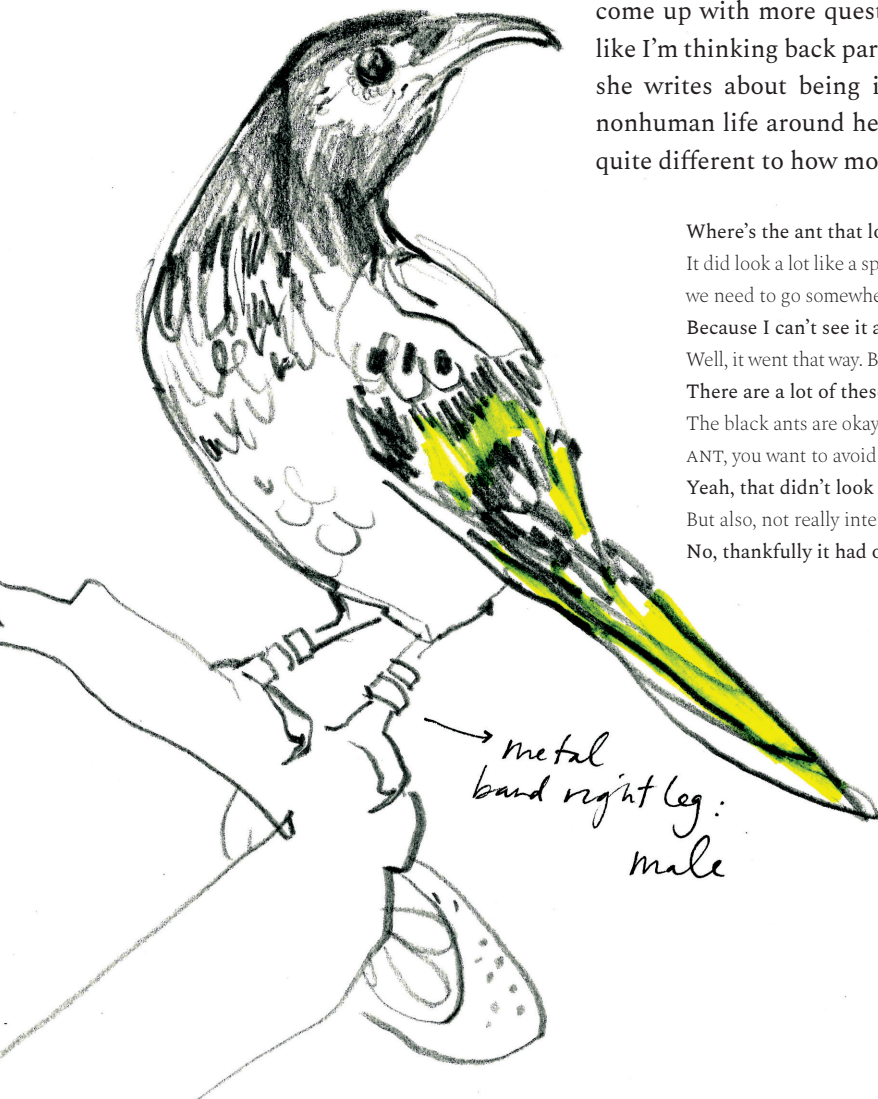
There are a lot of these BLACK ANTS everywhere.

The black ants are okay. They're annoying, but not too bad. It's that big FIRE ANT, you want to avoid that one.

Yeah, that didn't look like fun.

But also, not really interested.

No, thankfully it had other business to attend to.



Helen MacDonald has a great essay in *Vesper Flights*, on what birds' nests taught her about a sense of home, and a sense of permanence. Maybe that can be our first reading for the year, a shared text to put into the 'table method'. [NITZAN GREEN ET AL. 2019] So that was one thought, of many thoughts, that your questions brought up.

Maybe when we go into the area and sit down, we could answer these questions ourselves? First, before we try and answer them for the birds. Or is that putting ourselves too far into it? I supposed maybe the point isn't to answer the questions. The point is that you thought of the questions.

I think we do have to consider them as well. But I'm curious about how our ideas of home for example, kind of help but also limit our understanding of what a home might be for a Regent Honeyeater, or anything nonhuman that we put in captivity. And of course, I assume the long-term goal would be that there are no Regent Honeyeaters in captivity, that they're doing so well that there's no need to keep them in captivity.⁴

The ant is back

Is it that one on the left? Because that's a different one.

