

Red-tail News

Issue 43 November 2016

WELCOME

Edition 43 of Red-tail News (RTN) brings you a collection of news stories covering the highs and lows of 2016 starting with the alarming results from our recent flock counts showing a marked decrease in barred birds (females and juveniles). We sadly bid farewell to our treasured colleague Dick Cooper who has been a valued member of the Recovery Team since it began. On a brighter note we celebrated 20 years of counting Cockies, our Nest Incentive Scheme continues for the 2016/17 season, we look at how Bioacoustics may be used in the future to monitor nests, and you can read about

the great work Greening Australia are doing trialling large scale revegetation of Cocky habitat using a new planting technique and more.

On a very special note we congratulate Bronwyn Perryman on the new arrival of her beautiful girl Mya and wish Bronwyn, Adam, Nash and Chase all a wonderful first year together.

Kerry Gilkes who has been working on the 'Cockies Helping Cockies' Project is filling the Project Coordinator role while Bronwyn takes maternity leave.

Demonstrating the successful germination next to a 50c coin

Photo: Doug Phillips



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INCREASING CRITICAL FOOD SUPPLY

Greening Australia supported by the Australian Government through the National Landcare Programme have rolled out a major revegetation effort this year in two geographic areas on public land managed by the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). Drajurk State Forest near Casterton and Rennick State Forest near the South Australian border were both previously dominated by woody weeds *Pinus radiata* and *Acacia longifolia*. Following control treatments sub-optimal recruitment of *Eucalyptus araneosa* and *Eucalyptus baxteri* has been observed within these public land areas meaning a reduction in the availability of a critically important food source for Red-tails. To date this year Greening Australia supported by DELWP staff have installed *Eucalyptus*, as well as *Acacia* species via tube-stock and direct seeding (using a novel deployment methodology) across approximately 350 hectares of public land.

Monitoring results since planting and direct seeding have been extremely encouraging with high tube-stock survivals and an excellent germination response in both geographic locations. It is anticipated that an area covering 1,400 hectares will be revegetated via tube-stock and direct seeding next year, as well as a further 400 hectares in 2018.

Doug Phillips



Successful germination of stringybark at Rennick State Forest

Photo: Doug Phillips





Flock of South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo's drinking from a trough

Photo: Wayne Bigg

ALARM BELLS ARE RINGING AFTER 2016 FLOCK COUNT

Each year members of the Recovery Team and volunteers collect a range of information which assists us to assess how Red-tail populations are performing. This includes the annual count when we count all the birds we can find in its range in one day as well as reporting sightings of Red-tails all year round. In addition detailed 'flock counts' are used as a key measure of population performance, the number of young birds up to three years old in flocks in any one year.

Flock counts are done in autumn each year. Because young Red-tails are indistinguishable in the field from two and three-year old birds and from females of any age, we count the number of adult males in each flock. Adult males are recognisable by their uniform black colour and red tail feathers. All other Red-tails are spotted and barred, with barred tail feathers. The proportion of barred birds in flocks in autumn varies from year to year, according to how many young birds have been produced in the preceding breeding season. More successful nesting means more young birds, thus a higher proportion of barred birds. Flock counts have shown us that the breeding seasons of 2004-05 and 1998-1999 produced far more young birds than any intervening years. In those two years flocks contained an average of 63% barred birds in autumn.

This year we measured the proportion of barred birds at three flocks totalling about 700 birds. Our results are very worrying. Only 51% were barred birds. We believe this means that either no young from the past three years have survived to join flocks with their parents as most do by autumn, or that there has been an increase in the death rates of adult females.

Either way this appears to be a very serious worsening of the status of the Red-tail. It's essentially the same as a population of humans where there were no children under the age of 10 or 12 years old. Imagine what that would look like! Our monitoring also shows us that in the breeding season of 2015 (where the latest batch of young birds would have been produced); there were basically no new seed crops on stringybark at any of our monitoring sites across the Red-tail range. In seven years of detailed monitoring of stringybark seed production, we have never seen a year with so little food for Red-tails. We are currently organising for an external review of all our understanding of the key threats to Red-tails to see if there is anything we might have missed. It's a worrying time. Fingers crossed this breeding season will be a better one. Our stringybark monitoring suggests that this year's seed crop is better than 2015, but not by very much. Our monitoring next autumn will tell how Red-tails fared.

