

# A bird, a flock, a song, and a forest: The decline of Regent Honeyeater life

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## Abstract

The south-eastern corner of the Australian continent was once crisscrossed by the nomadic flight paths of the Regent Honeyeater. For hundreds of thousands of years, they winged their way up and down this vast continent. Today, however, the species is listed as critically endangered and is just clinging to existence. This multimedia essay tells the story of this decline, exploring the complex, co-shaping, relationships between individual birds and their flocks, their songs, and their forests. While these are relationships that might be glossed as being social, cultural, and ecological (respectively), and so belonging to separate domains of life, they are in reality delicately interwoven elements of what it is to be a Regent Honeyeater; relationships that, taken together, have been integral to the emergence and ongoing life of this species. In attending to the breakdown of these relationships in our present time, this essay seeks to develop new resources for storying loss in a time of ongoing extinctions. Bringing text into conversation with images and audio, the essay works to draw the reader/viewer/listener into an encounter with an unravelling world. Ultimately, our aim has been to create an essay

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in which the conceptual ideas, the design, and the biology of the species described, are brought into some sort of alignment that allows them to become mutually reinforcing elements of a storied encounter. Our reflection on the process of creating this essay are provided in the accompanying exegetical commentary.

#### KEYWORDS

biodiversity, extinction, loss, multispecies, Regent Honeyeater

## EDITORS' NOTE

'A bird, a flock, a song, and a forest' is part of a collective experiment in digital composition published within this double special issue of *TAJA*. As editors, our aim has been to ignite and enable novel forms of social analysis. We invited contributors to creatively rethink the form of the academic article with us and built a custom designed website to host the results. All original research contributions in this collection are made up of two parts: a digital article and its author/s' exegetical commentary. They have been peer reviewed as a pair. (See our introduction, 'Epistemic attunements: Experiments in intermedial anthropology', for an extended discussion of the rationale behind this adventure in 'off-grid' scholarship and why the digital article on the Curatorium website is not available as a PDF.)

Access the digital article here: <https://curatorium.au/taja-journal/form-content/a-bird-a-flock-a-song-and-a-forest>. Or by clicking the link in this note.<sup>1</sup>

Read the authors' commentary below.

[To experience Curatorium as intended please ensure the following browsers are used: Chrome version 121.0.6167.139 or later OR Safari version 16.6.1 or later.]

## MULTIMEDIA STORYTELLING

Regent Honeyeaters are striking black and yellow songbirds that spend their lives in nomadic movement, up and down the eastern half of Australia. Despite their broad-ranging movements, however, they must return again and again to the particular forests that provide the nectar-rich conditions necessary for them to successfully breed and fledge their young. These are forests that have been steadily cleared or degraded since European settlement, and so today the Regent Honeyeater finds itself critically endangered.

Our contribution to this special issue is an effort to tell some of the stories of this species in a new way. Each of the members of our team was drawn into the world of the Regent Honeyeater differently. When we met, most of us were already working on the bird in one way or another, and our essay is the product of a layering of our different perspectives, understandings, and stories about this bird.

Our team comprises six researchers from different disciplines. Design researchers Zoë and Timo are long term collaborators, most recently on the *Precarious Birds* project. Thom, Myles, and Sam are scholars working in the fields of multispecies and extinction studies, focused on the



historical and philosophical dimensions of species decline, and have been in conversation for the past couple of years about a shared interest in avian conservation and its connection to animal cultures. For the past few years, Thom and Zoë have worked together as part of *The Urban Field Naturalist Project*, and in this way began to explore other possibilities for bringing together their own work in philosophy and design.<sup>2</sup> When we started this piece, most of us had also been in contact with conservation ecologist Ross, including interviewing him, as part of our respective interests in this bird, which he has spent the better part of the last decade studying and tracking around eastern Australia.

We took the invitation to contribute to this special issue as an opportunity to tell stories of the regent and its decline through a multimedia essay. Although there is a well-established emphasis on storytelling in the emerging field of extinction studies, most scholarship has taken a primarily written form (Rose *et al.* 2017). Drawing on the diverse expertise of the team, we collaborated to extend a central written essay with illustrations, audio recordings and 'side flights', to create an assemblage that is greater than the sum of its parts.