Yeah, I think it may be the same species as the other.

The other one had redder legs.

Yeah. And this one jumps. Oh, great. That's exciting.

It's jumping the other way now?

Yeah. No, it's looking at me.

Oh, no, there's the other one with the red legs.

It really is quite spider-like isn't it?

It is. {stamping noises}

Coming back lost languages, with this species relating to what's happening more broadly in Australia, in the world, with languages being lost to colonisation. There are also refugee/migrant/diaspora associations.

Because I'm interested in patterns and language and naming, when I read science papers I notice reports of a species 'recently recategorised as this'. I think of human desperation to put everything in a Linnaean classification, having to know where it fits within this system, and all the people competing to prove species are in the wrong place. I find it comical in some ways, but then I very earnestly say, here's this cultural parallel—lost languages of refugee birds. Would the science community find that naive and equally amusing, that I'm projecting very human cultural classifications onto birds?

But also that, as I said earlier about why we chose these birds, when we were looking for an Australian species that migrates past us, as soon as I saw an image of these ones, I was like, Yes! Definitely this, I love it. Graphically



4. Michael Shiels, the bird keeper we spoke with, described the recovery plan as less a straight line and more a bell curve, with the aim to tide the species over until habitat is recovered (it will take decades for tree planting efforts in the Capertee Valley to have significant impact) and predation and competition are less devastating (which will require the wild population to significantly increase in numbers).

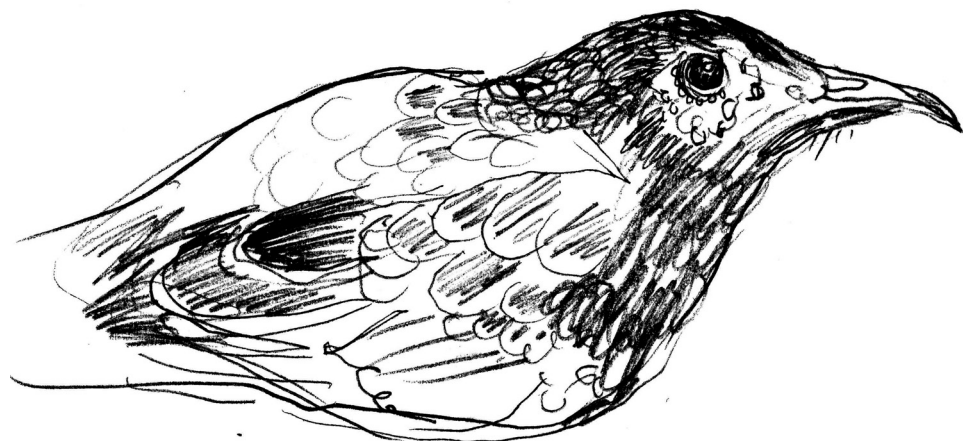




FIG 1.

Image credit —

Warty face honeyeater. John Lewin, *Birds of New South Wales with their natural history*.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

it's exciting; yellow and black and they have these great coloured patches around the eyes. My bias comes in, in a really aesthetic way as well.

I think one of the old names was **WARTY FACED HONEYEATER**.

That feels a bit cruel. Speaking of naming and categorisation, I initially named all of our Google drive folders 'Royal Honeyeater' because, you know regent, royal close enough whatever the yellow one. The *warty* one.

I could be remembering that wrong.

I'm hoping you're remembering that right.

It could be in reference to one of the other species of **WATTLEBIRDS** that ... Oh yeah here we are; one of the names it was known by was the **WARTY FACED HONEY-SUCKER**. I can see that securing funding for the conservation of the Warty Faced Honey-sucker would be maybe a different experience than securing funding for the Regent Honeyeater.

Yes! Did you see the Wilderness Society's 'Save Ugly' campaign, with Rosario Dawson and a cast of very famous people voicing weird and ugly animals?

Yep.

{Looking at an image of 'warty faced' on phone} It's so beautiful.

I reckon that naming was just a really grumpy ornithologist.

Probably brought here as a convict.

Bullied as a child.