Richard Hill



URGENT CALL FOR SIGHTINGS

The Recovery Team and BirdLife Australia are urgently calling on the public to help us locate new nest sites of the endangered South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (SERTBC).

Over the past five years, incentive payments have been offered to landholders and members of the public for information on previously unknown nest sites of the cockatoos across their range in south-eastern SA and south-western Victoria. Payments of up to \$500 are offered for information that leads to the identification of new nest sites or new activity at existing nests, thanks to funding provided by the Nature Foundation of South Australia.

The Red-tail Recovery Team is always interested in hearing from anyone who sees Red-tails, no matter how large or small the flock size. At this time of the year we are particularly interested in pairs of birds or single adult males, as this may help us locate new nest sites.

What do you look out for when finding a nest? Red-tails require large hollows (15–50 cm) for nesting, which naturally occur in very old, large eucalypts such as River Red Gums. Nests can be in dead or living trees and are more likely to occur in areas where there is stringybark within three kilometres. Although Red-tails have been found to nest year round, most breeding occurs over spring and summer.

Our recent flock counts highlighted the declining ratio of barred birds (females and juveniles) over the last three years, which indicates a lack of breeding success or increase in female deaths. This finding does not bode well for the future of Red-tails and highlights the critical importance of finding new nests to learn more about their nesting and fledging behaviour.

Knowing the locations of nests enables us to protect nests from predators such as Brush-tail possums and learn more about nest success and failure. We need to understand the threats so we can target future management.

There are a number of conditions required when applying for incentive payments, which are only made once the sighting has been confirmed by the Project Team.

Some landholders are understandably protective of their nests and would rather not have people coming onto their properties for fear of disturbing the nest. We respect this and



Female Red-tail protecting juvenile on nest

Photo:
Bob McPherson

would be happy to discuss with them how they can help their resident birds while remaining anonymous. We have local landholders on the Recovery Team who would be happy to talk to you about this.

Guidelines for the nest incentive scheme and information on Red-tail nesting behaviour are available on our website www.redtail.com.au. Alternatively you can contact the Project Coordinator on 1800 262 062 or by email kerry.gilkes@birdlife.org.au

RED-TAIL COUNT – 20 YEARS

This year we celebrated 20 years of holding our Annual Red-tail Count. Twenty years is a long time to be engaging volunteers across the birds' range and this year we were able to celebrate the enormous contribution our volunteers have given to Red-tails. Barry Clugston was at the Recovery Team meeting when the idea of holding a count was thrown around and Barry volunteered to organise our first count.

In Barry's words.....

Reaching 20 years of counting Red-tails (RTB) gave me a jolt. That is a considerable achievement and record.

20 years ago we were having a recovery meeting and we got talking about the actual numbers for the RTB and somebody suggested a count. I volunteered to try one out. After the meeting one of the scientists said that I had been very calm about running such an event. But I considered there was a lot of interest across the region with a network of keen observers. So it was not all my work, my role was merely to act as a coordinator.

I selected a date to coincide with the birds feeding on buloke, then wrote to all the schools, Landcare groups, shires, CMAs, and farmer groups that we had records for.

It was fairly shambolic but got things up and running and it was only when Tim Burnard and Richard Hill got hold of

the count that they pulled it together in a more organised way. But from little things to big things grow and it has been consistent, annual and effective and a credit to all who have been involved in a terrific activity.

By Barry Clugston



20 Years of Counting Cockies was celebrated with volunteers at Baileys Rocks with a delicious Cockie Cake.

Photo: Kerry Gilkes.

COCKIES PROVE DIFFICULT TO FIND

More than 150 volunteers helped celebrate 20 years of counting cockies as part of this year's annual Red-tail count which was held 7 May.

Despite a record number of individual sightings on the day (52), the total number of cockatoos counted was considerably lower than last year's total.

After taking into consideration double counts of cockatoos and three additional sightings of Red-tails recorded either side of count day the final tally stood at 901 birds, well down on 1545 recorded last year.

