

Diurnal bird surveys across State forests: insights into targeted surveys for the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot

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Pre-harvest surveys for threatened species are a requirement for logging operations in NSW State forests. The data from ten years of diurnal bird surveys undertaken between 1998 and 2008 within State forests of the Hunter Region are reviewed, with an assessment of their success in identification and protection of the two target threatened species, the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot. The reporting rates for all species encountered was calculated, with reporting rates and species richness considered at a regional scale as well as compared between the northern and southern forests within the region. Fifteen bird species were most commonly encountered across the study area with a reporting rate of greater than 45%. The two target threatened species were each only encountered once over the 10-year period. These results highlight the inability of pre-harvest surveys to target and therefore provide additional protection to these threatened species during native forest harvesting operations.

INTRODUCTION

Pre-harvest surveys are historically used to inform the management of wildlife and, in particular, threatened species, within native production forests in eastern Australia (Cann *et al.* 2002; Shields 2004; Victorian Government 2024). As an outcome of the NSW Regional Forest Agreement process, requirement for these surveys was enshrined in the *NSW Forestry and National Parks Estate Act (1998)* and associated threatened species licence. While a positive step forward for the wildlife management within production forests in NSW (Shields 2004), the data collected from these surveys have been rarely interrogated to provide a baseline for ongoing management.

Diurnal birds are commonly regarded as a useful taxon to indicate change across landscapes (Lindenmayer *et al.* 2010; Rayner *et al.* 2015; Smith *et al.* 2019) or in response to disturbance events (Gould 2020; Clarke *et al.* 2017). Many of these studies use multiple sites with repeated visits over extended timeframes to establish baseline data and allow for the ability to detect change in the chosen metric over time. Although pre-harvest surveys in NSW do not necessarily provide the same frequency and intensity of monitoring, there is an opportunity to review the success of these surveys in detecting and providing additional protection to

populations of target threatened species. The data from pre-harvest surveys can also be used to compare with broader regional studies (e.g. Stuart 2008) to assess results at a landscape scale.

The main aim of this study was to review 10 years of diurnal bird survey data to assess the success in recording the two target threatened species, the Regent Honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia* and Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor*. Additionally, the reporting rates of all threatened and commonly encountered species are assessed and compared. The value of these surveys in informing production forest management is also assessed.

METHODS

Study area and survey site selection

Surveys were undertaken in State forests across the Hunter Valley, from the Hawkesbury River, north to Wang Wauk River near Coolongolook, and west to include Putty State Forest in the Macdonald River catchment and State forests on the Barrington Tops south of the Barnard River, as shown in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**. Surveys across this area were managed between two major conglomerations of forests, being the Watagan Mountains and adjacent forests to the south of the Hunter River and the Barrington Tops and Bulahdelah forests to the north.

