

# Red-tail News

Issue 58 June 2024



Curious adult SERTBC female beautifully photographed by Mike Sverns on count day'.

Photo Credit - Mike Sverns

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## WELCOME TO THE WINTER EDITION OF RED-TAIL NEWS FOR 2024

Greetings Red-tails supporters and welcome to our first edition of Red-tail News for 2024.

In this edition, we are excited to bring you the latest news and updates from the program including staff movements, RTBC funding, results from our recent population monitoring activities including the annual count, flock counts and nest monitoring, attendance and representation at community engagement events including the World Species Congress and Casterton Rotary Shelter Opening and Annual count training event and a special story from our long-term volunteer and Recovery Team Member, Evan Robert's regarding his successful count day experience.

We would also like to take this time to acknowledge the incredible efforts of all our volunteers, landholders, project partners including first nations and the wider red-tail community for their on-going support of the program, particularly with respect to on-ground habitat restoration works and range-wide events such as the annual count. Without your assistance this project wouldn't be possible. We are very proud to be a part of this passionate community, all striving to make a positive difference for our Red-tails.

## RTBC FUNDING

Over the last eighteen months, the Recovery Team and BirdLife Australia have been working collaboratively with regional boards and delivery partners to put forward proposals for consideration for the next phase of RTBC project funding. This has been a long, drawn out and uncertain process with negotiations still underway for some regional boards.

While we are currently not in a position to expand on this further, we can provide some assurance that baseline/core recovery activities such as population monitoring, community engagement and on-ground conservation works will continue, albeit some at a heavily reduced capacity. We look forward to providing announcements and more detail as to what this entails in the next edition of Red-tail News.

I can confirm that BirdLife Australia will be looking to recruit a new Project Coordinator over the next few months. In the meantime, I have been working closely with project partners and the Recovery Team to ensure critical activities are delivered while we navigate through this process.





'Skye McPherson helping with nest box install works at Keranda.

Photo Credit - Bron Perryman

## FAREWELL SKYE

It's been a difficult first six months of the year for the recovery program starting firstly with the departure of our much-loved Project Coordinator Skye McPherson at the start of February 2024.

Based in South Australia, Skye started in the Project Coordinator role back in August 2021. During her time, she worked incredibly hard to coordinate, implement and support recovery efforts for Red-tails across three regional boards and multiple funding contracts, much of which occurred at the peak of COVID-19 restrictions. This included much of the population and habitat monitoring activities, community engagement and communications, and recovery team coordination.

Skye's friendly and approachable nature quickly made her a favourite amongst her peers and the Red-tail supporter network. Her quiet disposition, but positive can-do attitude made her a perfect candidate for the role and working with a diverse array of stakeholders and volunteers to create a brighter future for our Red-tails.

Skye made the very hard decision to leave the PC position to be closer to family back in Melbourne. There she has taken up a new role with Trust for Nature as a Conservation Program Officer based in the Port Phillip area. Although she won't be working on Red-tails directly, we are certain she will continue to work closely with BirdLife Australia and other partner organisations to achieve positive outcomes for birds and biodiversity for many years to come.

We would like to say a big thank you to Skye for all she has done and achieved whilst in the role, for BirdLife Australia, the Recovery Team and most importantly for our Red-tails. We wish her all the very best for the future and look forward to seeing her at one of our counts in the future.

*Bron Perryman*

## COCKY COUNT RESULT BEST IN YEARS

The annual RTBC count was held back on the 4th May in almost perfect conditions for counting cockatoos. This year 80 groups totalling 177 volunteers scoured the stringybark forest, covering more than 3,365km of forest tracks and roadsides across the species range in south-east South Australia and south-west Victoria.

Survey effort coupled with good listening conditions and reports of RTBCs either side of count day has resulted in our best count since our record-breaking tally of 1545 birds in 2015.

After taking into consideration double counts and eight additional sightings of RTBCs recorded on days either side of count, the final tally for 2024 stands at 1,303 birds, 99 more birds that last year's total of 1,204.

Results of this year's count are particularly pleasing given it has been nine years since we recorded more than 1300 birds. This confirms our suspicions about birds being missed in previous counts rather than any significant losses of individuals.

A total of 58 sightings of RTBCs were made on the day, however 24 of those were considered double counts of the same birds and excluded from the tally. The additional 8 sightings, tallying 364 RTBCs, made either side of count day accounted for 28% of the final number of birds recorded.

One of the most important reasons for completing the annual count is to locate large flocks for subsequent follow-up counts of males and barred birds (females and juveniles). Flock ratio counts provide our best indication of breeding success and population performance.

This year, nine large flocks, ranging from 60-150 birds per flock were located, comprising 65% (847 birds) of the total number of birds counted. Large flocks were found north of Edenhope (Murrays, Hauslers, and Morea State Forests), west of Penola (Smelts and Clay Wells Road areas), Mt. Burr, Jilpanger, Chetwynd and Nangwarry.

