



KOOKABURRA NOTES

July 2019



Description

The Laughing Kookaburra is instantly recognisable in both plumage and voice. This large member of the kingfisher family measures 40 - 45 cm in length. It is generally off-white below, faintly barred with dark brown, and brown on the back and wings. The tail is more rufous, broadly barred with black. There is a conspicuous dark brown eye-stripe through the face.

The chuckling voice that gives this species its English name is a common and familiar sound throughout the bird's range. The loud 'koo-koo-koo-koo-koo-kaa-kaa-kaa' is often sung in a chorus with other individuals. The Laughing Kookaburra also has a shorter 'kooaaa', which is normally given when accompanied by other members of its family group.

Identification may only be confused where the Laughing Kookaburra's range overlaps that of the Blue-winged Kookaburra, *D. leachii*, in eastern Queensland. The call of the Blue-winged Kookaburra is coarser than that of the Laughing Kookaburra, and ends somewhat abruptly. The Blue-winged Kookaburra lacks the brown eye-stripe, has a blue tail and a large amount of blue in the wing, and has a pale eye.



Distribution and Habitat

The Laughing Kookaburra occurs throughout eastern Australia. It has also been introduced to Tasmania and the extreme south-west of Western Australia, as well as New Zealand. It inhabits most areas where there are suitable trees. In the central north and north-west of Australia it is replaced by the Blue-winged Kookaburra. The two overlap in range throughout Queensland, although the Blue-winged Kookaburra tends to occupy the coastal areas.

Food and feeding

Laughing Kookaburras feed mostly on insects, worms and crustaceans, although small snakes, mammals, frogs and birds may also be eaten. Prey is seized by pouncing from a suitable perch. Small prey is eaten whole, but larger prey is killed by bashing it against the ground or tree branch. Laughing Kookaburras often become quite tame around humans and will readily accept scraps of meat. This 'pre-processed' food is still beaten against a perch before swallowing.

Breeding

Laughing Kookaburras breed from August to January. The birds are believed to pair for life. The nest is a bare chamber in a naturally occurring tree hollow or in a burrow excavated in an arboreal (tree-dwelling) termite mound. Both sexes share the incubation duties and both care for the young. Other Laughing Kookaburras, usually offspring of the previous 1-2 years, act as 'helpers' during the breeding season. Every bird in the group shares all parenting duties.

Fauna Rescue receives many calls a year for "Baby Kookaburras", most of these calls end up being for feral pigeons or doves. Baby kookaburras have a large beak and so do young pigeons so are often confused. Note that a kookaburra has a large triangular beak whereas a young pigeon has a thinner beak with prominent nostrils



Above- Baby Kookaburras



Below - Baby Pigeon



Baby kookaburras require warmth but on hot days this needs to be monitored as the heat may need to be turned down.

Handling

Kookaburras are quite easy to handle. They have soft feet but it is the beak you need to be careful of. Kookaburras can be handled easily without gloves but be careful of the beak. If they peck you with the beak it won't cause any damage but it is the inside of the beak you must watch out for. The inside ridges of the beak are razor sharp and if they grab on to your finger it can be very painful.

The best way to handle a kookaburra is to wrap it in a towel and slowly unwrap one body area at a time to assess for injuries. Adult kookaburras stress very easily and may wriggle and try to escape. Keep a firm grip on the bird at all times.

Injuries

The most common injuries to Kookaburras are broken wings or legs, internal injuries, concussion and bruising.

Unless the bird is bleeding, place it gently in a warm quiet place for about an hour before examining it, because it will almost certainly be suffering from shock.

If a bird heat box is not available, place the Kookaburra in a cardboard box, making sure it is the right size for the bird so that feathers will not be broken and have to regrow (which can take up to twelve months). Place some extra holes in the box for ventilation and place a lid on the box.

If it is a cold day, a hot water bottle well wrapped in clean towels may be placed at one end of the box to keep the bird warm (about 25°C.). Check the temperature of the water bottle every couple of hours to make sure it is still warm.

If the bird is bleeding it can be stopped by holding a pad made from a clean cloth such as a handkerchief and applying pressure with fingers.

If the bird is having difficulty breathing, check mouth and throat and remove any obstructions.

Unless you are experienced with giving water with a syringe, do not risk getting water into the lungs. If you think the bird is dehydrated and it is a very hot day you can gently dribble water over the top of bird's beak, so that it runs down sides of the beak.

Examining The Bird

Hold the bird firmly but gently well away from your face, keeping all fingers close to the bird's body or you may find your nose or your finger held in a vice-like grip which is hard to release.

If the bird has a broken wing or leg it will need to see a vet. If you are going to transport it to a Vet because of a broken wing use some temporary strapping on it to prevent further damage during transport.

Broken bones heal very quickly in birds so it is essential they are attended to urgently otherwise the bone may heal in the wrong position.

Check that eyes are wide open and clear, with both being the same size. Any abnormality could indicate concussion or brain damage and a Vet will be necessary because the bird may need medication to reduce the inflammation in the brain.

If the bird is standing with head bowed and both wings drooping it is probably feeling very weak. Check the body condition by feeling the keel-bone (sternum). This should be well rounded and firm. If the keel bone is very sharp the bird has not been eating well, which could indicate disease.

Check the throat for Trichomoniasis (canker). This will appear as a cheesy-yellow fast growing, foul-smelling growth, which will be fatal if not treated promptly. Trichomoniasis can prevent the bird from swallowing food, and if it becomes really severe will interfere with the bird's ability to breathe. Never attempt to remove the growths (lesions) in birds which have Trichomoniasis, because it will bleed to death in a very short time.

Kookaburras may also be poisoned by insecticides or by eating poisoned mice or have internal parasites.

If any of the above problems are showing you will need to take the bird to a vet.