Ok, where were we.

Your task was to come up with a list of questions for the birds, and mine was to come up with a list of activities. Mine will make more sense once we're in there, sitting down. I was using the Simple Steps to Becoming an Urban Field Naturalist⁵ as a guide:

SLOW DOWN,
OBSERVE,
RECORD AND COLLECT,
ASK QUESTIONS
and SHARE.

So the first bit was asking us to just **SIT STILL FOR FIVE MINUTES**. No pens, no recording devices, or anything. We can do more than five minutes if we want, depending on time and how we're feeling, just sit.

Then to **HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT WE NOTICE**. Nothing more specific than that, just what did we notice.

5. www.urbanfieldnaturalist.org/resources/a-few-simple-steps



FIG 2.

Image credit —

Warty-faced Honey-eater (*Zanthomyza Phrygia*) illustrated by Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841) for John Gould's (1804–1881) *Birds of Australia* (1972 Edition, 8 volumes).

CC BY SA 4.0

Then COUNT HOW MANY WE CAN SEE.

Then CHOOSE ONE TO WATCH FOR FIVE MINUTES.

Then SKETCH IT FOR FIVE MINUTES, in a series of ways: continuous line drawing, negative space drawing. I can run us through them.

And then the final thing is to start to LOOK AT MOVEMENT AND LISTEN TO SONGS; diagram and sketch and map how they're moving around the space, and if they seem to be communicating to each other.

It might not actually be possible to do much except sit there. But once we get in there, we can think of other ways to observe or respond to them. But if we can build on your list of questions and build on the list of observational exercises, I think that when we come back for a second time, we'll have a different way of passing at it.

I think at some point, we should go to the Capertee Valley.

Maybe Vicki [Powys] will take us for an audio tour.

It just seems so accessible in a way that none of the other species [in our *Precarious Birds* project] are. It would be odd not to try to make that happen, and maybe even repeat some of the exercises were able to find one.

I'm blown away by the understory of where we are.

It's incredible, isn't it?

It's pretty dense. And yeah, I don't think we actually articulated that we were visited by a brush turkey earlier.

We just started laughing about John's research stalking us.⁶

I actually think that this was a very successful place to have accidentally stopped despite being covered in MOSQUITO bites.

Session, one complete.



7



FIG 4.

Image credit —

Part of a plate from John Albert Leach's 1911 *An Australian Bird Book: A pocket guide for field use*.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

6. Dr John Martin, a research scientist at Taronga Conservation Society, runs projects on behavioural adaptation in bird species such as BRUSH TURKEYS, COCKATOOS and IBIS. He prefers 'nuisance' to 'pest' species, because they are native birds. See Big City Birds app on Spotteron.

FIG 3.

Regent Honeyeater, listening to the songs of other species. Collaged from: Red and Little Wattlebird, Little Friarbird, New Holland Honeyeater illustrations from Gould's *The Birds of Australia*, 1848. Regent Honeyeater (Warty Faced Honeysucker) illustration from John Lewin's *Birds of New South Wales with their natural history*.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

2

The Aviary

IN WHICH *Timo and Zoë sit together on another rock looking at birds, this time inside the Creatures of the Wollemi display (also known as the Blue Mountains Bushwalk). Light filters through the dense canopy, with netting just visible between leaves and sky. It's damp, mossy, full of song and the threat of falling poo.*



So my first observation is that we are watching from the same vantage point, but I wonder if we observed the same things. What did you notice?

The absence of them. One joined us right at the end of the observation, but we had a lot of other birds. We have some SCALY-BREASTED LORIKEETS here. And that DOVE was stretching the whole time.

I wondered if it was drying its wings.

Maybe getting sun on them.

I enjoyed watching the sunlight come through the feathers.

And we've just been joined by another Regent Honeyeater.

They're trying really hard to poo on us.

I noticed a couple of birds flying overhead outside, including an IBIS, and thought about what it might feel like for a bird inside, watching a bird fly by higher up.

I noticed the double-bang of the gate in and out of the aviary. That would be part of the natural soundscape for these captive birds. And also the voices of people, which I imagine would sound quite weird to them.

There are a lot of languages; I wonder if they recognize different human languages in the way that we can ...