From the outset, we all understood that these multimedia elements should not simply *illustrate* the central written text, but rather should aim to reinforce, to perform, to emotionally charge, and to complicate, the story we were telling. Paratextual theory offers a way to understand how these elements function as additional 'thresholds of interpretation' for this complex story (Genette 1997; Sadokierski 2013, 2016). If we consider the written essay to be the 'primary text', then the multimedia elements are 'paratexts' that surround and extend that text. Although the primary text can be read without the paratexts, these elements are not superfluous. They are designed to provide visual, aural, and linguistic cues for the reader to *think with*; multiple thresholds into the many stories of the Regent Honeyeater. Stories that might offer a glimpse of the 'lifeworld' of the species, and in this way thicken our sense of who these birds are and why they matter, as well as how our own lives are tangled up in diverse and unequal ways in their ongoing decline.

Although we were all in agreement on how the multimedia elements should function, one of the most interesting and least reported aspects of cross disciplinary collaboration is the back-and-forth process of how the final solution came about. In [Figure 1](#), we share some key insights.

## Layout

The Regent Honeyeater is a nomadic bird, travelling over large sections of eastern Australia. The annual movements of these birds are not well understood by scientists. As their numbers have declined drastically—now down to only a few hundred birds—the way of life of the species is also breaking down. As we discuss in detail in the essay, there are strong spatial elements to this breakdown. Today, the birds do not exist at the density that allows them to successfully form large flocks so that they can maintain territories and breed (and so that young birds might learn their song from other regents, discussed further below).

We wanted this intimate and consequential relationship between these birds and their landscape to be at the heart of the essay design. We wanted the layout of the piece to pull the reader/viewer into an awareness of the 'emplacedness' of the story, and to hold them there.

Thom's initial suggestion was to use the lines of text of the main essay as 'flight lines' travelling down a map of eastern Australia. When the viewer zoomed out from the text, they would be able to see this larger map, and potentially also encounter breaks and diverging paths that evoked the uncertainty that surrounds the species' nomadic movements. One practical barrier to this

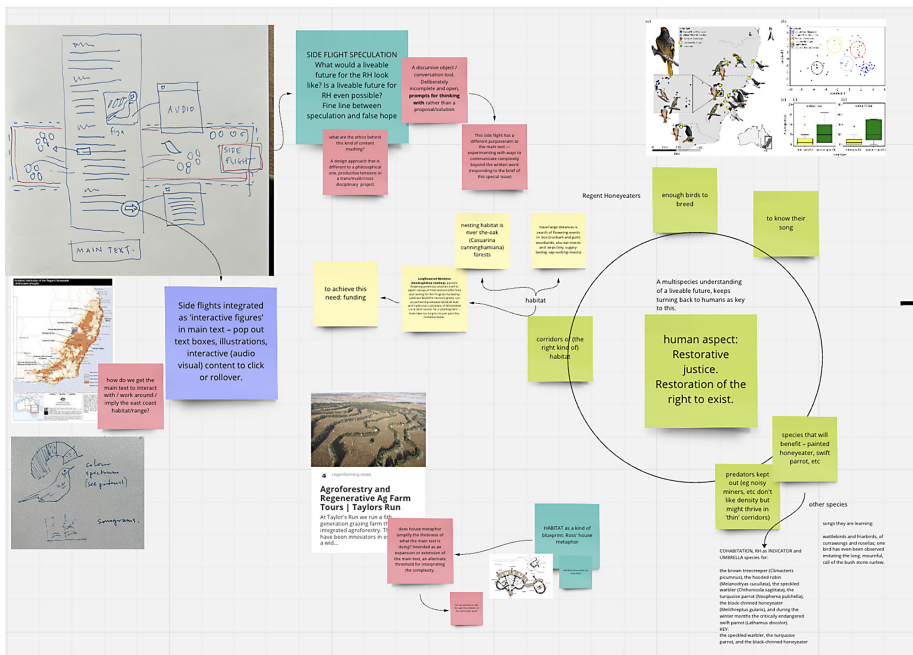


FIGURE 1 Screen capture of a digital whiteboard tool, used by the team to discuss concepts and explain how the essay format could work.

approach was managing the readability of a long form essay using an experimental typesetting design that might not work the same way across different screen sizes and reading devices (e.g., desktop versus tablet); one risk of experimental publishing formats is losing readers frustrated by technical errors or reading experiences that require digital literacy to navigate. Through this discussion, we decided the central essay should be presented as a conventional reading experience (a linear scroll) that could be expanded and enhanced with the paratextual elements; engage readers, then entice them to delve further. A second issue with this approach was the reliance on geographical maps to represent place. While these maps can be immensely useful, they are also a Western and human-centric approach to place that is frequently deployed to cover over or erase other ways of understanding and relating (Fujikane 2021; Chao 2022; Tsing 2005). As a result, many scholars and activists are now rightly pushing against these maps (see, for example, the *Feral Atlas* and the *Decolonial Atlas* projects).<sup>3</sup>