Flocks were widely dispersed and considerably smaller this year, with only six large flocks of more than 80 birds recorded. Of these large flocks, three were determined to be double counts, and could not be included in the final tally.

The distribution and high occurrence of smaller flocks over

a wide area may be partly to blame for the fewer Red-tails counted this year.

Red-tails are often very difficult to find, especially given their rarity and widespread distribution — spanning over 18,000km² from Natimuk to Nelson in south-western Victoria and Mount Gambier to Keith in South Australia.

This year counters found Red-tails near Casterton, Frances, Millicent, Naracoorte, Wilkin, Mt-Arapiles, Little Desert National Park, Miga Lake, Hotspur, Harrow and Cobboboonee.

The greatest concentrations of Red-tails (just over 60 per cent of all birds recorded) were found west of Casterton. It's no surprise, then, that the biggest flocks recorded on the day — 334 birds drinking at a trough on the western boundary of Drajurk State Forest and 180 feeding near Cawker Creek — were found in this area.



The annual flock counts, which followed in the weeks after the count, recorded more than 700 birds feeding and residing in the Casterton area. Richard Hill and Tim Burnard were fortunate enough to count a staggering 501 birds come into drink at puddles in wheel ruts in Nangeela State Forest during this period.

Good numbers of Red-tails were also observed near Frances on the day, with follow-up surveys, thanks to Evan Roberts, revealing a total count of 136 birds for this area.

As always, information gained from the annual count is used to determine patterns of habitat use, a minimum number of birds and — most importantly — the location of large flocks. This information is essential for staff to carry out the all important flock counts.

The annual count helps raise awareness of the needs of the cockatoo and invites volunteers to help in recovery activities.

There was yet another wonderful turnout of volunteers to help on the day comprising locals, farmers who chose to survey their own stringybark patches, and interstate participants who travelled from as far away as Adelaide and Melbourne.

Volunteer effort was again outstanding, with 77 groups spending over 360 hours scouring more than 4,000 km of stringybark forest for the cockatoos across the range.

The annual Baileys Rocks Campout was a huge success with 24 people

Observations and counts of South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos recorded as part of the 2016 annual count. Double counts excluded

braving the wintery conditions to top off a big day of counting. Those attending were rewarded with a delicious cake thanks to Kerry Gilkes and Vicki-Jo Russell (Recovery Team chairperson) to celebrate 20 years of counting cockies.

BirdLife Australia and the Red-tail Recovery Team would like to sincerely thank all the wonderful volunteer observers involved on the day, including those that reported sightings in the lead up to the count. Without your incredible effort, this event would not be possible.

Also, thank you to those volunteers who offered to trial our first ever annual count smartphone app. The app sequence, developed to improve data handling and accuracy, received mixed reviews, but was found to be very useful for detailing the exact route taken on the day. The Recovery Team will be looking to take on board people's feedback and suggested improvements in readiness for next year's count.

Finally, a special thanks to Evan Roberts and Kerry Gilkes for their assistance with promoting the count and getting local landholders involved on the day and Tim Burnard for running the training session in Casterton and organising the campsite at Baileys Rocks.

The SERTBC Recovery Program is managed by BirdLife Australia and is supported by Natural Resources South East, Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority and Wimmera Catchment Management Authority through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme.