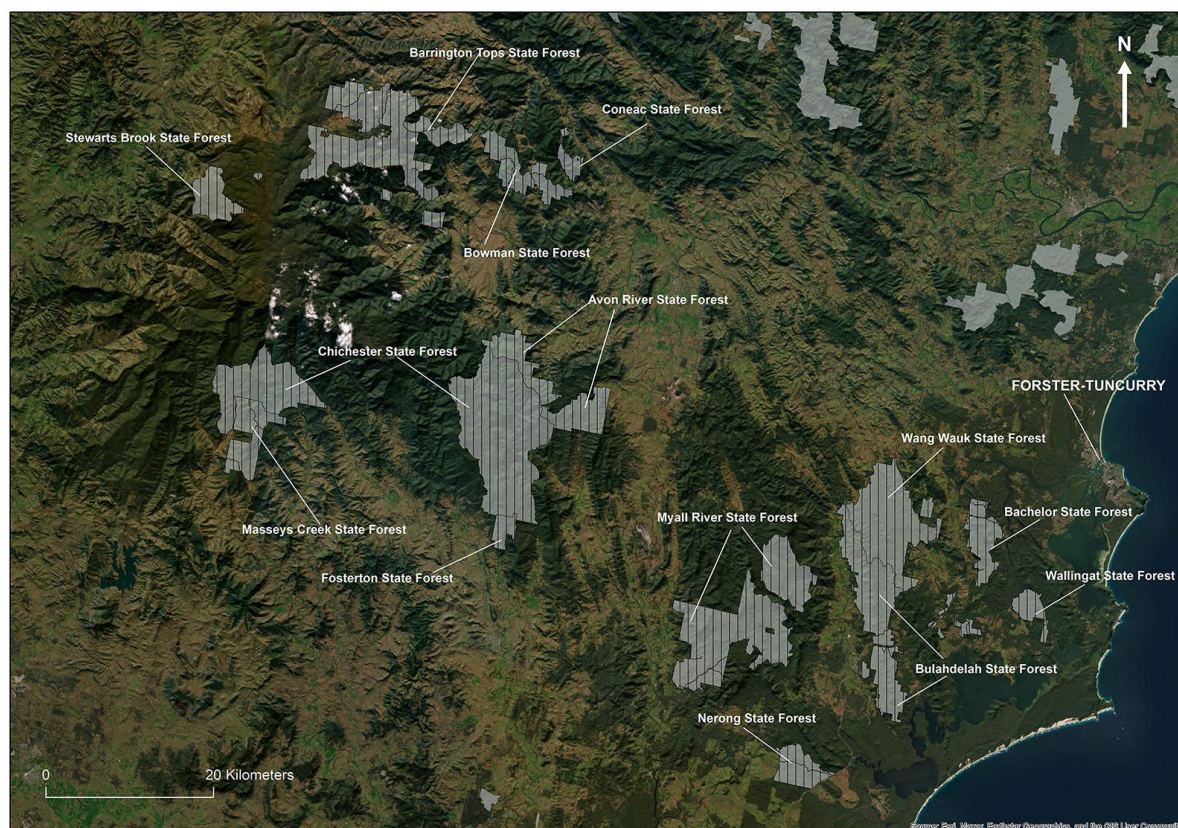


Figure 1. The northern forests study area, with all State forests where surveys were undertaken indicated by the vertical lines.