Timo and Zoë's initial idea was to visually communicate an analogy used by Ross in an interview with them, comparing the way regents move around their habitat range to the way humans use different rooms in a house for eating, socialising, and breeding. This description helped them comprehend the importance of varying corridors of habitat for the species' survival, and how different the concept of 'home' might be for a nomadic bird (Sadokierski and Rissanen 2023). They proposed visualising this using a blueprint, or floorplan, layered over a map of proposed corridors of the regents' habitat. However, in conversation with the team it was clear that a blueprint connotes ideas of urban development, human property, and land ownership, and hard-edged divisions of landscapes that are some of the most fundamental threats to the survival of many threatened species. What's more, the image of 'corridors' we were drawing from posed significant conservation problems. We concluded that a convincing verbal analogy in context does not necessarily work as a static visual representation.



We ultimately settled on capturing the nomadic movement of birds through continuous, branching, lines of vegetation (and other floral and faunal features of the landscape) that travel with the text down the page. This approach has the particular virtue of reminding the reader that the movements of birds do not take place through empty space—like a blank page, or even the shaded page of a map—but rather occur through specific landscapes, that must be home to particular features and characteristics, perhaps, most importantly of all in the case of regents, the specific trees that provide both nest sites and the nectar-rich flowers that are one of their principal sources of food.

This connection between regents and their plants is also a core element of the story told in the essay. Attending to this relationship adds another important layer to the spatial dynamics of the species decline, going beyond a simple question of the number of birds and their population density, to ask about the particular ecological requirements of the places they need and the places they actually have. Can a place provide all of what is needed by birds to survive and thrive? Or, as in the case of a far-ranging species like the Regent Honeyeater, can various places be stitched together to do so? This stitching together of places creates what we call a ‘sustaining matrix’—a network of particular concrete places that together enable the ongoing life of a species. This is a network that can, of course, become frayed and fractured, coming apart in a way that leaves a species unable to endure.

Various graphic elements weave their way alongside the text, held together in large part by the leaves and flowers of the regent’s key food, the yellow box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*). Key predators and competitors of the regent are featured, as are threats to their forest habitat, from fires to noisy miners (*Manorina melanocephala*). In places, these threats interrupt and break the flow of vegetation, representing both the fracturing of habitats and the consequent inability of birds to successfully connect the places required to provide all of what is needed. Taken together, these visual elements are an effort to capture this sense of landscape as something that is thoroughly relational, sustaining, consequential, stitched-together, and, all too often, fragile.

The practice of ‘stitching’ together is also at work in another way in this multimedia essay. The digital collage process used to produce these core visual elements in the piece involves cutting and assembling elements from a range of sourced images into new ‘vignettes’, a process known as ‘stitching’ (see [Figure 2](#)).

All the source images used in the essay are natural history illustrations of the various species described in the written text, taken from the public domain. Here, we must address a conceptual paradox: despite shying away from the use of Western geographical maps or visual metaphors that allude to human domination over the natural world in our early concepts, we settled on an approach that involves using illustrations taken from colonial archives. Contrary to the early concepts for designing the multimedia essay, which *worked* discursively but not so well when it came to visual representation, this idea of archival collage is a more difficult sell verbally but yields a final product that we feel richly evokes the landscape and the set of sustaining relationships at the heart of our essay.

Natural history illustrations tend to isolate a specimen on a vacant backdrop, occasionally with sprays of foliage to exemplify habitat or faunal life cycle stages, thus the eye is invariably drawn to the target species, which has been ‘captured’.

Through her collage-making practice, Zoë explores ways to draw attention to collection and representation practices that isolate specimens from their ecological and cultural contexts. She invests hours trawling image archives, ensuring the source images used in the collages depict the correct species of plants and animals.