Bronwyn Perryman



Female Red-tail flying in to join Male
Photo: Bob McPherson



Counting the flock
Photo: Mike Sverns

LUCINDALE AREA SCHOOL PLANTING FEED TREES FOR COCKIES

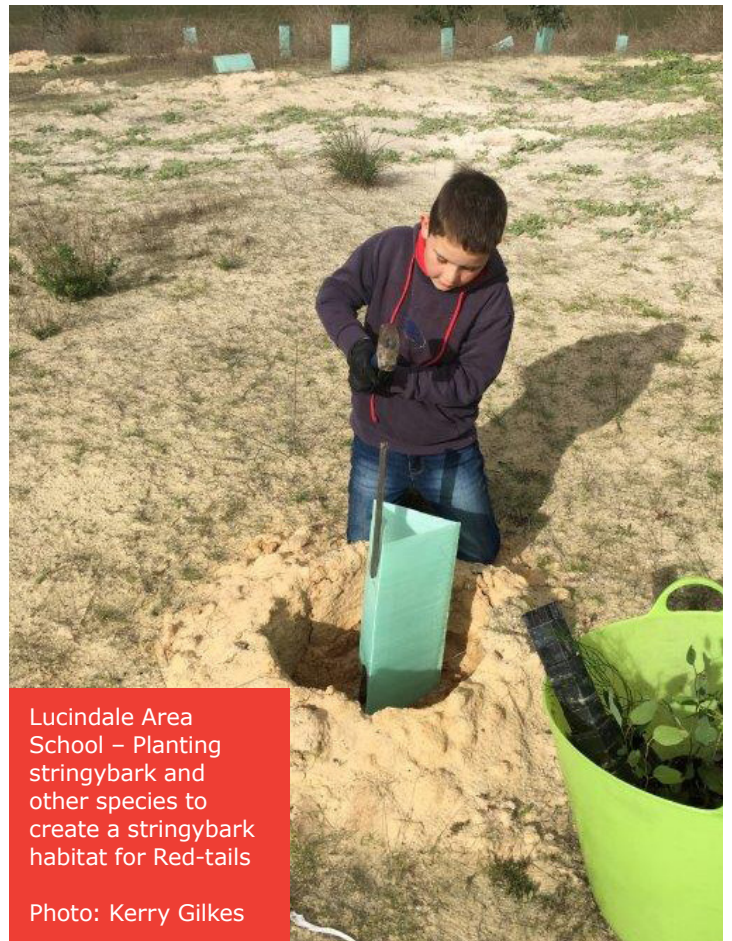
Lucindale Area School 4/5 class started their stringybark project in 2015 when they collected stringybark nuts and dried them in brown paper bags on their window sill at school. After three weeks when the nuts had opened the students then had the fun job of sieving the seed from the rubbish and sowing into tubes. Eucaleuca Native Services Nursery kindly helped care for the germinating seedlings over the Christmas holiday period as the seed was planted out in term four. The germination was a huge success and after some thinning the seedling trays were returned to the school for the children to grow on until planting.

In July this year students in Mrs Hille's Year 3/4 class participated in a planting day on a local property to plant the stringybark they had grown and other native seedlings purchased from Eucaleuca Native Nursery as part of the Cockies Helping Cockies Project.

The day started with a short bus trip and upon arrival students were shown how to successfully plant a seedling and the important role tree guards play in protecting the seedlings to establish. Students were then divided into groups to plant and guard the seedlings. All students enjoyed a well-deserved recess break before they moved to another site to plant more seedlings.

The students planted and guarded 300 seedlings across the two sites and had an enjoyable day learning valuable skills in planting seedlings and creating habitats. It was wonderful to see students being very careful and particular when planting the seedlings and hearing them remind each other what a wonderful contribution they were making to their environment.

The children at Lucindale Area School will collect more seed in term four this year and will follow through with the same process enabling the children to understand and be hands on during the entire process from collecting to growing the seed, and then finally planting out.



Lucindale Area
School – Planting
stringybark and
other species to
create a stringybark
habitat for Red-tails

Photo: Kerry Gilkes

BIOACOUSTICS FOR CONSERVATIONS: THE CASE OF THE SOUTH-EASTERN RED-TAILED BLACK-COCKATOO

The Recovery Team would like to welcome Daniella Teixeira who will be spending time with us over the next three years as she undertakes her PhD in the application of bioacoustics (combines studies in biology and sound) for conservation. Daniella's project aims to develop and implement bioacoustics techniques to improve the nest monitoring of our Red-tails.

The first stage of this project involves describing the vocalisations and associated behaviours of the birds at and near nests during the breeding season. The aim is to see whether specific vocalisations can indicate nesting activity and, importantly, a fledging event.

Bioacoustic recorders have been installed by Daniella at five active nests in the Casterton region and she will collect acoustic data until the breeding season ends in early 2017. Daniella will combine this data with field observations, films, handheld acoustic recordings and potentially camera traps to describe the vocal behaviour of the cockatoos in nesting areas.

