

Red-tail News

Issue 51 December 2020

WELCOME TO EDITION 51 OF RED-TAIL NEWS.

Welcome to the Christmas edition of Red-tail News.

We hope that everyone has been staying safe and healthy in these strange times, especially those living in Victoria. Although COVID-19 restrictions have created additional challenges to delivering our recovery project activities since the pandemic began earlier this year, many Recovery Team members have still been very busy working hard to achieve great outcomes for Red-tails.

In this edition of Red-tail News we will hear from Jess from Greening Australia's stringybark revegetation project in Victoria, as well as updates from the Communities Helping Cockies (CHC) team about revegetation for Red-tails in SA.

We will also hear from Daniella Teixeira with results from the bioacoustic monitoring project in Victoria during the 2019/20 Red-tail breeding season, and Richard Hill with the results from the latest flock counts.

We also have several exciting opportunities available for landholders who wish to plant Red-tail feeding and nesting trees on their properties. The CHC team are looking for landholders who are keen to plant stringybark and buloke, as well as undertake woody weed control and fencing. There is also funding available for landowners who wish to plant paddock trees. More information can be found in the newsletter.

We hope that everyone has a safe and happy Christmas and New Year, and that you enjoy reading our selection of stories in this edition of Red-tail News.

Thanks, Kelsey

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*A pair of festive
Red-tailed
Black-Cockatoos
Photo: Michael Waters*

birds are in our nature




birdlife
AUSTRALIA

PUBLIC URGED TO REPORT RED-TAIL NESTING ACTIVITY

The Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery Team and BirdLife Australia are again calling on landholders and members of the public to help locate new nest sites of the endangered South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo. As the Nest Incentive Scheme is a low risk activity with regards to COVID-19, recovery project staff and volunteers aim to continue the program this year to find new Red-tail nests.

Since 2011, nest incentive payments have been offered to the public for information on new nest sites of the cockatoo across its habitat range in the south-east of South Australia and south-west of Victoria. Forty new nests have been discovered through the scheme, with the Recovery Team keen to find more nests during the breeding season of September to March. It is important to find nests so we can understand what the birds need to raise their chicks successfully and protect nests from predators such as brush-tail possums.

Payments of \$500 will be offered for information which leads to the discovery of new nests.

Red-tails nest in large hollows (15-50cm), which most often occur in very old, large eucalypts such as River Red Gums. Nest hollows can be in dead or live trees, with most nests occurring within 3km of stringybark habitat.

The Recovery Team are eager to find more nests across the range, especially in South Australia where there are very few known nests. A total of nine new Red-tail nests were discovered last season and we are hoping to continue with that success this year and find even more nests across the range.

All Recovery Project personnel will strictly follow COVID guidelines while conducting nest checks, including social distancing and hygiene practices, carrying hand washing and cleaning equipment in vehicles. There are Recovery Team members residing in both SA and Victoria so no matter which side of the border you live on, a team member will be able to confirm whether a nest is active or not.

We are asking anyone that sees Red-tails or observes nesting behaviour, particularly single males or pairs of birds, to report their sightings to the Coordinator by calling 1800 262 062 or via email redtail@birdlife.org.au. All we need is the date and time of sighting, number of Red-tails, the location (preferably a grid reference), and what the birds were doing (e.g. feeding, flying, drinking etc).

Understandably, some landholders are concerned about the impact that discovering a nest on their property may have on their farm. We would like to assure them that there are no negative consequences involved with reporting a nest to the Recovery Team, as we simply want to monitor each nest from a distance and protect them from terrestrial predators.

There are a number of conditions required when applying for the scheme, with incentive payments only made once the sighting has been confirmed. Guidelines for the nest incentive scheme and information on Red-tail nesting behaviour are available on our website www.redtail.com.au.



A female Red-tail and chick at the nest

Photo: Bob McPherson

RESULTS OF 2019/20 BIOACOUSTIC MONITORING PROJECT

In the 2019/20 breeding season, sound recorders were used to monitor breeding at 36 Red-tail nests. This included 25 new artificial nest hollows in the Wimmera region (potential nests), and 11 nests where breeding had commenced (active nests). Recovery Team members Richard Hill and Kelsey Bennett conducted the on-ground work, attaching a small AudioMoth sound recorder to each nest tree which recorded sound from 18:30 – 21:30 each day. The methods used were based on my PhD research, which examined how sound can help us monitor nesting activity, but this was a much larger scale.