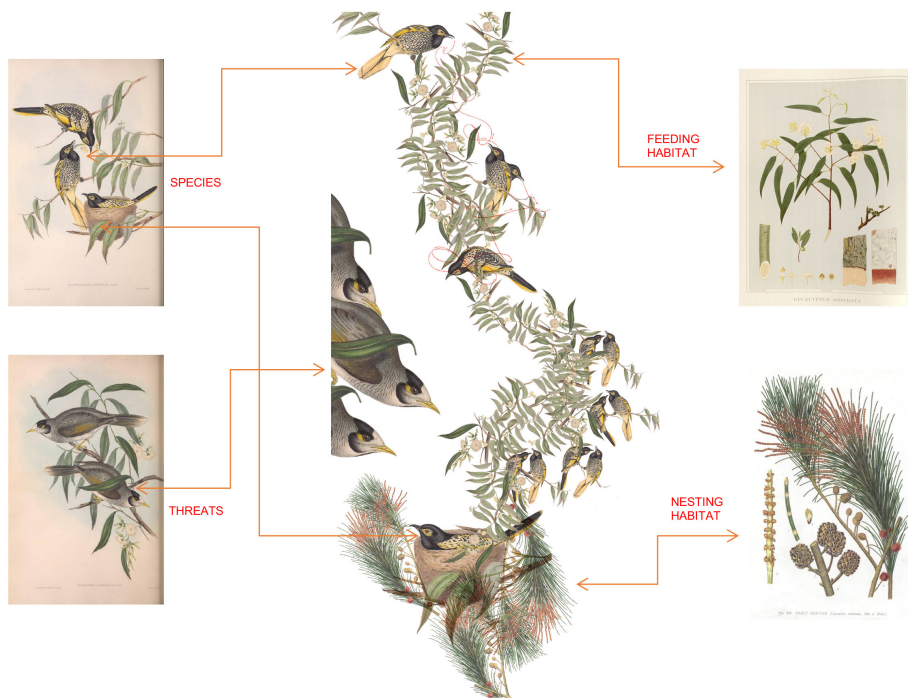


FIGURE 2 An exploded diagram of the source material for one of the visual elements of the essay.

Cutting, extracting, and ‘stitching together’ elements from the sourced images into new, more complex illustrative vignettes aims to unsettle the viewer, or ‘make strange’ the familiar-looking images. More than illustrating the text, these visualisations (and audio-visual elements) are designed to surface questions, to provide thresholds for thinking with and about the conventions of ‘illustrations’ in scholarly and scientific reporting (Sadokierski and Dean 2023).

To integrate the written text and visualisations into a web-based reading experience, we worked closely with the Curatorium Editorial Collective. Over many rich conversations with Jennifer Deger, Victoria Baskin Coffey, and Caleb Kingston, we discussed the most effective and engaging ways to materialise the work; we consider this a crucial part of the collaboration. Caleb, in particular, dedicated long hours to translate the supplied collage ‘assets’—which Zoë created in Photoshop and mocked up in InDesign—into a web-based reading experience. Collaborating with an editorial and creative production team is a rare gift and, although it demands patience, experimentation, and significant additional labour, we found it to be a deeply rewarding process that resulted in a complex work that goes well beyond the individual skills and expertise of its contributors.

## Side flights

Alongside the central text, the essay also includes a series of ‘side flights’. These moments are marked by an animated regent that flaps its wings, inviting the reader to follow. Doing so takes you away from the central text, layering in another element of the regent story via an additional short text, and in some cases a graphic and/or audio element. These side flights are optional departures that expand, complicate, or enrich. This aspect of the essay speaks to both



the uncertainty and diversity of nomadic regent movements (there is no singular flight path or migration route for these populations). But it is also an effort to layer in more perspectives and voices, to interrupt any possibility that the main text might be taken to be *the story* of the Regent Honeyeater, and so to remind the reader of the partiality of all meaning-making and storytelling (Haraway 1991), and the need to hold open room for an ongoing unfolding and layering of voices and ideas—as well as visions for the future of the species, and how a sustaining place for it in the world might be achieved.

This open-ended, multi-voiced, approach to storytelling has well-established roots in many fields, including extinction studies (Rose *et al.* 2017; van Dooren and Rose 2016), and design studies (Boehnert 2018; Fletcher *et al.* 2019; Demos 2016). Our side flights are an attempt to give them a prominent place in the text. However, there is more that we might have done here. With additional time and resources, we would have liked to invite others to contribute regent stories and perspectives, to layer in more voices in this way. We recognise that our team of Western-educated scholars are limited in important ways in the stories we can contribute. In discussing this possibility, our team was mindful that if we were to explore this option further, we would need to do so with great care. This is because the structure of our multimedia essay would always end up, quite literally, ‘marginalising’ these other voices and, in a way, putting them in the service of the ‘main text’. The obvious solution would be to abandon a ‘main text’ in favour of assembling an archive of regent stories. Our key concern with this approach, however, was that the archive format is one that can often leave a reader/viewer lost and disoriented. While there is certainly a place for these formats, in this case we felt that we needed a ‘main text’ that would allow us to ‘cast our lot’ with a particular story about what is happening to this species and why. But we wanted also to leave openings in this story, to invite departures, curiosity, the layering of thicker histories and alternative interpretations. The side flights offered a thoroughly imperfect means of doing this. In future work, we hope to continue to explore the opportunities opened up by multimedia formats in multi-voiced work for addressing issues of inclusivity and diversity.