The biggest flocks, comprising 150 birds per flock, were found in Murray's State Forest and at Diamond Swamp (west of Penola).

This year most of the RTBCs counted were found in Victoria (873 birds) with the largest concentrations of birds found in the Wimmera (north to north-east of Edenhope). In South-Australia, almost all cockatoos were found in the southern part of the range - west of Penola, near Mount Burr Swamp and Nangwarry, with only two small flocks found north of Penola.

This distribution of RTBCs observed this year was consistent with food availability monitoring and buloke fruiting observations. Most RTBCs sighted were feeding in Eucalyptus arenacea (Desert Stringybark) with fewer flocks recorded in Eucalyptus baxteri (Brown Stringybark). This was not the case, however, for flocks reported in South Australia where the majority of individuals were located in E. baxteri.

This year the buloke, which is found in the northern part of the species range produced an exceptional seed crop with heavy seed loads observed throughout the Wimmera. Good buloke fruiting coupled with an increase in overall stringybark capsule availability across the range, with E. arenacea performing slightly better than E. baxteri, explains why large numbers of RTBCs were found in the Wimmera region this year (605 birds) and/or feeding in areas dominated by E. arenacea.

Other areas in which smaller flocks of RTBCs were located included Dergholm, Wilkin, Lake Mundi, Casterton, Little Desert, Rennick, Bangham, Dorodong, Miga Lake and Mt



## COCKY COUNT RESULT BEST IN YEARS CONTINUED

Arapiles. There was an absence of birds around Lower Glenelg National Park, with only a small flock found in Dry Creek NFR located to the west of the Park.

The success of this year's count has been attributed to the exceptional weather conditions experienced on the day and additional sightings reported. Very little wind, combined with sunny conditions made listening for birds much more conducive than in previous years where adverse conditions (rain, hail and wind) reduced the chance of finding birds.

Furthermore, there was an improvement in volunteer survey effort from last year with 80 groups spending 365 hours scouring stringybark habitats for RTBCs. Of those groups participating, one third sighted RTBCs on the day.

There was again a great mix of new and returning participants, including several large teams of multiple search groups (DEECA, Zoos SA, Deakin University and VMLCG). There was also a subset of farmers who checked their own properties

on the day, several of whom had good success locating large flocks coming into drink.

Unfortunately, very few volunteers attended the Baileys Rocks Campout this year. Those that did attend enjoyed the usual banter and bragging about who saw the most birds. This year's biggest counters were Evan Roberts and Don Murdoch who counted a total of 239 birds north of Edenhope.

BirdLife Australia and the RTBC Recovery Team would like to thank all the wonderful volunteers involved, including those who reported sightings either side of the day. Finally, a very special thanks to Evan Roberts for his ongoing commitment and assistance with promoting the count and contacting and encouraging local landholders to check their properties for RTBCs on the day.

*Bron Perryman*

*Acting SERTBC Recovery Project Coordinator*



*Male SERTBC observed over the count weekend in Dry Creek NFR by 13 year old Tom Barisic. Photo credit - Tom Barisic*



*Pair of Red-tails feeding in stringybark forest in Meereek State Forest by count volunteer Rob Grenfell. Photo credit - Rob Grenfell.*



*Three SERTBCs observed on annual count day by count volunteer Ben Zeeman. Photo credit - Ben Zeeman*



*Large flock of RTBCs observed on private land to the west of Penola coming into drink on count day. Photo credit - Julian Rebellato*

## SOUTH-EASTERN RTBC ANNUAL COUNT ON SATURDAY 4 MAY: ONE PERFECT DAY

After participating in the Annual Count for many years with either no or small sightings I set out for the 2024 count, accompanied by my friend Don Murdoch. This year the weather was perfect. A cool, sunny, dry autumn day.

Bron Perryman had allocated me the usual sites 11 and 18, so we headed out using the 'drive in the park' method. We started with Clarrie Clarkes in the north and worked our way south. We detected promising signs straight away with fresh evidence of feeding over a period, with some trash (chewings) fading in colour but no bird sightings.

The next area was Morea State Forest where I usually travel between 40 – 50 kms over a 5-hour period. Morea's condition has varied over the years and this year some of the swamps were still holding water and the stringy bark had fresh growth after recovering from a burning programme. With fresh trash evident on the western side of the park, we eventually found 70 RTBC quietly feeding in the stringy bark on the western boundary track. On returning to our vehicle, we had 70 plus fly over us and assumed they were the flock just counted so did not record them again. We commented that it does not usually get more hectic than this. Two and a half kms further south we found another 13 RTBC quietly feeding.

The next site was Broughtons where we found 6 RTBC on the southern boundary, almost the exact location I had seen 18 several years ago.