To analyse the sound data, I used a call recogniser that I'd previously developed to detect Red-tail calls in sound recording. Given the high number of false positive detections, I also had to manually verify the recogniser's results. We had quite a lot of trouble with wind noise this season, which we think related to the design of waterproof housings that the recorders were in. These were different recorders to the ones I'd used in my PhD work, and we've since done additional testing and modified the design for the 2020/21 season.

The results of the 2019/20 season were very promising. Of the 36 nest sites monitored in the 2019/20 season, 13 were active. Nestlings were recorded at nine nests, or 69% of active nests. Fledging was recorded at one nest (a direct measure of nest success) and assumed at two (nestling calls indicated imminent fledging). Additionally, late-stage nestling calls were recorded at two nests of unknown outcome, where the sound recorders were retrieved while the nest was active. As such, nest survival among active nests was between 23 – 38%, and it may be higher if some nests of unknown outcome were successful. Of the nests whose outcome was known, 43% fledged.

Remarkably, one nest was re-nested the day after fledging and was still active when Richard collected the sound recorder in April! Of the 25 artificial nest hollows that were monitored, one was used for nesting and another was prospected. Flocks were frequently detected in recordings from many nests, indicating the presence of the birds in the area. Perhaps this season those adults will decide to nest in the artificial boxes.

The causes of nest failure are not known but nestling calls allow us to estimate the age at which a nest fails. The region experienced extreme temperatures (high 40s) on 20 December 2019, however there is no indication that any nest failed because of this. The three nests for which failure dates are known survived to January and February 2020. While there were no obvious indications of predation, sound recordings were limited to 3 hours/day.



We've already kicked off the 2020/21 monitoring season and we're looking forward to sharing the results next year.

Dani Teixeira

A new nest box in a tree with a sound recorder attached at the base

Photo: Kelsey Bennett

INCREASING FUTURE FOOD SUPPLY FOR THE SOUTH-EASTERN RED-TAILED BLACK COCKATOO IN SOUTH-WEST VICTORIA

Greening Australia has been ramping up efforts to address a lack of recruitment and age diversity concerns within degraded Heathy Woodland remnant vegetation across the range of the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo in Western Victoria.

Some years ago we began to be alarmed by the lack of recruitment we were observing for both the Desert Stringybark, *Eucalyptus arenacea*, and the Brown Stringybark, *Eucalyptus baxteri*. Two of the three food sources for the red-tails, not to mention the fact the other main food source the Bulokes, *Allocasuarina leumannii*, are an endangered species themselves.

We also know that breeding success for the cockies is dependent on a reliable food source occurring close to the nest to limit the amount of time away foraging for food.

So what's driving this issue? Why aren't we seeing a good next generation of Stringybark trees?

To answer this question, we engaged Melbourne University to undertake a literature review into the limitations around germination and survival of these two species. Essentially this highlighted that both severe frost, high summer temperatures and water deficit were the key drivers behind high mortality of seedlings and that we needed to adapt our approach to restoration of this species. Also, that these factors were likely increased in effect when the existing canopy is compromised leaving the understory increasingly exposed to the elements.

From our own observations we suspect that a compromised canopy is being caused by two main factors. High intensity burning and historical clearing.

In the Glenelg-Hopkins region we have focused on crown land forests where controlled burning has resulted in canopy scorch. And in the Wimmera we have focused on areas of private land

under conservation covenant where the vegetation has been previously cleared and good conservation management alone was not making an impact on these species.

We have also changed our planting approach to utilise existing cover as much as possible and planting on the south side of anything. We also plant as early as possible in the Autumn to maximise root growth prior to the first summer and apply a slow release fertiliser at the bottom of the planting hole. Application of a browsing deterrent has also increased our success rate.

We are ecstatic with the success of this year's efforts to date with 30,000 desert stringybark seedlings planted across 500 hectares of private land under conservation covenant in the Wimmera and 41,000 desert stringybarks established through a combination of planting and hand direct seeding across 400 hectares within Dradjurk State Forest in the Glenelg Hopkins catchment. It's very encouraging so far however the post summer monitoring will tell the final story so stay tuned.

