



NATIONAL AQUARIUM IN BALTIMORE

Conservation Education Department
Pier 3, 501 East Pratt Street
Baltimore, MD 21202

Fast Facts

- ◆ The call of the kookaburras commonly used in movies to imitate the sound of monkeys in a jungle.
- ◆ Though the cassowary is a bird, it is the largest land animal in Australia.
- ◆ Kookaburras live at home for the first four years of their life. During this time they take care of and provide food for any younger nestlings.

Key Terms

Cassowary: A large bird that mainly lives in northern Australia. It has a horn-like helmet on its head and is closely related to the emu.

Kookaburra: A brown colored kingfisher found in Australia, about the size of a crow.

Kingfisher: A bird with a short tail and a long, wide, sharp bill.

Ask the Aquarium

*Fact Sheets from the
Conservation Education Department*

Australian Animals: Birds

ANIMALS OF AUSTRALIA

Australia is a continent that is about the same size as the continental United States, but has less than a tenth of the human population. About 15% of the population lives in the "Outback" or center of the continent. The majority of the population lives along the coasts. Australia has six states and two territories: New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory. It is the world's largest island, but smallest continent. Australia is considered a land of extremes due to dramatic temperature changes and periods of flood, drought, and fire. Despite these extreme conditions, Australia is home to many remarkable animals that have adapted to the environment. As a result of millions of years of isolation on this island continent, the animals have not only survived these conditions, but have also thrived. Various species of birds make up some of these animals.

AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

Birds are the most commonly seen animals in Australia. This is because Australia does not have large predators that other countries have. There are about 750 species of birds in Australia. About 300 of those species can not be found anywhere else in the world, but in Australia. This is the largest number of native species found in any country. The other 450 species come from all over the world including Asia, and some even from the Arctic Tundra. Out of the many bird species found in Australia, two of the most well known



The laughing kookaburra is Australia's national symbol. Flick, the Aquarium's kookaburra, can be seen in Education Programs at the National Aquarium in Baltimore.

species are the southern cassowary and the laughing kookaburra. Despite popular belief, cockatoos are also an Australian species and are often found in the pet trade.

SOUTHERN CASSOWARY

Even though the name is misleading, the southern cassowary is only found in the northern parts of Queensland. The "southern" in the name comes from the two other species found in Papua, New Guinea, just north of Australia. Standing at five feet, no other bird looks less like a bird, than the cassowary. They are very large with glossy black hair-like

feathers. They have a bald, blue head and neck with a red wattle. Atop its head is a large helmet, a prominent horn-like protrusion. The use of this helmet is not known; some think it may be for protection, dominance, or as a shovel to look for food. The inside toe of each foot has a four inch long spike that is used as protection, making the cassowary very dangerous if approached. Although cassowaries are very hard to see in the rain forests where they live, they are very important animals for the rain forest. The cassowary swallows fruit whole, which is useful for seed dispersal since they excrete the seeds intact. As they are dispersed the plants start growing wherever the seeds land. One can usually see the cassowary along the roadside in the rain forest. Traffic casualties are one of the main causes of the declining cassowary population.

LAUGHING KOOKABURRA

The laughing kookaburra is a very distinct bird and is Australia's national bird. The call is unlike any other, and is how this particular species gets its name. The laughing kookaburra is around 18 inches in height and is brown on its upper side with black stripes on the tail. The underside is white, and the head has brown patches around the eyes. Laughing kookaburras can be seen individually, but are more commonly seen in groups. A pair mates for their entire life and builds a social gathering with their offspring. The female usually lays 3 eggs at a time. The first-born is the most dominant, making it unlikely that the last

will survive. Laughing kookaburras are found in forest areas of Australia and have been known to become tame around people, especially around picnic areas. Kookaburras are very important to their habitat; they eat many kinds of prey including insects, snails, fish, frogs, and even small lizards and snakes.

COCKATOOS

If you travel to Australia, one family of birds you will definitely see and hear are cockatoos. These birds are common to Australia with 14 different species, 11 of which are native to Australia. Cockatoos are very social and their flocks can reach into the thousands. Cockatoos are known to be affectionate, often bonding with one family member and becoming aggressive towards the others. In the wild or as pets, cockatoos are prone to behavior problems such as screaming, due to their dependent nature. One of the most frequently seen species is the sulphur-crested cockatoo. They are white with a small amount of yellow under their wings and tail. They are recognizable by the large yellow crest on top of their head. A basic need for all cockatoos, which the sulphur-crested take to the extreme, is the need to chew. In the urban areas of Australia they are known to chew on wooden porches, windowsills, and doors. The sulphur-crested cockatoos have become very common in the urban areas because the wild birds are mixing with those that are released pets.

While visiting the Aquarium's *Animal Planet Australia: Wild Extremes* exhibit, you can see laughing kookaburras, cockatoos, and rainbow lorikeets along with many other species of native Australian birds.