

THE KOOKABURRAS

Kookaburras are large 28-42cm (11-17 inch) terrestrial Kingfishers native to Australia and New Guinea, the name derives from an Australian aboriginal dialect, and is onomatopoeic [a word or a grouping of words that imitates the sound it is describing, such as “meow” for a cat] of its call. Four of the five species commonly called Kookaburras belong to the genus *Dacelo*, while the fifth is the single member of the genus *Clytocyx*.

Kookaburras are best known for their unmistakable call, which sounds like loud, hollow human laughter. Good-natured, rather hysterical, merriment in the case of the Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*); and maniacal cackling in the case of the slightly smaller Blue-winged Kookaburra (*D. leachii*). They are usually not restricted to close proximity of water, and are found in habitats ranging from humid forest to arid savannah, but also in suburban and residential areas where food can be easily found.

There are five species known as Kookaburras found in Australia, New Guinea and the Aru Islands. These being:

- Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*)
- Spangled Kookaburra (*Dacelo tryro*)
- Rufous-bellied Kookaburra (*Dacelo gaudichaud*)
- Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachii*)
- Shovel-billed Kookaburra (*Clytoceyx rex*).

1 THE LAUGHING KOOKABURRA



LAUGHING KOOKABURRA
Dacelo novaeguineae
Photo: “Diliff”

This endemic carnivorous bird, well known for its laughing call, was once commonly known as the Laughing Jackass. However, it is now best known by its onomatopoeic aboriginal name of Kookaburra.

The Laughing Kookaburra is found throughout eastern and southern Australia. They occupy woodland territories (including forests) in loose family groups, and their laughter serves the same purpose as a great many other bird calls, the demarcation of territorial borders. They have been introduced to the south-west corner of Western Australia, Tasmania, and Flinders Island. They were also introduced into New Zealand in the latter part of the 19th century, but only those liberated on Kawau Island (by Sir George Grey, Governor of South Australia 1841–1845, and twice Governor of New Zealand) survived, and are still found there.

This Kookaburra is renowned for its "laugh" which it uses to greet its mate after absence. It may be heard at any time of day but most frequently just after dawn and especially just after sunset. One bird will start with a low, chuckle, then throwing back its head it breaks into raucous laughter; often several other birds join in. If a rival group is within earshot and replies, the whole original group gathers to fill the vicinity with ringing laughter. Hearing Kookaburras in full cry is one of the more delightful experiences of the Australian bush, people unaccustomed to the call, unless forewarned, find the experience startling.

Kookaburras hunt by perching on a convenient branch, or wire, and waiting patiently for prey to pass by. Prey includes small mammals, such as mice and similar sized creatures, small birds and nestlings, lizards, large insects and most famously, snakes. Small prey is preferred, but Kookaburras can take surprisingly large creatures, including venomous snakes much longer than themselves. In urban areas they quickly learn to take food scraps and left-over barbecue meat.



LAUGHING KOOKABURRA
WITH BBQ SCRAPS
Photo: "Lander777"

Like most of the related species Laughing Kookaburras live in family groups, with the young helping to hunt and care for the next generation of offspring. The courtship ritual consists of the female adopting a begging posture and vocalising like a young bird. The male then offers her his current prey accompanied with a soft "oo oo oo" sound. They start breeding around October/November; and if the first clutch fails, they will continue breeding into the summer months.

The usual clutch is three eggs laid on alternate days, but if food is in short supply the last egg is often smaller and this chick will be at a disadvantage to the other two chicks. The young have a hook on the upper mandible, which disappears by fledging. If food is scarce the chicks will quarrel and the hook used as a weapon with the weakest one being killed by its larger siblings. If food is plentiful the adults need to hunt less and are able to spend more time brooding the young, this restricts the chick's aggressiveness, and results in all the young being raised.

These birds are a common sight in urban areas, and are so accustomed to humans that they will often eat from the hand. However, it is not wise to feed them as it interferes with their basic dietary requirements and can lead to an unbalanced diet and disease.

Reference: *Wikipedia*

To be continued.