The major drawback of acoustic approaches to monitoring is the effort required to process the enormous quantities of data generated. To address this, Daniella will use the acoustic data collected to build call recognisers that will automatically or semi-automatically extract the nesting-related calls from the recordings. For this part of her project, she will be working in collaboration with the Ecosounds lab at the Queensland University of Technology.

If she can determine that the cockatoos' vocalisations relate to breeding behaviours and that automatic call detection is possible, she will implement methods to explore more specific questions about breeding success. Where active nests are known, these methods could provide a measure of fledging success and whether this relates to nestlings' begging behaviours and the availability of food in the surrounding

habitat. In areas where nests are suspected, monitoring could be established to identify the presence, location and densities of nests. Finally, should juveniles 'sound' different to adults; bioacoustics methods might be able to identify the presence of fledglings in a flock.

Through Daniella's work she has located five new nests in the Casterton area this breeding season. This comes at a critical time when the Team is trying to locate new nests to learn more about their nesting and fledging behaviour in light of the recent flock counts. The Recovery Team look forward to working with Daniella as she undertakes her research



Daniella attaching a bioacoustic recorder to a nesting tree
Photo: Richard Hill

OPERATION ECLIPSE

Operation Eclipse is a state-wide wildlife compliance operation set to be implemented over the next 12-18 months by DELWP's Wildlife Officers who are collaborating with a number of partner agencies, such as the South Australian Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR), Parks Victoria, key stakeholders and community groups.

Regional Wildlife Officers from Barwon South West, Grampians and Loddon Mallee are seeking support from Victorians in relation to any suspicious activity associated with the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo.

DELWP Wildlife Officers are concerned that illegal removal of Red-tail eggs and chicks will impact the birds long-term.

The South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus graptogyne*) is prohibited to be kept by Victorian bird keepers and planned audits of licenced bird collections will also be undertaken during this operation.

DELWP is encouraging Victorians to report people who may be unlawfully keeping and trading these birds or people behaving suspiciously at or near key habitat locations; call DELWP's Customer Call Centre on 136 186



Female South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo protecting her egg. Photo: Mike Sverns



Red-tails silhouetted against the night sky
Photo: Mike Sverns

WE FAREWELL DICK COOPER

Dick was actively involved with the Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery Program for around twenty years. His invaluable contribution to the program has helped shape our current knowledge and understanding of Red-tails and their habitats, particularly in the Casterton area.

Dick was always more than happy to share his immense knowledge of the cockatoos and their whereabouts and established many wonderful friendships during his time with the Red-tail team. His friendly, outgoing nature and passion and enthusiasm for finding cockatoos will be sadly missed by all.

Richard Hill, Tim Burnard and Bronwyn Perryman attended Dick's funeral in Casterton on the 13 May, where Richard gave a heart-warming eulogy celebrating Dick's love and passion for Red-tails. Richard has kindly provided a copy of the eulogy to share with RTN readers.

The Recovery Team would like to extend our deepest sympathies and thoughts to Dick's family, friends and community

CELEBRATING A LIFE AND LOVE FOR RED-TAILS

Eulogy by Richard Hill



I first met Dick in 1997.

I had moved with my family from Melbourne, and we had temporarily settled near Cavendish to start a three year study of the Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo.

Dick got in touch to report a sighting of Red-tails near Casterton and I arranged to meet up with him.

Apparently I sounded a bit

sceptical about the number of birds he had counted when I talked to him, so you can imagine he was very pleased that while on the way to meet him, I came across a flock of the same number near where he had seen them.

With Dick's help we quickly discovered that Red-tails were quite easily found nearby to Casterton, and based on this new information, I decided to relocate the Red-tail study and my family to Casterton.

Dick was key to the success of the Red-tail work at Casterton! He knew all the bush tracks. He knew where there were stands of good stringybark that the birds seemed to favour. He knew where the big red gums with hollows were out in the bush. As well as where the stands of old dead red gums were on farmlands. These were the areas we searched for nests.

