

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#23 KING ISLAND EMU



King Island Emu
As depicted by: John Gerrard Keulemans
(1842-1912)

The King Island or Black Emu, *Dromaius ater*, is an extinct ratite species which occurred on King Island in Bass Strait. It is only known from subfossil bones and one museum specimen.

The French ornithologist Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot first identified the King Island Emu in 1817.

The Emus occurring on King Island had darker plumage and were much smaller than other emus, being only half the weight of the mainland birds. They were about 140cm (55 inches) in height and weighed 23kg (51lb). The juveniles were grey, while the chicks were striped like other emus. Their diet consisted of berries, grass and seaweed. It was recorded that they frequented the shady area of lagoons and the shoreline. Their taxonomy has been the subject of much debate, as they were sometimes confused with the Kangaroo Island Emu, *Dromaius baudinianus*. The situation was only resolved in 1984 by Shane Parker of the South Australian Museum.



Nicolas Baudin
1754-1803

The King Island Emu was discovered by the Baudin expedition in 1802. Two or three individuals were brought back to France in 1804 and were kept in captivity in the Jardin des Plantes, the last one dying in 1822. The skin of one of these last birds is the sole surviving specimen in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle.



Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle
Paris, France
Photo: Eric Pouchier

By the time the last captive bird died, the species was long gone from King Island, having been killed off by hunting and, apparently, fires started by visiting sailors.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia