



## Laughing Kookaburra

Kingdom: Animalia  
 Phylum: Chordata  
 Subphylum: Vertebrata  
 Class: Aves  
 Order: Coraciiformes  
 Family: Alcedinidae  
 Genus: *Dacelo*  
 Species: *novaeguineae*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

### Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The laughing kookaburra is primarily found in medium to dense woodland areas of eastern Australia. It has been introduced to Tasmania, southwestern Australia, and New Zealand.
- **Exhibit Location:** Propagation Unit

### Characteristics

- Length: 18 inches; Weight: about 1 pound; females are slightly larger than males.
- The kookaburra has a compact body, a short neck, and short legs, which are characteristics of its kingfisher family.
- Its strong, dapper-like bill is about 4 inches long. The maxilla (top beak) is black and the lower mandible (bottom beak) is tan.
- Its creamy white head has dark brown lines over the crown and through its eye regions. A white band separates the head from the body. Its shoulders are dark brown, and its underparts are dull white. Its wings are dark brown with light gray-blue tips. The tail is barred, brown and black. After about 3 months of age, all males and females have similar plumage (feather) coloration.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild:** 15-20 years; **In Captivity:** 20 years

### Behaviors

- The kookaburra is territorial, sharing and defending its territory with other family members.
- It is sedentary (non-migrating), remaining in its well-defined territory throughout the entire year. Most are permanent residents in the area in which they breed.
- Sometimes symbolic aggressive acts are used within the territory of these usually peaceful birds. Sparring occurs in order to form a dominance hierarchy within a family, even between pairs of the newest young. In sparring, two birds grasp bills, each twisting and turning the other's bill to show strength and dominance. The loser is either thrown off its perch or gives up and flies away.
- The kookaburra usually roosts in treetops at dusk. As it joins with other family members, a noisy chorus of laughing sounds can be heard. As dawn breaks, the family's raucous chorus sounds again. Such morning sounds are often referred to as a "bushman's clock."
- The kookaburra often sits on an exposed perch such as dead branches in open, wooded areas or on power lines. From its vantage point, *Dacelo novaeguineae* searches for prey. After locating its prey, the kookaburra swoops down and captures it on the ground. Before eating, it pounds the catch against a tree branch, log or rock, which tenderizes the meat.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** Insects, fish, small plastic balls

### Reproduction

- The laughing kookaburra reaches sexual maturity at 1 year of age.
- Once maturity is reached, a pair becomes established through display rituals and active defense. The pair remains monogamous (having 1 mate) for life. The pair often has helpers to assist with the care of

the young, however. These helpers are usually their offspring from a previous brood who are now learning how to become parents, or the helpers could be an unrelated pair waiting to enter the family's territory.

- Nests are usually in tree holes, hollow tree trunks, or excavated arboreal (tree-dwelling) termite mounds – without any nesting materials being used.
- Breeding season is usually from August to January. The female lays 2-4 pure white eggs.
- Both sexes share the incubation duties during the 24 -26 day incubation period. The chicks are naked and blind when they hatch. Both parents care for their young, especially for the first 30 days. Even though the chicks often fledge (leave the nest) after 1 month, the parents and helpers continue to care for them for a few months more.
- Kookaburra offspring may remain within their family group for several years, helping with and protecting their younger siblings.

### **Diet**

- **In the Wild:** insects, lizards, worms, snakes, snails, frogs, small birds, rodents, crustaceans
- **At the Zoo:** mice, small rats, fish, insects, and occasionally a snake

### **Conservation Status**

- **IUCN status:** Not listed; **CITES Appendix:** Not listed
- Their conservation status, according to the Australian government, is secure.
- The kookaburra is fairly adaptable to its habitat. However, it does need forested areas for nesting and for finding food. Residing in Australia is most beneficial to laughing kookaburras, because there are strict animal control laws throughout the country.
- Predators: humans

### **Did You Know?/Fun Facts**

- *Dacelo novaeguineae* assists humans by reducing the insect population when insect outbreaks occur.
- Its nicknames include Laughing Jackass and Great Brown Kingfisher.
- It is of value to Australians because it will even prey on venomous snakes.
- In many of the old Tarzan movies, the jungle sounds of Africa included the call of the laughing kookaburra, which lives nowhere near Africa.
- A legend from the Australian aborigines states: When the sun rose for the first time, the god Bayame ordered the laughing kookaburra to utter its loud, almost human laughter in order to wake up mankind so that they should not miss the wonderful sunrise.
- The Australian aborigines also believed that any child who insulted a laughing kookaburra would grow an extra slanting tooth.

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