Murrays State Forest has diverse vegetation with swamps, eucalyptus and some large stringy bark trees. In the northeast corner we came across a lot of fresh trash and could hear RTBC in the distance. We started to walk towards them but on realising they were well spread out we separated, Don going south and I north. The birds were spread out over approximately 40 hectares. With Don and I more accustomed to counting sheep we were amazed at how close each of our tallies were so we split the difference to agree on 150 birds.

As the sun was setting, we completed filling in the paperwork. It had been an exciting and hectic day but we hoped we did not come across anymore.

*Evan Roberts*

*Red Tailed Black Cockatoo Recovery Team Member*



*Just some of the SERTBCs Evan and Don located on annual count day in Murray's SF. Photo credit – Justin McManus.*



## ENCOURAGING SIGNS AS FLOCK COUNTS REVEAL SUCCESSFUL BREEDING

Long-term readers of the Red tail news will know that each year, immediately after the annual count, we do our 'flock counts', detailed counts of flocks of birds coming in to drink in the evening.

Flock counts are our main measure of how red-tails are faring from year-to-year. The annual count tells us about how many red-tails there are in total and where the large flocks are so that we can find them to do the flock counts. The annual count on its own can't tell us if numbers are increasing or decreasing.

The flock counts carefully work out the proportions of adult males and barred birds in flocks. Barred birds represent all adult females and young less than four years old. The more barred birds the better, as we assume that more barred birds equals more successful breeding. We have now been doing these counts for 26 years, and the long-term average proportion of barred birds in flocks is 58%.

This year we collected counts from six sites totalling 512 birds. Two flocks of birds were counted west of Penola, one near Casterton, two near Dergholm and one north of Edenhope. Across those flocks 57% of birds were barred.

The numbers of barred birds in flocks in the last 15 years has been lower than the long-term average and it's been very encouraging that numbers have been relatively high for the past four years. This also matches what we know of the amount of food in stringybark which was monitored by Skye in January this year and which we have done each January since 2007. The past four years of stringybark food monitoring suggest that food availability has also been relatively high based on long-term averages. We also had a really good buloke season this year which will have contributed to the good breeding outcome seen this year in Red-tails.

Availability of high-quality food is still, we believe, the best driver of good breeding red-tails. Most of the desert stringybark is in bud and we can hope that will lead to a good seed crop in the coming 12 months.

*Richard Hill*

*Senior Biodiversity Officer DEECA*



*A male RTBC captured on camera as part of May 2024 annual flock counts. Cameras are attached to troughs where big flocks are known to drink to assist in identifying the number of males and barred birds (females and juveniles) in flocks as part of annual flock count monitoring. Photo credit - Richard Hill.*

## LISTENING IN

Another year of bioacoustic nest monitoring has been completed over the 2023-24 summer breeding season as part of our ongoing efforts to track the breeding success of red tails across their range.

This summer's monitoring effort was the largest to date with 124 possible nesting sites having audio monitoring devices deployed at them. Of these, 41 were natural hollows with a known history of nesting activity and 83 were artificial nesting boxes, these included 50 new colorbond nest tubes recently installed by Birdlife Australia and 33 other nest boxes known to have been used at least once in the past.

During site selection, apart from the 50 new boxes, priority was given to hollows or boxes which, based on previous usage, were most likely to have nesting activity in order to maximise the sample size of nesting attempts with a discernible fledging outcome, rather than dispersing monitoring effort across regions or stratifying by other environmental variables. Determining other spatial and temporal factors, which may be leading to nest failures or successful fledglings, will be crucial in the future. However, understanding the rate of nest failure is an important first step in clarifying if nestling survival is indeed the bottleneck in the species' life cycle, so the more attempts captured the better.



Servicing a bioacoustic recorder (audiomoth) on a nest box tree at Miga Lake. Photo credit - Skye McPherson.

During the monitoring season activity was visually observed at several natural and artificial sites with female birds being seen leaving or entering the nest, always a satisfying moment in the field to catch evidence with the eyes not just the ears. Work will be ongoing throughout the year to process and interpret the approximately 7 TB of audio files generated between September and March and to determine likely outcomes for as many of the active nests as possible.

So watch this space for an update on the results later in the year.

*Oliver Wardle*

*RTBC Nest Monitoring Officer, BirdLife Australia*



Female RTBC utilising a newly installed nest box at Powers Creek. This box is one of 83 artificial nest boxes monitored over 2023-24 to determine nesting success. Photo Credit - Skye McPherson.



Nest site monitoring'. Photo credit - Oli Wardle.



## COCKIES HELPING COCKIES AT THE WORLD SPECIES CONGRESS

On the 15th of May this year, the inaugural World Species Congress was convened, and the Cockies Helping Cockies project was featured on a truly global stage. A historic 24-hour online event, the World Species Congress involved a global and highly diverse community like never before, as a wave of speakers rolled its way around the world.

Vicki-Jo Russell (Chair, Trees for Life) and Mark Smith (Zoos SA) presented Cockies Helping Cockies to an impressive audience, including 201 speakers from 68 countries across 168 sessions, 16 government representatives, and a total of 10,409 participants from 203 countries and territories. Bronwyn Perryman and Kerry Gilkes also featured heavily in the presentation, as the great video highlighting the program, put together by the recovery team, was presented during the Congress.

If you have not already seen the video, you can view it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLxcU1cBsqq>

A joint effort between the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and WAZA (World Association of Zoos and Aquariums), the World Species Congress was specifically designed to facilitate a collision of ideas, highlight programs from many different regions, learn from various sectors and different taxa, and take lessons from beyond the bounds of traditional conservation efforts. A key hoped-for outcome from the Congress was to boost progress on Target 4 of the United Nations Biodiversity Plan – i.e., to halt extinctions, reverse species declines, and recover populations. You can learn more about the World Species Congress at their official website here: [World Species Congress](https://www.worldspeciescongress.org/).

One of the features of Cockies Helping Cockies that so impressed Congress participants was the collaborative nature of the project, where landholders, community members, and many GOs and NGOs are integral to its ongoing success. The pivotal role of the great teams at the Limestone Coast Landscape Board, Trees for Life, BirdLife Australia and Zoos SA was highlighted.

Unsurprisingly, the feedback from Congress participants was very positive, so we are delighted that the project has been refunded for another four years and that the great work can continue.

*Mark Smith*

*Conservation Manager, Adelaide Zoo*



*Kerry Gilkes showcasing one of her many highly successful 'Cockies Helping Cockies' revegetation sites near Lucindale SA. Photo Credit – Bron Perryman*

## GRAND OPENING OF CASTERTON ROTARY CLUB INFORMATION SHELTER & ANNUAL COUNT TRAINING EVENT

The Casterton Rotary Club has done a spectacular job of updating the information shelter on the outskirts of Casterton. The impressive new shelter which features a newly updated information board and two striking red-tail feather sculptures highlights just how important the SERTBC is to the people of the Casterton region.

The official opening of the 'newly upgraded' information shelter was held on Saturday 4th May to coincide with the RTBC annual count and volunteer training event. The training event has historically been held at Rotary Park situated in the township of Casterton adjacent the Glenelg River.

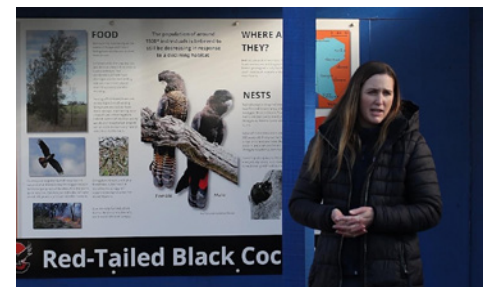
The event was attended by a crowd of about 30 people comprising local residents, members of the rotary club, count volunteers and myself as the Birdlife Australia and Recovery Team representative.

Rotary President Sheryl-Lee Brown and Mayor Karen Stephens jointly performed the official opening, which was dedicated to the memory of past Rotarian Ian Esmore. Ian's vision was to educate and help preserve Casterton's endangered wildlife, in particular the RTBC.

The official proceeding was then followed by a presentation/annual count volunteer training event, where attendees and volunteer counters learnt about the cockatoo and its habitat needs, reasons for undertaking the count, how and when to complete the survey, how to identify stringybark habitat and signs or indicators of RTBC presence (ie chewings and trash left behind after feeding). Volunteers needing additional information were further supported at the conclusion of the presentation where required.

We would like to acknowledge and express our sincere thanks to the Casterton Rotary Club for their wonderful efforts in helping to promote and educate the broader public about the plight of the SERTBC. In particular, Tonie Thiel for reaching out and driving this collaboration.

*Bron Perryman*



*Bron Perryman presenting at the Casterton Information Shelter Opening and annual count training session on the 4 May 2024.*



*Attendees at the grand opening of the Casterton Rotary's Club's newly upgraded Information Shelter and annual count training session on Saturday 4 May. Photo credit: Andrew Seabrook.*

## MOVING TO PAPERLESS

To minimise resources and administrative expenditure we are moving to a paperless format for all future editions of Red-tail News. If you currently receive a paper copy and want to continue to receive this paperless please contact us either via the website [www.redtail.com.au](http://www.redtail.com.au) or email [redtail@birdlife.org.au](mailto:redtail@birdlife.org.au) with your preferred contact email address. If you currently receive your news electronically nothing will change.

Thank you for your understanding and support.

*Male SERTBC making the most of the good seed crops in buloke this year.*

*Photo Credit - Steve Bourne.*



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### Bron Perryman

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