Diet

In care kookaburras require a special diet which must be considered by carers as some members may not have the stomach to be able provide a suitable diet.

Kookaburras even from a young age like to "kill" their food, some will tolerate minced food but many will not and mince is not recommended. It is best to start teaching from a young age to feed on whole diced meat and a variety of insects.

Young kookaburras can be fed a variety of foods. However this must include insects, meat and mice. For young kookaburras the mice will need to be cut into small portions as a whole mouse is too big.

Foods that can be used to feed young kookaburras are:

Chopped up mice, crickets, mealworms with the heads removed, worms, moths, slaters, diced raw red meat (beef, kangaroo etc).

Chopping up dead mice can be messy so if you need to chop up a dead mouse the easiest way is to cut it into small pieces while still frozen as this is also easier on the carer.

Foods that can be used to feed juvenile & adult kookaburras

Whole mice, crickets, mealworms, snails, worms, cockroaches, caterpillars, moths, diced raw red meat. Older kookaburra love snails, they will spend ages cracking the shell open to eat the snail.

It is important to give them as much natural food as possible because the feathers and fur provide roughage while the bones and insect shells provide calcium.

Kookaburras cannot digest everything they eat. As a result the birds cough up a "cast" of beetle legs, wings, mouse fur and bones which looks like a black pellet made up of all these bits and pieces. A cast is usually regurgitated once a day.

An adult bird will eat about two to three mice a day.

Young Kookaburras will eat a little more.

If stressed a Kookaburra will regurgitate their last meal, even hours later.

If it is necessary to force feed a Kookaburra, place the food well back in the mouth to help them swallow, as they have very short tongues. Food can be moistened by dipping it in a little water to make it slide down their throat more easily. A Kookaburras crop is between its legs so allow time for each piece to go down before trying another. When force feeding, small pieces of food are best, and plastic tweezers are handy for placing food in their mouths to avoid getting bitten.

Baby Kookaburras should be given pieces of food that are small enough for them to swallow without difficulty and the size of the pieces of food can be increased gradually as the bird grows.

In the wild, baby Kookaburras are fed by their parents and the other family members in the group until they are about three months of age, so if the bird has a short, all-black beak it will probably need to be hand fed.

Feed only freshly caught mice or ones that have been frozen and thawed out properly before use. Never feed mice which have been found dead as they may have been poisoned.

Water

It is important to place a large bowl of water in the aviary as kookaburras love to bathe and play in water. This will need to be changed daily and in the warmer weather often 2-3 times per day. Make sure it is not too deep and they can easily get out and not drown as they will get right in it and splash about. Place the bowl along side a log or branch so they can hop in and out easily.

Housing

Baby Kookaburras without feathers need to be kept warm 24hrs a day at around 30C, and a bird heat box is best for this.

All bedding must be changed at least once per day, and the vent (cloaca) should be checked and cleaned regularly to make sure it doesn't become blocked with faeces.

Young Kookaburras which no longer need heat, and injured birds with strapping or splints etc. can be kept in a large cobby cage, partially covered with a blanket and cleaned out each day. Keep the bird in a quiet place away from draughts, household pets, people and household noise and activity. Keep handling to a minimum. Remembering this is a wild bird and is naturally afraid of people.

They need a large aviary at least 10ft x 12ft with plenty of natural perches such as gum boughs and some stumps or rocks to sit on.

The Kookaburras' laughter is their territorial call and they laugh very loudly before dawn each morning which can cause big problems with neighbours. It is best not to put Kookaburras into an aviary with other birds, especially small ones which they will eat, so house them separately.

Kookaburras have a large wing span and will need plenty of room to fly and build up muscle tone. They also need room to "pounce" on their food and learn to catch live insects.

Branches are spaced at each end of the aviary to allow room for flight from branch to branch.



Stimulation

Kookaburras are highly intelligent birds and are very inquisitive. You will need to provide plenty of stimulation. Feeding live insects helps alleviate boredom and is a vital part of their development. Place leaves and small sticks around the bottom of the aviary. Kookaburras love to pick these up and play with them.

Release

Releasing kookaburras can be very difficult as they are a very territorial bird and will kill another introduced into the area if a release is not done properly.

Ideally it is best to release the kookaburra where it was found back into its area if it has only been in care for a few weeks.

Over the years we have learnt much more about how to successfully release kookaburras. It appears that most adult kookaburras in a territory will allow a new juvenile kookaburra in. It is vital when rearing a kookaburra to encourage it to self feed and hunt insects as soon as possible. This is not hard as natural instincts kick in with these birds from a very young age. If there are other young kookaburras in care it is best to crèche them at a young age so they can be released together. This also stops them from imprinting.

Never cold release a kookaburra. Much care needs to be taken as to a suitable area. They must be placed in a flight aviary for several weeks to acclimatise to the area and to find out if the resident kookaburras will accept or reject them. Often wild adult kookaburras will come down to the aviary of a young or juvenile kookaburra and adopt them by feeding them insects through the wire. If this happens the aviary door can be opened after a few days and the young kookaburra allowed to join the wild adults. However this cannot be done until the young bird is fully feathered and can fly well

You may observe the wild kookaburras landing on the aviary, making a lot of noise and showing aggression. This may settle down after a week or so but if it does not then it means the wild ones will not accept any new comers and a new release site will need to be found with more tolerant resident kookaburras.

Mid-morning is a good time to release a bird, when it has already eaten and there is still plenty of time left to get used to its surroundings before dark. Only fit and healthy birds, which are able to fly well should be released. Do not release unless you are sure it can survive.

Check the weather forecast before release. Do not release if there are high winds, storms, or heat waves.

Food can be left out on or near the aviary for the first few days at least, while the bird is adjusting to fending for itself again.