## Audio

Our multimedia essay also includes a variety of audio clips. One of the key elements of the story we tell is that of the loss, or transformation, of the regent’s song. As bird numbers decline, there are no longer enough regents around for young birds to come into contact with, listen to, and develop a culturally specific adult song. In cases where birds rarely cross paths, or even become isolated, individuals have been found incorporating elements of the songs of other species into their repertoires. This breakdown of the regent’s song culture is thought to be contributing to the decline of the species, further undermining social and reproductive possibilities.

As with the visual elements of the essay, our aim in including this audio material was multi-faceted. We hoped to thickly presence the song of the regent to enable listeners to hear some of what is being lost, and so to make this loss a little more tangible. At the same time, the use of this material gives the contemporary cultural song of the regent—as well as the broader soundscape of its forests, including other resident bird species—another kind of life, online. Of course, this kind of presence is nothing like a substitute for the continued presence of these birds in the forest. But, as Zoë and Timo have argued in their *Precarious Birds* project, it does contribute to a cultural ‘archive of loss’, preserving more-than-scientific data about species that are all too likely to disappear in the coming years (Sadokierski and Rissanen 2022).

For many of us, engaging with audio recordings of bird song is also often a humbling experience as it quickly becomes clear how much of the subtle nuance, the diversity of calls within and between species, is lost on us. We expect that many viewers/listeners will share this experience as they encounter bird song in our essay. Understanding and appreciating these recordings—really *attuning* to them—requires us to learn to listen in ways that most of us have simply never tried to do. In this regard, our team relied on Ross and his colleagues who have conducted some of the key studies on the song of the Regent Honeyeater (Crates *et al.* 2021), as well as on Myles, whose research in the environmental humanities focuses on this same species, exploring how an attention to song shapes, and is shaped by, scientific knowledge, conservation practice, naturalists, and others, as well as the significance of attending to song in the context of ecological loss and extinction. For those of us entering into this process of attunement, it may be an opportunity to be perplexed and astonished by some of the many intricate facets of the lives of others about which we are usually simply oblivious.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, our contribution to this special issue is an effort to playfully explore how this digital environment might enable us to tell the regent story a little differently, opening up opportunities for connecting and knowing in other ways. Our hope is that the nuance and complexity of the storytelling approach might come a little closer to the nuance and complexity of the story being told, allowing us to weave together multiple perspectives, beings, experiences, understandings, and possibilities.

One of the particular joys of this collaboration has been in finding ways in which the biology and life history of this species in this place might speak to the ethical work of storytelling, and then weaving these understandings into the design. When we really slow down with regent song (what it is, how it is learnt), with their nomadic movement (its complexity, uncertainty, challenges), with their attachment to specific places (what these places provide, how they are stitched together), these elements of their lives invite us to tell the story of this species differently. This is partly about the particular words and facts we include, but it can also be about the format and design of the piece. In this way reading/viewing/hearing an essay might make the case for holding onto a bird and its places in multiple different ways, working on the audience at different levels. In exploring this space, we have been excited by the possibility to create this kind of experience in which the conceptual ideas, the design, and the biology of the species described, are brought into some sort of alignment that allows them to become mutually reinforcing elements of a storied encounter.

We are firmly of the view that we cannot solve problems with the same stories or images that gave rise to them.<sup>4</sup> And yet, we are also constrained in various ways by our inheritances: by conventions of genre, technological architectures, available image archives, and more. And so, we are called upon to playfully stretch, redo, and repurpose what is available to us to create new possibilities. In this way, our essay seeks to make loss and breakdown more palpable, while also celebrating some of the possibilities that have been, and might yet be, stitched together.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>We invite you to navigate this twinned reading experience in any way you want. Our suggestion is to engage with the Curatorium website article first, <https://curatorium.au/taja-journal/form-content/a-bird-a-flock-a-song-and-a-forest>, and then return to TAJA to read the author's commentary below.

<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.urbanfieldnaturalist.org/>

<sup>3</sup>See Tsing *et al.* 2020 (<https://feralatlus.org/>) and <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/>

<sup>4</sup>This idea echoes many earlier thinkers, including Audre Lorde's assertion that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'; Einstein's proposition that 'we cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them'; and most recently, from Haraway's (2016, 35) *Staying with the trouble* (engaging with the work of Marilyn Strathern): 'It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.'

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