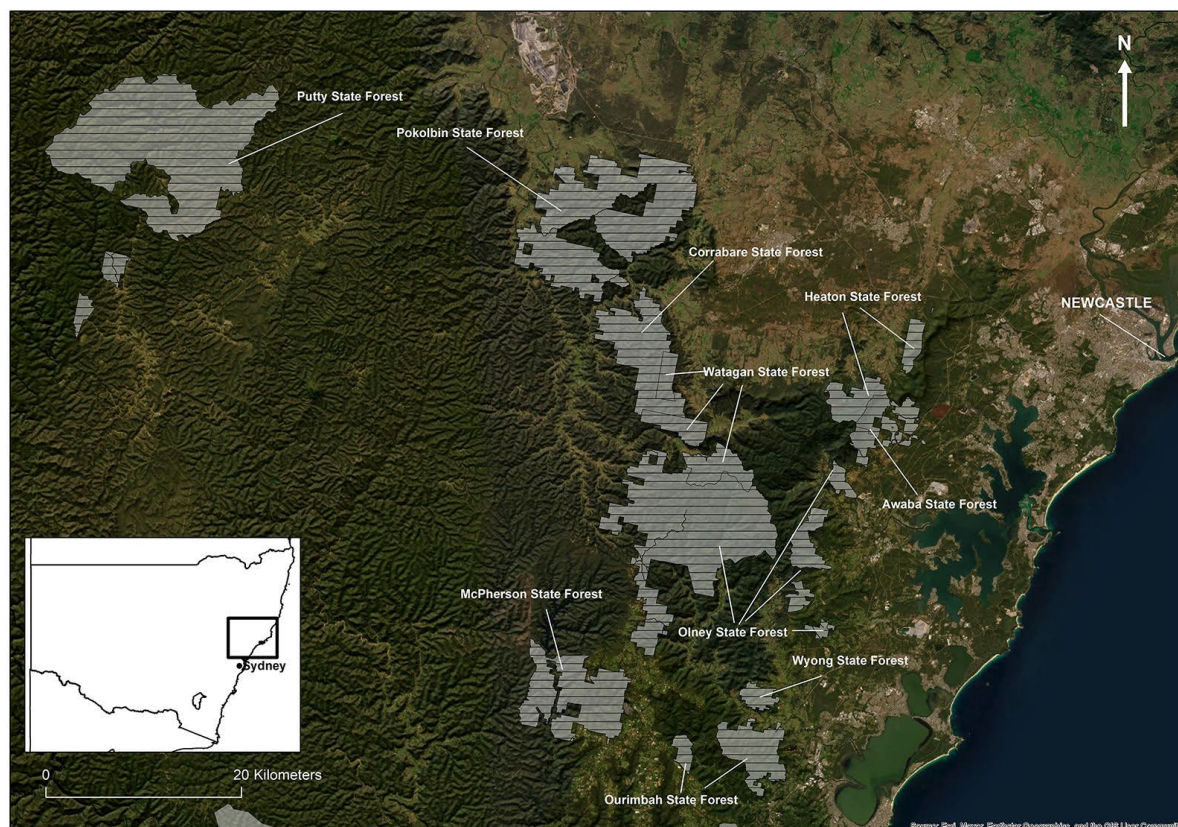


Figure 2. The southern forests study area, with all State forests where surveys were undertaken indicated by the horizontal lines. Inset picture shows the approximate location of the study area in NSW.

Survey site selection was prioritised based on the areas identified for upcoming native forest harvesting over a 12-month period from year to year. Site selection for diurnal bird surveys was based on access and the presence of flowering eucalypts within areas planned for harvesting. Non-harvestable areas, including rare non-commercial forest types, rainforest and various harvest exclusion zones, were excluded. Where eucalypts were not flowering during the survey due to seasonal conditions, the best available habitat was identified for survey sites, based on vegetation community type and presence of standing water. A small number of surveys were undertaken on adjacent private property with the landowner's permission. In addition, over the time period of these surveys, several State forests were transferred to the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service estate for management as conservation reserves.

Survey method and timing

Field surveys were undertaken between February 1998 and October 2008. The majority of surveys were conducted to fulfil conditions of the Lower North East Threatened Species Licence (NSW Government 1999). Surveys were undertaken between February and October annually to primarily target two species, the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot. Surveys consisted of point or area searches targeting suitable habitat, undertaken in the early morning. The survey effort at each site varied, depending on the size of the area being planned for harvesting. For harvesting areas up to 200 ha, a minimum of 1 person hour of survey was required, plus 15 person minutes per additional 50 ha of harvesting area (NSW Government 1999). Where possible, surveys were undertaken for shorter timeframes but at multiple points across the target area to cover a greater area of habitat and increase the chances of locating the target species. Even though only a single census was required for each survey, wherever possible a repeat census of the same site was completed, a minimum of 24 hours after the first census. All other bird species heard and observed were recorded during the surveys, using a pair of 8x40 binoculars to aid identification. Weather conditions, including temperature and approximate wind speed, were also recorded.

Analysis of results

Data analysis was complicated by the lack of repeat visits to sites over time. All surveys prior to harvesting were undertaken, but a lack of post-harvest assessment, as required under licence conditions, resulted in no post-harvest monitoring being undertaken. The results were also influenced by varied survey effort for each target area to meet the conditions of the Threatened Species Licence, point versus area search methodology, and the skill and experience of the observers. Similar issues were identified with analysis of the Birds Australia Atlas data by Newman *et al.* (2010) however reporting rates (the number of times a species was encountered divided by the number of surveys, expressed as a percentage) for individual species provide a crude measure to assess the data collated from these surveys.

Reporting rates were calculated for all species encountered, with all surveys, including each repeat census, treated independently. Reporting rates for individual species were considered across the region. Reporting rates were compared between the southern forests in the Watagans and the northern forests in the Barrington-Bulahdelah area.

Additionally, species richness was assessed between the southern and northern forests using the Margalef and Menhinick indices. These indices account for the relationship between the number of species and the number of individuals and allow for comparison of species richness between different ecosystems (Chugani 2026a, 2026b). Menhinick's Index is expressed as the number of species divided by the square root of the number of individuals recorded while Margalef's index is expressed as the number of species minus one divided by the natural log of the number of species. Both indices were calculated for each survey completed, with the mean for the indices generated to compare species richness between the southern and northern forests.