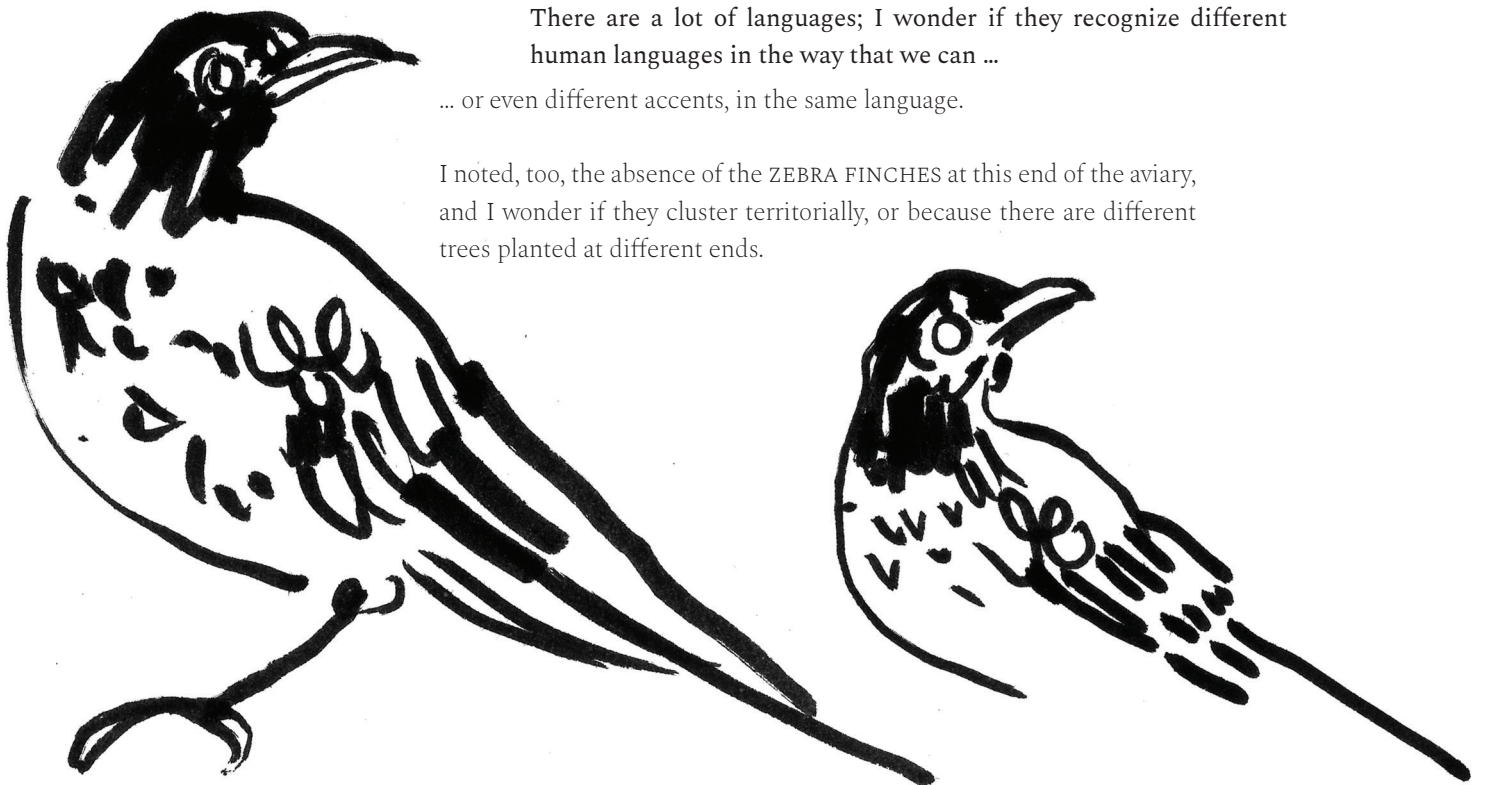
... or even different accents, in the same language.

I noted, too, the absence of the ZEBRA FINCHES at this end of the aviary, and I wonder if they cluster territorially, or because there are different trees planted at different ends.

12.01.2021

30 second sketches.

Japanese brush pen.