Finally, this incredible effort would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and bravery of our passionate contract planting crews, including Levo's plantation services and Gariwerd Tree Thugga Massive, who adhered to all the COVID-19 social distancing and hygiene standards whilst working incredibly hard. Also, a big thankyou to all the wonderful nursery staff for your adherence to quality and hard work whilst also under the challenges presented by the pandemic. And finally, the funding and support provided by the Victorian Government's Biodiversity Response Plan team.

Jess Gardner

Senior Ecologist, Greening Australia



1 Degraded remnant Heathy Woodland. Compromised canopy and lack of recruitment. **2** Desert stringybark only four months old near the Little Desert with amazing secondary growth. Note the browsing deterrent on the initial leaves. **3** Yes, we are going in there! **4** Oliver Wardle from Gariwerd Tree Thugga Massive enthusiastically embracing the challenging task of planting within thick understory vegetation. **5** Socially distanced camping on site.

Photos: Jess Gardner

HELP OUR RED-TAILED BLACK-COCKATOOS – FUNDING AVAILABLE FOR SE LANDOWNERS

The Communities helping Cockies project has funding to help South East landowners to plant trees and protect habitat for the endangered South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo.

The Communities helping Cockies project expands on Zoos SA's highly successful Cockies helping Cockies project which has been running for nearly a decade around the Naracoorte and Lucindale areas.

Over the next three years, the project is looking to invest in revegetation of feeding trees as well as woody weed control and fencing to improve and protect existing habitat. Sites close to areas where Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos regularly feed are a high priority.

Zoos SA's Cockies helping Cockies Project Officer, Kerry Gilkes, said 'the project is flexible to fit in with what farmers want and they are supported through every step of the process to ensure their project is successful.'

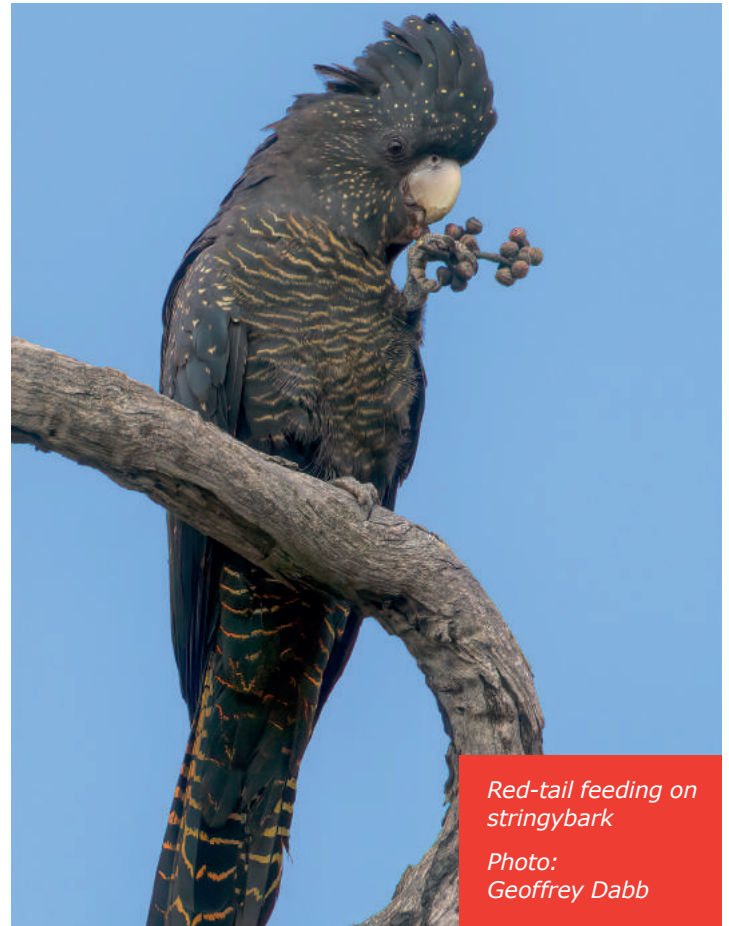
Participating landholder, Jane Pryor said, 'The Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo project has made us acutely aware of the vulnerability of these beautiful birds and their habitats, and the need for intervention by landholders and the community. Participating and contributing to the project has been exceptionally rewarding.'