RESULTS

A total of 439 diurnal bird surveys consisting of 712.9 person hours of effort were conducted between 1998 and 2008. Of these surveys, 208 (377.9 person hours) were undertaken across the northern forests and 231 (335.0 person hours) across the southern forests. There were 141 species recorded across the entire region with 23 species (16% of recorded species) only encountered once. The mean Menhinick richness index of surveys across southern forests was 2.312 (SE = 0.036) compared to 2.170 (SE = 0.057) across the northern forests, suggesting comparable species richness between both areas. The mean Margalef richness index of surveys within southern forests was 4.241 (SE = 0.074) compared to 3.726 (SE = 0.105) in the northern forests, indicating that both areas have a high species richness (Values >3.0). The full list of species encountered including reporting rates is provided in the Appendix (available at <https://www.hboc.org.au/the-whistler-volume-20/>)

Reporting rates for individual species varied between infrequently versus commonly encountered species. Fifteen species had a reporting rate across the study area of greater than 45%, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Reporting rates for the most commonly encountered species across the study area.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Reporting Rate (%)		
		Northern	Southern	Region
Lewin's Honeyeater	<i>Meliphaga lewinii</i>	74.5	80.1	77.4
White-throated Treecreeper	<i>Cormobates leucophaea</i>	64.9	84.0	74.9
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	<i>Caligavis chrysops</i>	68.3	80.5	74.7
Grey Fantail	<i>Rhipidura albiscapa</i>	65.9	77.1	71.8
Eastern Whipbird	<i>Psophodes olivaceus</i>	71.6	69.7	70.6
Golden Whistler	<i>Pachycephala pectoralis</i>	57.7	72.7	65.6
Pied Currawong	<i>Strepera graculina</i>	65.9	65.4	65.6
Grey Shrike-thrush	<i>Colluricincla harmonica</i>	59.6	70.1	65.1
Spotted Pardalote	<i>Pardalotus punctatus</i>	59.6	64.5	62.2
Superb Lyrebird	<i>Menura novaehollandiae</i>	55.8	62.3	59.2
Brown Gerygone	<i>Gerygone mouki</i>	63.0	52.8	57.6
Eastern Spinebill	<i>Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris</i>	37.0	73.2	56.0
White-browed Scrubwren	<i>Sericornis frontalis</i>	45.7	62.8	54.7
Brown Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza pusilla</i>	21.2	79.2	51.7
Eastern Yellow Robin	<i>Eopsaltria australis</i>	38.5	53.7	46.5

The species in **Table 1** are known to utilise open forest habitat, with either a grassy, shrubby or moist understorey, and had a higher reporting rate compared to closed forest (rainforest), waterbirds or other specialist species. This pattern was repeated across other species with moderate to high reporting rates. These 15 species demonstrate differences in reporting rates between the northern and southern forest areas surveyed, with only the Pied Currawong and Eastern Whipbird having very similar reporting rates (within 2%) between the two areas.

Fourteen threatened species were recorded during the surveys. Both target species, the Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater, were only recorded once, in the southern and northern forests respectively, over the 10 years of surveys. This equates to a 0.46% (two surveys out of 439) success rate for these targeted species.

Table 2. Reporting rates for threatened species encountered across the study area with the two target species highlighted in bold. Status Key: V = Vulnerable; E = Endangered; CE = Critically Endangered

Common Name	Scientific Name	Status	Reporting Rate (%)		
			Northern	Southern	Region
Wompoo Fruit-Dove	<i>Megaloprepia magnifica</i>	V	0.5	0.0	0.2
White-throated Needletail	<i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i>	V	1.9	0.4	1.1
Little Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus morphnoides</i>	V	0.0	0.9	0.5
Glossy Black-Cockatoo	<i>Calyptrorhynchus lathami</i>	V	4.3	4.8	4.6
Gang-gang Cockatoo	<i>Callocephalon fimbriatum</i>	E	0.0	18.6	9.8
Little Lorikeet	<i>Glossopsitta pusilla</i>	V	0.5	1.3	0.9
Swift Parrot	<i>Lathamus discolor</i>	E	0.0	0.4	0.2
Speckled Warbler	<i>Pyrrholaemus sagittata</i>	V	0.5	0.0	0.2
Regent Honeyeater	<i>Anthochaera phrygia</i>	CE	0.5	0.0	0.2
Varied Sittella	<i>Daphoenositta chrysoptera</i>	V	3.4	6.9	5.2
Olive Whistler	<i>Pachycephala olivacea</i>	V	1.0	0.0	0.5
Scarlet Robin	<i>Petroica boodang</i>	V	0.5	0.4	0.5
Flame Robin	<i>Petroica phoenicea</i>	V	3.4	0.0	1.6
Hooded Robin	<i>Melanodryas cucullata</i>	E	0.5	0.4	0.5

DISCUSSION

Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot

Over a 10-year period, 439 pre-harvest diurnal bird surveys were conducted which recorded 141 species across State forests of the Hunter Region. Only two surveys (0.46%) successfully recorded the two target species. Both of these encounters occurred during 2007, with the Regent Honeyeater detected within flowering *Eucalyptus siderophloia* in the north, and the Swift Parrot within flowering *E. saligna* in the south. Observations of both of these species were recorded widely and in high numbers on both public and private lands across the Hunter Region during 2007 (Stuart 2008).