Most of the large dead red gums that the birds favoured for nesting were on farms and we needed to get onto these properties to find and study the nests. I didn't know any of these farmers, Dick knew them all. He rang and introduced me to them, and invariably they agreed to us coming onto their places. There were lots of reasons why farmers might have been concerned about a stranger asking to come onto their places to look for a rare bird. That I was working with Dick was the only reassurance that most farmers needed.

We searched for nests in spring, sitting out in paddocks for 2-3 hours on countless evenings. Sitting quiet and still in the cold breezy spring weather looking and listening for Red-tails flying to and from their nests. Dick never seemed to wear enough I thought, on those icy evenings, I was always rugged up with every inch of skin covered.

In late autumn and winter we would search for and find the large flocks of Red-tails that form at that time of year. Then we would have to find their drinking site to enable us to count them accurately. Dick knew where all the waterholes were out in the scrub, and all the farm dams were as well (probably because he loved his yabbies and his ducks).

With Dick's help we found an enormous flock of birds one winter at the back of a property south of Dergholm. We stood that evening as the birds streamed out of the bush to drink at a dam, counting over 400 birds. It was one of the largest flocks of Red-tails ever recorded. Dick loved the bush around Casterton, and I grew to understand why.

Although Red-tails were Dick's first and most enduring interest, he was interested in all wildlife. In spring we would stop and investigate patches of wildflowers, or he would leave a message on my phone saying he had left a stick beside a tree just west of east boundary on centre track marking an interesting orchid for me to have a look at. Or a brolga nest. A phone call to say that the pair on centre track were nesting, another call a couple of weeks later to say the pair had two chicks. An eagle nest here, an emu nest there. There were always new things happening in the bush that he was interested in.

He continued throughout his retirement to go out to the scrub just west of Casterton several times a week all year round. His dogs loved those days as well. He was always accompanied by a much-spoilt cream Labrador: Tammy, Bessie and then Mollie.

They all loved swimming in the bush dams.

Over the years he compiled the most important record of Red-tails and their comings and goings that we have. We have subsequently used this to help understand where important areas for Red-tails are, and what drives their movements.

Dick had a great sense of humour, and took quiet satisfaction from our time together. He was amused by my stories of getting into trouble out in the bush, despite his warnings. Even when he was sitting in the car beside me.

I came to grief several times early on in the quicksand like bogs which can swallow up cars out in our bush. More than once Dick was sitting beside me as the car settled into the mud, and I would look across at him and grin sheepishly. But the local bush guru did sometimes come unstuck himself. I wasn't there unfortunately, but there is a good story from the 2012 fires just west of here. Pete Larkins was on patrol of the fire line several days after the fire had commenced, and by which time the tracks had turned into deep rutted messes. Along the track comes an old white Subaru, known to all of us out at the DSE office, bouncing and bumping along to finally settle, bogged, in a big hole full of bulldust. Dick came around to the office to drop off a slab of beer the following day, standard payment for being pulled out of a bog. The boys were pleased to see it was proper beer, and not Coopers!

Just last Saturday was the Red-tail annual count.

Dick and I have counted the Casterton area together almost every year for the past 18 years. All this week Tim Burnard and I have been searching these same tracks, bush waterholes and farm dams, looking for the large flocks of Red-tails that form at this time of year, and for where they are drinking so that we can count them. The Red-tails are back at the same places that they have used on and off for the past 18 years. This year they are back in very big flocks, perhaps more than we have ever seen around here.

I know how pleased Dick would be.

HAMILTON SHEEPVENTION

The SERTBC Recovery Team had a stand at the Hamilton Sheepvention this year. It was a great opportunity to promote the recovery activities and events and talk to the broader community about Red-tails. The event was held over two days with Monday being extremely busy. There was much interest with people stopping to ask questions and/or chat about their sightings, experiences and join our mailing list. It was encouraging to see so many children stop for a chat and ask questions about Red-tails.

A big thankyou to Felicity and John Lord for volunteering their time to help out at the Red-tail site on the Monday

*South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery Team
stand at the Hamilton Sheepvention 1-2nd August 2016.*

Photo: Kerry Gilkes



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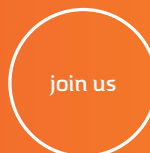
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Kerry Gilkes

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

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