Alan Tregoweth, a farmer from Lucindale agrees, 'It's a very easy program to be involved in, with minimal effort required by the landowner which makes it so easy.'

Trees For Life Habitat Officer, Cassie Hlava said, 'with only 1500 Red-tails remaining in the wild, it's critical that trees are planted now to provide future feeding habitat. We hope that Limestone Coast farmers will continue their great work and partner with us to make the most of the funding we currently have available to keep the cockies here for their grandkids.'

The cockatoos mainly feed on brown stringybark and desert stringybark which grows on sandy soils between Keith and Mount Gambier. Though much rarer, buloke is also a valuable food tree that can be planted in clay or loam soil in its natural range close to the border in between Naracoorte and Bordertown.

If you have stringybark or buloke on or near your place and are interested in revegetation, woody weed control or fencing habitat, please contact Kerry Gilkes on 0429 660 027 to discuss your project idea and register your interest.



Red-tail feeding on stringybark

*Photo:
Geoffrey Dabb*

FUNDING FOR Paddock TREES IN SOUTH-EAST SA

The Limestone Coast Landscape Board (formerly SE NRM) in partnership with the Communities helping Cockies project partners were successful in applying for a small Smart Farms Grant to protect and replace food and nest paddock trees for Red-tails and other threatened species in the south-east of South Australia. This project seeks to preserve existing paddock trees and establish a new generation.

Paddock trees are an iconic and valued feature of our regional landscape and provide many benefits for farms including shade and shelter for stock, nutrient cycling and attracting beneficial insects. They are also important for providing food and nesting resources for many different species, including Red-tails.

Trees For Life will be working with the Board and project partners to deliver the grant and has engaged Red-tail Recovery Project Officer, Kelsey Bennett to work with local landholders. Kelsey is keen to hear from landholders with an interest in planting new trees and protecting existing trees on their property. Trees for Life can provide seedlings, guards, and fencing materials to participating landholders.

Participants can also choose to take part in the paddock tree guard trial. There are several different types of guards that the project team are keen to trial to determine their relative feasibility and cost-effectiveness.

Interested landholders will need to fill out a short expression of interest form which can be found on the Trees for Life

website and email the form to project officer, Kelsey Bennett at KelseyB@treesforlife.org.au.

If you would like further information about the project please email Kelsey.



Large, old paddock trees are an icon of the regional landscape

Photo: Jonathan Tuck

'LOOK TO THE SKIES' REPORT

This year BirdLife Australia and the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery Team held a local 'Look to the Skies' monitoring event on Saturday 2 May to try and count as many cockies as possible. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions unfortunately we had to cancel our usual Annual Cocky Count, however it is vital at this time of year to count as many Red-tails as we can and find the location of large flocks so we decided to run a smaller event aimed at locals who live in the Red-tail range in south-east SA and south-west Vic.

Participants searched their own properties and backyards for Red-tails on the day and despite the cold and windy weather we received a good number of sightings. The total number of cockies seen on the day was 748 birds from 18 sighting reports, which is a fantastic effort considering most of the birds counted were on private land. Taking into account sighting reports received in the week before and after the event, as well as several large flocks which were known but weren't counted on the day, the number of birds counted came to 1144.

A large number of birds were found in Ullswater, with landholders Ros and Andrew Bradey counting 450 birds on their property and in the surrounding stringybark reserves! Red-tails were also found in other areas in Victoria including Benayeo and Meereek. In SA birds were found around Naracoorte, Wild Dog Valley, The Gap, Lucindale and Kalangadoo. Other areas where birds had been seen before and after the event included Strathdownie and Clear Lake.

The majority of birds appeared to be in the northern part of the Red-tail range, especially in the Wimmera region. It is likely the birds are taking advantage of the good seed crop currently available for them in Desert stringybark which occurs in that part of the range. While we won't be able to compare the results of this event to previous years' Annual Counts, the data collected is still important in finding the location of large flocks and determining patterns of habitat use.

There were around 40 people who officially registered for the event but it's likely that more people took part and kept an eye out for Red-tails on the day but didn't register. The event was promoted widely in the weeks leading up to it and attracted a good amount of attention.