The lack of encounters with the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot over the 10 years highlight the inability of pre-harvest surveys to locate these two species. Both species were recorded annually across the Hunter Region during the 10-year (1998-2008) survey period by members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club, from a mix of independent opportunistic and regular surveys (Stuart 1999-2009), with the Swift Parrot only absent during 2001 (Stuart 2002). Although surveyors were aware of regional reports and constantly on the lookout for these two species and flowering events within State forest survey areas, these measures did not improve pre-harvest survey results. Based on the data from the Hunter Bird Observers Club and also a review of reporting rates within Birddata database (<https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/>), it is apparent that both these two species were present within the region, albeit in small numbers, and likely within the timber production forests, but were typically not detected.

While both the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot have been recorded feeding on a variety of flowering plants, winter-flowering eucalypts are an important food resource (BirdLife Australia 2023a, 2023b). Within coastal and sub-coastal areas of the Hunter Valley, winter-flowering eucalypts such as *E. robusta* are utilised extensively for foraging, particularly during periods of drought (Saunders & Heinsohn 2008). However, as a rare and non-commercial forest type, stands of *E. robusta* are excluded from harvesting and were not targeted for pre-harvest surveys (NSW Government 1999). Other winter-flowering eucalypts, including *E. tereticornis*, *E. pilularis*, *E. moluccana* and *Corymbia maculata*, are widespread within State forests of the Hunter Valley (Forestry Commission of New South Wales 1989) and were included as part of targeted pre-harvest surveys. Each of these

eucalypt species is an important food source for both the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot (Franklin *et al.* 1989; Saunders & Heinsohn 2008; Roderick & Ingwersen 2012). However, pre-harvest surveys did not record use of these winter-flowering eucalypts by these two threatened species. Although there are a number of factors that could have influenced this result, pre-harvest surveys were shown to be of limited value in the identification and protection of these two threatened species and their foraging areas within native forest timber production forests.

Had either species been detected, additional protections would have been implemented to protect these sightings, including an exclusion zone (20 metres) around the nests of Regent Honeyeaters, retention of any tree where either Regent Honeyeaters or Swift Parrots were seen feeding and the retention of ten eucalypt feed trees within every two hectares of forest available for harvesting (NSW Government 1999). These measures would have been applied in addition to other standard habitat and tree retention requirements.

Other Threatened Species

Twelve other threatened bird species were recorded at varying reporting rates across the region. As shown in **Table 2**, reporting rates for most of these species were generally low (<10%) and comparable between the northern and southern forests surveyed. Reporting rates for all threatened species generally correspond with mapping reported by Newman *et al.* (2010). Obvious differences included the Little Lorikeet *Glossopsitta pusilla*, which was under-reported within the southern forests, possibly due to its nomadic nature in response to food resources (Roderick & Stuart 2010). The Flame Robin *Petroica phoenicea* was under-reported in the northern forests, probably related to the species being an altitudinal migrant and breeding in summer at high altitudes before dispersing to low altitudes during winter (Roderick & Stuart 2010).

The Gang-gang Cockatoo *Callocephalon fimbriatum* had the highest reporting rate of any threatened species. This species was at the northern edge of its distribution in the southern forests of the study area and is rarely recorded north of the Hunter River (Cooper *et al.* 2016; Newman *et al.* 2010; Roderick & Stuart 2010). Although occasional sightings are known to occur on the lower slopes of Barrington Tops (Cooper *et al.* 2016), this species was not recorded during pre-harvest surveys undertaken within the northern forests. Large flocks of Gang-gang Cockatoos were regularly recorded

within the southern forests, often feeding on the fruit of various eucalypt species including *E. pilularis* and *E. saligna* (A. Fawcett pers. obs.).