The only time we interacted with each other was when I pointed at the Regent Honeyeater. Which you'd obviously already seen, I knew you'd seen it but I was excited.

Me too.

I saw one come down, it was sitting down there somewhere and another bird, couldn't see what, swooped down and took its place. There's a bit of rivalry going on.

There are two right above us now.

I suppose we cheated in this exercise a tiny bit because when we first walked in and saw one, we both got excited and started taking photos. And we said we were going to come in for five minutes with no notebooks, no cameras. But I don't think that's a failure.⁷

I also took photos of LIZARDS.

I spent a lot of time taking photos of ZEBRA FINCHES.

I'm vaguely disappointed neither of us have been pooped on by a Honeyeater Yet.

I think there's a good chance that will happen.

I don't want to be pooped on by a PARROT or a PIGEON...

... but these are special PIGEONS

That was close!

Our local LORIKEETS are the same, almost hit you when they fly past.

They're rude, in other words.

Yes, on our terms.

How many Honeyeaters are actually in this aviary?

I feel like we've seen at least four different ones including that one up there, having a little preen. And I wonder how long it would take to start to recognize them by their patterns.

Did you just get pooped on?

Um, I don't think it was poo.

We'll go with that.

Observation ends with poo in eye.

⁷ The sketches in the margins of this document were not drawn at the Zoo. The days following our visit, I tested some of the timed exercises I'd planned for us to do on site.

I'm not sure why I didn't sketch there. I had a bag full of drawing implements. The birds were too far away for detailed sketches, and in the aviary I was in a state of awe rather than focus. That didn't stop me snapping scores of lousy iPhone photos, but sketching just didn't happen. Perhaps too, I'm shy about drawing in front of people (other than Timo). I reflect that sketching in nature is an entirely different practice to studio drawing. Next visit, we'll do the five minute observation before engaging with pens or cameras.



60 sec.
insufficiently
sharpened 6B.

3

(Brief) exit notes

IN WHICH *Timo and Zoë attempt to debrief on the way home, muffled through masks (mandatory on public transport) and deafened by the ferry’s roaring engine. Unable to speak without shouting, they abandon themselves to the harbour view and sea breeze.*



8. Birdlife (Southern NSW) organises volunteer YELLOW BOX and MUGGA IRONBARK tree planting days twice a year in the Capertee National Park, as part of a strategic revegetation plan to extend breeding habitat for the Regent Honeyeaters.

T: I just briefly note that I knew that conservation work is complex but it was eye opening how really complex it is. And I was also surprised that they only have four pairs breeding every year.

So yeah, the work that they do is incredible. I think it made me feel that the birds are even more precarious now. But the work really has to happen across the board. Captive breeding alone isn't enough, there has to be robust habitat restoration as well. And probably also controlled predators, at least a control of predators in the short term.

Z: I enjoyed Michael [Shiels] talking about a bird keeper actually being a habitat specialist rather than a bird specialist. He talked about the Recovery Team needing to consult with apiarists to find out if and when the flowers were in bloom on release years [around 70 captive-bred birds are released in 2-yearly cycles, depending on conditions] and the dynamics of pairing up and moving around birds in breeding seasons. I jotted down his comment: “Things breed all year. Things die every day.”

And the idea of tree planting being as important to recovery as breeding — let's go tree planting.⁸

Mistranslations of Regent Honeyeater by the transcription software:

- RATION HONEY EATER
- REGION LEADER
- WRITTEN HONEYEATER
- REGION ANEW
- REASON HONEY
- REGION HUMMING OODA
- REGIONAL PLANNING LEADER

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FURTHER READING

Fiction books we recommended to each other during the extended conversation:

Helen MacDonald, *Vesper Flights* and *H is for Hawk*

Max Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Wings* and *Lanny*

Margaret Atwood, *Dearlly: Poems*

Robbie Arnott, *Flame* and *Rain Heron*

RESOURCES

REGENT HONEYEATER PROJECT, a volunteer conservation project dedicated to tree planting and nest box placement and monitoring (for mammals) to help farmers with landcare as well as protecting wildlife: <http://regenthoneyeater.org.au/>

TARONGA ZOOKEEPER TALKS, Regent Honeyeaters: <https://taronga.org.au/dubbo-zoo/keeper-talks/regent-honeyeater>