The Recovery Team would like to say a massive thank you to everyone who took part in the event and reported sightings, and also to those people who helped promote the event. This would not have been possible without the help and support from locals and landholders in the Red-tail's range. We hope that next year we'll be able to hold our normal Annual Cocky Count again and volunteers will be able to go out and search for our stunning Red-tails! A special thanks to Evan Roberts and Kerry Gilkes for their assistance with promoting the event and getting local landholders involved on the day.



Red-tails feeding in stringybark as part of a large flock found in Strathdownie before the event. Photo: Chris Farrell

2020 FLOCK COUNT RESULTS

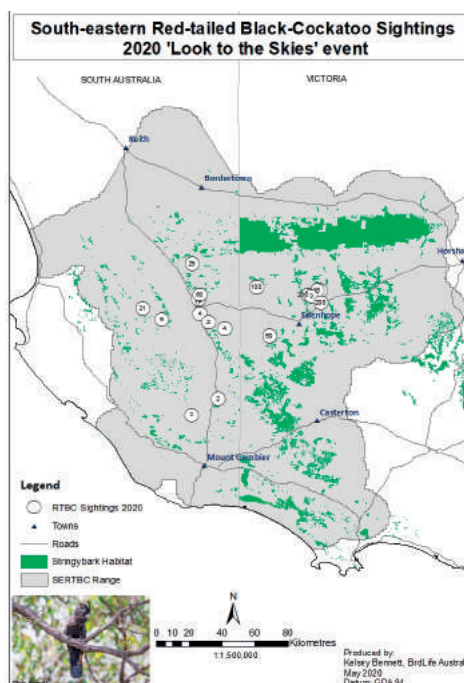
Long-term readers of Red-tail news will know that, each year immediately after the annual count, we do our 'flock counts': detailed counts of flocks of birds coming into drink in the evening. Flock counts are our main measure of how Red-tails are faring. These counts carefully work out the proportions 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. Over the past 21 years that we have collected these data, we have seen the number of barred birds vary around an average of 58%.

This year we collected counts from six sites totalling almost 800 birds. Birds were counted near Wilkin, Apsley, Ullswater, Frances, Harrow and Lucindale. The mean proportion of barred birds was 54%. The proportion of barred birds in flocks over the past six years is consistently below the long-term average and confirms this trend for fewer young birds or adult females that we have been observing over this period. Our results this year varied quite a lot between flocks, as some flocks had quite high proportions of barred birds and some had very low. This may indicate that there were greater regional differences in breeding success in the last 12 months than we've previously seen.

Our current belief is that food quality, principally good quality stringybark seed crops, have been much poorer over the past several years and that has reduced nesting success of cockatoos markedly. This wasn't the case this year, with widespread fruiting of Desert Stringybark in spring 2019. Our food monitoring suggested that Desert Stringybark food availability was the highest since 2013. Unfortunately, we didn't see consequent sign of a lot of successful breeding.

We are keen to understand where cockatoos are nesting this year and monitor how successful they are. Now with acoustic recorders, we can monitor nesting success easily and simply, by placing the small recorder on or near the nest and coming back four months later. It's easy, doesn't disturb the birds at all, and tells us if a nest was successful, and if not, at what stage it failed. This new information will help us work out where birds breed most successfully, and how to create more habitat like that. This type of monitoring is limited now by how many nests we know of, so finding active nests is more important than ever. Please pass on information about nests to Kelsey to allow us to do this critical work.

Richard Hill



Observations of South-eastern Red-tailed Black Cockatoos counted as part of the 2019 Annual Count

LATEST UPDATES FROM THE SA COMMUNITIES HELPING COCKIES PROJECT

The following projects are part of the 'Communities Helping Cockies' project which is funded by the Limestone Coast Landscape Board.

Cockies Benefit from Stringybark Habitat Plantings

Recent rains will benefit the 12,500+ stringybark habitat seedlings planted on private land this winter. The plantings will provide a valuable food resource in the future for the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo along with many additional benefits including shade and shelter for stock and a healthier landscape.

Zoos SA's Cockies Helping Cockies project officer Kerry Gilkes said 'it was one of the biggest plantings that has been undertaken in the eleven years of the project with 23 properties involved across 46 sites planted out by locally employed crews working from mid-May through to August. Plantings were spread across the birds' range from Keith in the north to Penola in the south.