The Olive Whistler *Pachycephala olivacea* is known to have a disjunct distribution within NSW, with a distributional gap occurring between the Illawarra region and north of the Hunter River (Cooper *et al.* 2020; BirdLife Australia 2023c). There are typically few confirmed records for this species within the southern part of the study area (Cooper *et al.* 2020; Roderick & Stuart 2010) and no sightings were recorded as part of the pre-harvest surveys. The Olive Whistler was under-reported within the northern forests where it is primarily found in association with high altitude cool-temperate rainforest in the Barrington Tops (Roderick & Stuart 2010; BirdLife Australia 2023c). The low reporting rate for the Olive Whistler was most likely the result of surveys being conducted within eucalypt forests. The species' preferred habitat is cool-temperate rainforests and adjacent warm temperate ones – these are excluded from harvesting operations (NSW Government 1999) and hence are not targeted for surveys.

Other bird community trends

There were some obvious trends in the reporting rates for specific groups of birds. Raptors were all encountered at low levels (<5% reporting rate) across both areas, likely to be a reflection that these diurnal predators generally occur at low population densities (Newton 1979). There were also few waterbirds encountered (<2% reporting rate) over the survey period, a result of the focus of surveys within open forest and the lack of wetland habitat. Summer migrant species (Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae*, Eastern Koel *Eudynamis orientalis*, Pallid Cuckoo *Heteroscenes pallidus*, Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus*, flycatchers, Oriental Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis*, Common Cicadabird *Edolisoma tenuirostre*, White-throated Gerygone *Gerygone olivacea*, Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sanctus* and Noisy Pitta *Pitta versicolor*) were also encountered at low levels (<10% reporting rate), probably due to the timing of the surveys between February and October annually. There were three exceptions to this trend, the Rufous Fantail *Rhipidura rufifrons* (5 to 10% reporting rate), Shining Bronze Cuckoo *Chalcites lucidus* (4.8 to 21.2% reporting rate) and Black-faced Monarch *Monarcha melanopsis* (11.3 to 14.9% reporting rate). Though all three species are considered migratory, the later timing of their migration movements in mid to late autumn (BirdLife

Australia 2023d, 2023e, 2023f) overlaps with the timing of the surveys.

Options for future targeted monitoring

Review and analysis of this data have attempted to provide meaningful context to the pre-harvest diurnal bird surveys, undertaken as a licence requirement for native forest management within NSW. While the data provides a snapshot of species recorded and reporting rate, it is not possible to establish long-term trends. Additionally, the success of harvesting exclusions for managing biodiversity and threatened species cannot be assessed due to the survey design and lack of repeated landscape monitoring, an issue that has been identified previously (Meek 2004; Law 2004; Kavanagh *et al.* 2004; Slade & Law 2017).

Since the surveys assessed in this study were conducted, targeted survey approaches have been developed for both the Regent Honeyeater (Crates *et al.* 2017) and Swift Parrot (BirdLife Australia 2022). These could be adopted as standardised approaches to target both of these species as part of a broader landscape monitoring program. A stratified and strategic landscape monitoring program would better monitor bird populations within timber production forests, similar to approaches taken by Clarke *et al.* (2017) or Gould (2020) when monitoring the impact of disturbance events.

Although these options for future targeted monitoring of the Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater could be utilised as part of pre-harvest assessment within production State forests in NSW, any such proposed changes to existing methodologies need to be ratified by the NSW Environment Protection Authority, the state regulator for the licences issued under the Integrated Forestry Operations Approval. The recent review of the coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Approval has seen a significant shift towards a stratified landscape monitoring approach (Slade & Law 2017). However, a broader landscape monitoring program for diurnal birds is still to be implemented across production forests along the NSW east coast and ranges. This does provide an opportunity for these standardised monitoring methods for the Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater to be adopted, should monitoring of diurnal birds be included within this stratified landscape approach.

CONCLUSIONS

Data from ten years of diurnal bird surveys, targeting the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot, was reviewed to assess success in locating these two species as part of the pre-harvest survey requirements for timber production State forests within the Hunter Valley.

Both the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot were recorded once each in 439 diurnal bird surveys undertaken between February 1998 and October 2008. During the same period, both species were recorded in the broader area of the Hunter Region. Twelve other non-target threatened bird species were recorded during these surveys with varying reporting rates across the region.

Although there are a number of factors that could have influenced the results, targeted pre-harvest surveys for the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot had limited capacity to identify occurrences and therefore trigger additional site-specific protection for these two threatened species and their foraging areas within timber production forests. While this review provides a snapshot of all species recorded and reporting rates, it was not possible to determine long-term trends. A stratified and strategic landscape monitoring program would be better to monitor bird populations within timber production forests.

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