



Australian Animals: Birds

AUSTRALIAN ANIMALS

Australia is the world's largest island, but also its smallest continent. It is about the same size as the continental United States, but contains less than 10 percent as many people as the U.S. Roughly 15 percent of Australia's population lives in the "Outback", or center of the continent, while most of the remaining people live along the coasts. Australia is comprised of six states and two territories: the states of New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, plus the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.

Australia is considered a land of extremes due to dramatic temperature changes and periods of flood, drought and fire. The continent's Northern Territory experiences a six-month wet season where heavy rains cause river gorges to flood with fresh water. The wet season is followed by a cloudless dry season where lightning strikes can ignite wildfires across the wilderness. Despite these extreme conditions, many remarkable plants and animals have adapted to life in Australia. One group of animals that is well-suited for Australia's extreme conditions is birds. As a result of millions of years of isolation on this island continent, these animals have not only survived these conditions, but have thrived.

AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

Birds are some of the most commonly seen animals in Australia. There are close to 850 species of birds in Australia and approximately 350 of those species cannot be found anywhere else in the world. The remaining species spotted in Australia come from such places as Asia, New Zealand and Antarctica. Some of the most recognizable Australian birds are the southern cassowary, laughing kookaburra and cockatoo.

SOUTHERN CASSOWARY

Cassowaries are large, flightless birds that belong to a group called the ratites. This group is made up of other birds that cannot fly, including ostriches, emus and kiwis. Of the three cassowary species found in the Indo-Pacific, it is the southern cassowary that resides in Australia. This bird can weigh up to 130 pounds and measure five feet in height, making it the second largest bird on earth behind the ostrich. Its body is covered in black, hair-like feathers that are not suitable for flight. Instead, these sleek feathers allow the cassowary to travel efficiently through brush in the rain forests where they reside. Another adaptation that is thought to enable this large bird to move through tangles of tropical plants is the protective casque atop its head. This horn-like projection consists of a calcified core covered in keratin and is located on the cassowary's head. Below the casque, the cassowary's skin is pale blue and fades

FAST FACTS

- The southern cassowary has small wings buried under its feathers, but cannot fly.
- The kookaburra's call is commonly used in movies to imitate the sound of monkeys in a jungle.
- Cockatoos do not have oil glands to protect and clean their feathers. Instead, they rely on a white powder made of down to do the same thing.

KEY TERMS

Casque

Horn-like structure on top of the cassowary's head. It is thought to be used for protection while the bird runs through the dense forest brush.

Kingfishers

A group of birds that have short tails and long, sharp bills. The laughing kookaburra is one of the few kingfishers that does not primarily eat fish.

Dyck texture

A microscopic texturing of feathers that makes them appear blue or green. Cockatoos lack this texture, so their feathers typically appear white, black or grey with accents of red or yellow.





The laughing kookaburra is the largest in the kingfisher family. It is also the state bird of New South Wales.

to darker blue near the neck, where two bright red wattles are located. The southern cassowary's legs are relatively short, but powerful enough to enable it to run up to 30 miles per hour, swim effectively and jump up to five feet in the air. During such a jump, the cassowary can swipe its five-inch inner toenail at a potential predator. Females of this species are larger than males, and can lay up to five pale green eggs in a nest on the rainforest floor. Males incubate the eggs and will raise the hatchlings for the first nine months of their lives. Southern cassowaries primarily eat fruit that has fallen to the ground and play a very important role in distributing the seeds of over 100 tropical plants. As such, it is very important

to protect southern cassowaries in Australia. These large birds are affected by habitat loss and are considered endangered due to decreases in population size.

LAUGHING KOOKABURRA

The laughing kookaburra is the largest kingfisher and is native to eastern Australia. However, over the last century it has been introduced throughout the continent and can now be found in wooded areas all over Australia. The laughing kookaburra has cream-colored plumage on its head and underside, with brown wings and brown eye stripes. Males and females have similar coloration, but females are slightly larger, weighing up to a pound and measuring up to 18 inches in length. The laughing kookaburra has a large bill that is used for grabbing prey including insects, lizards, snakes, amphibians, crustaceans, small mammals and birds. The kookaburra is a "sit and wait" predator, meaning that it perches in a tree until it spots its prey, and then swoops down to grab it. Larger prey, like a snake, is beaten against a rock or branch to pulverize it for easier ingestion. The laughing kookaburra mates for life and typically constructs its nest within trees or termite mounds. Both parents help to incubate the 2-4 eggs that are laid each breeding season. After 25-29 days, the chicks hatch. They remain with their parents for approximately four years, during which time they help to raise successive clutches of siblings. These laughing kookaburra families are territorial and use a call that sounds like a laugh to advertise their territory. It is this distinct sound that earns them the name laughing kookaburra.

COCKATOOS

Cockatoos belong to a group of parrots from Australia, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. One characteristic unique to this group of birds is a moveable crest of feathers on top of the head. Cockatoos can communicate that they are excited or alarmed by raising this crest. Another difference between cockatoos and other parrots is the color of their feathers. Cockatoo feathers lack Dyck texture, a structural arrangement which makes feathers appear green and blue. All 14 Australian cockatoo species are primarily grey, black or white, however almost all have pigment components in their feathers or skin to allow for accent colors of shades of reds and yellows. For example the male cockatiel has a yellow head, crest and orange cheek mark. The Galah cockatoo is about 60 percent grey and the rest is a rose color. Like other parrots, cockatoos have strong beaks which they use to crack nuts and seeds. They also eat berries and roots which are found in their forested habitat. Flocks of cockatoos perch in these forests and use loud screeches to communicate among the dense trees. A sentinel bird in a flock will screech in alarm when a predator is spotted, signaling to the other birds that danger is near.

Visit the Aquarium's *Animal Planet Australia: Wild Extremes* exhibit to see cockatoos, laughing kookaburras, rainbow lorikeets and many other species of native Australian birds.



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