'It is a privilege to work with landholders to develop an individual plan that works for their property and then work through the process until the trees are in the ground', says Ms Gilkes. 'Each property contributes individually but when you collectively add the sites across the landscape you can really see the connectivity of food highways being created for the birds. All sites are followed up the following year to address any planting gaps and backfilled that year. The challenge in each season is different so we need to keep adjusting our methods to maximise results'.

'A local Lucindale crew is employed through the planting season to ensure all the seedlings are planted and guarded at the optimum time. This allows for deep root establishment

before the summer months. We also employed a local Keith planting crew this season which helped support their community during business closures due to COVID-19' Ms Gilkes said.

Over the next few months we will be seeking interest from landholders who may be interested in undertaking works on their property in the 2021 planting season, with more information in the newsletter.

For further information contact: Kerry Gilkes m: 0429 660 027



A site which was planted with stringybark trees and woodland understorey species. Photo: Kerry Gilkes



The planting crew placing guards around stringybark paddock trees

Photo: Kerry Gilkes

Kids helping Cockies Update

Over the last twelve months local students have been working hard to help our endangered South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos by growing and planting stringybark trees as part of the popular Kids helping Cockies Program.

This year eight schools have been involved in producing stringybark seedlings for planting at local habitat restoration sites over winter. Participating schools have included Allendale East Area School, Frances Primary School, Glenburnie Primary School, Grant High School, Lucindale Area School, Naracoorte South Primary School, Newbery Park Primary School and Tenison Woods College.

Students have navigated their way through the entire process from seed collection to revegetation. In doing so they have gained practical skills in seed collection, planting and propagation, knowledge of conservation management techniques and experience in applying those techniques to help increase food availability for Red-tails.

Seed collection excursions and seed planting events held towards the end of last year resulted in many hundreds of stringybark seedlings germinating over summer. Approximately 1750 stringybark seedlings were propagated as a result of this project.

Upon returning to school early in the new year students spent time thinning out germinated seedlings to maximise growth and improve survival.

Under normal circumstances, seedlings would have been planted out by students over May/June, however due to COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions, all school planting excursions were cancelled during Term 2, resulting in delayed planting.

Fortunately, the easing of restrictions in Term 3 meant that students were finally able to dirty their hands and plant-out grown seedlings at local habitat revegetation sites over July/August 2020.

Planting events were undertaken in conjunction with Zoos SA Cockies Helping Cockies, Trees for Life, Forestry SA and Nature Glenelg Trust. This year's plantings occurred on both private and public land near Lucindale, Naracoorte, Frances, Tantanoola, Caroline, Wandilo and Glencoe.

Approximately 916 seedlings including a mix of stringybark and associated understory species were planted by participating students across the seven sites visited. The remaining seedlings were distributed to other habitat restoration projects for Red-tails. Students also helped to guard seedlings to protect from grazing herbivores.

As always, planting sessions proved very popular with students, allowing them to get outside and experience/engage with nature and learn new skills.

A highlight for many students involved this year was a visit and cultural experience with Aboriginal Elder Doug Nicholls thanks to Zoos SA Cockies Helping Cockies. Doug talked about the significance of Red-tails to the Aboriginal people, the six seasons and the importance of caring for country. He also shared his knowledge and extensive collection of Aboriginal tools and artifacts used by his people. The kids were thoroughly engaged and were thrilled to be able to experience, learn and immerse themselves in Aboriginal culture.

Of the 400 students involved in the program this year it was really rewarding to see so many kids engaged and excited to be involved in taking action for our Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos. Their action today will result in more food for our Red-tails to come. Well done kids!

If your school is interested in getting involved in the Kids helping Cockies Program please contact myself on 0438 317 024 or email bronwyn.perryman@birdlife.org.au at any stage.

Bron Perryman

Kids helping Cockies Coordinator



Doug Nicholls talking to Tenison Woods College student about the six seasons. Photo: Tina Opperman



Newbery Park Primary School students helped to backfill stringybark seedlings at Forestry SA's Windy Hill-Mt Watch Biodiversity Corridor. Photo: Bron Perryman



Lucindale Area School Students planting a stringybark seedling at an Australian Blue Gum Plantations site near Lucindale. Photo: Bron Perryman



FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

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Red-tails drinking from a trough on a Lucindale property that were counted as part of the flock counts

Photo: Kelsey Bennett

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Help us create positive outcomes for birds and their habitats

Kelsey Bennett

Project Coordinador, South Eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery Team

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