Laughing Kookaburra

Dacelo novaeguineae

What do they look like?

The laughing kookaburra is the world's largest kingfisher. It measures up to 46 cm from the tip of its beak to the tip of its tail. Its plumage is shades of whites and browns, which help it to blend easily into its environment. This makes it more difficult for prey or predators to see the bird.

There are 10 kingfisher species in Australia. They are the azure, forest, collared, red-backed, sacred, little, yellow-billed and buff-breasted paradise kingfishers, and the blue-winged and laughing kookaburras. Although their size differs, all kingfishers look similar. They have stout, squat bodies with large heads and long beaks.

Where do they live?

The laughing kookaburra can be found in NSW. It lives in forests, open woodlands, or on the edges of plains.

What do they eat?

Kookaburras use their strong beaks to catch a variety of prey, including fish, small snakes, lizards, rodents, worms, beetles and other insects. In times of grasshopper or mouse plagues, their diet will consist almost entirely of these animals.

To catch its food, the kookaburra uses a wait-and-pounce technique, taking up a post with a good view. When prey appears, the kookaburra drops straight down from its perch, its wings back, with beak ready to grab its dinner. Large prey items like lizards and snakes are bashed against a tree or rock, to kill them and soften them up before they are eaten.

Breeding and Lifecycle

The main purpose of a kookaburra's call is to let other birds know of its territory and boundaries. A kookaburra lives in the one place for most of its life. It also mates for life. Laughing kookaburras establish a social system in which only the dominant male and female in a family group will breed, usually between spring and mid summer.

Nests are made in tree hollows, termite mounds in trees or on the ground, where the female will lay up to three eggs. During this time, the rest of the family helps out with the incubation, feeding, and protection of the young.

Conservation threats

There are two ways in which humans can have an adverse effect on kookaburras. Firstly, kookaburras need trees for nesting, roosting and perching on while waiting for prey. Removing trees means that there are fewer breeding and feeding sites available for kookaburras, and this can lead to a decline in numbers.

Secondly, when humans use pesticides to kill insects, they end up poisoning the animals which usually feed on those pests. When kookaburras eat contaminated insects, they absorb the pesticide chemicals and store them in their fat. When food is in short supply and the kookaburras use some of their fat store, high concentrations of chemicals may flow into the blood. The result can be reproductive losses or even death. If you must use pesticides, choose the least toxic ones – and take special care to avoid those which build up residues in the bodies of animals which prey on insects.