

BIRD CARE & CONSERVATION SOCIETY  
CARING FOR WILD BIRDS IN CAPTIVITY SERIES  
(ADELAIDE AND ENVIRONS)

## CARING FOR KOOKABURRAS

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### 1. SPECIES

The two species of Kookaburra below are the largest birds belonging to the Kingfisher family found in Australia

- The Blue-winged Kookaburra which occurs only across the north of Australia,
- Laughing Kookaburra found in Eastern Australia from Cape York Peninsula to Eastern Eyre Peninsular in South Australia, and has been introduced into Tasmania and the South-West of Western Australia

Laughing Kookaburras breed in the spring and usually hatch two or three chicks which are bald and pink, and by sixteen days are covered in pin-feathers. They leave the nest at around thirty-six days of age and are fed by the adults until about three months of age.

Care and diet are the same for both species.

### 2. IDENTIFICATION

The Laughing Kookaburra is approximately 45cms long from head to tail. It has a creamy-white chest and head with brown markings through the eyes and on the crown. The back and wings are brown, with a blue patch on the side of each wing. Males usually have a blue patch on the rump. The tail is striped rufous and brown with white tips to the feathers.

The beak is large and strong, the top beak being black and the lower beak being buff-coloured.

The juvenile Laughing Kookaburra is easily distinguished by its shorter beak and tail-feathers which may be still growing. The lower beak is also black and turns slowly buff-coloured at approximately four months of age. Young birds are often darker on the chest than the adults.

### **3. FIRST AID**

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 hospital 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 25C.). Check the temperature of the water bottle every two hours to make sure it is still warm. Be careful, a cold water bottle will act as a heat sink and chill the bird.

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.

Kookaburras don't usually drink, they usually derive enough moisture from their prey. 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 birds beak, so that it runs down sides of the beak.

### **4. EXAMINING THE BIRD**

Kookaburras have weak feet compared with other Birds of Prey but their beaks are large and strong. It is preferable to have someone helping you when examining the bird. Even very young Kookaburras have extremely strong beaks. Take care when handling them.

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 a wing or a leg is broken it will need to be splinted by a Vet, unless you have experience in doing this. If you are going to transport it to a Vet because of a broken wing place a temporary strapping on it to prevent further damage during transport. Please refer to the BCCS Handbook Caring for Rescues Birds for instructions on how to strap wings. 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.

All the above problems will need to be treated by a Vet, preferably by one who knows birds.

Broken beaks will grow again, but it takes months and both top and bottom beaks will need to be filed a little at a time every two or three weeks with a medium bastard file until normal again. The lower beak may need to be cleaned out gently if a build-up of food has caused the tongue to be stuck down, making it difficult to swallow. This can be done by softening the build-up with a few drops of water, taking care not to get any in the birds lungs,

and removing it slowly and carefully with a blunt object such as the rounded end of a nail file. Cleaning the beak should only be necessary if the bird is not feeding itself but watch for it anyway.

## **5. FEEDING**

In the wild Kookaburras eat mainly mice, small snakes and lizards, small birds and insects such as crickets, worms, beetles and centipedes. In captivity they are usually fed mice, day-old-chicks, pieces of beef, small rats, sparrows and mealworms. 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. As an emergency food only (for first 24hrs.) canned dog food can be substituted for the above.

Kookaburras should regurgitate a cast of undigested material in the form of a pellet which looks almost like dry mammalian faeces. A cast is usually regurgitated once a day.

Adult Kookaburras will bash their prey on their perch to break up the bones making it easier to eat, as their food is swallowed whole. An adult bird will eat about one and a half day-old-chicks per day or 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 Kookaburra's 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 the scissor-type tweezers are handy for placing food in their mouths to avoid getting bitten.

Baby Kookaburras (pullus) 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.

## **6. HOUSING**

Baby Kookaburras without feathers need to be kept warm 24hrs. a day at around 30C, and a brooder is best for this. All bedding should 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 brooding, and injured birds with strapping or splints etc. can be kept in a large cocky 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. Always remembering that it is a wild bird and is naturally afraid of people.

In captivity, Kookaburras are not a very active bird, but unless they are unable to fly, they need a large aviary with plenty of natural perches such as gum boughs and some stumps or rocks to sit on.

Kookaburras do not usually need to drink as they derive enough moisture from their diet but they love to bathe and a bird bath or shallow pond with the water changed regularly, is appreciated.

The Kookaburras' laughter is their territorial call and they laugh very loudly before dawn each morning which can cause big problems with neighbours. One Kookaburra in captivity may not laugh at all unless there are wild Kookaburras within hearing distance, as they are not soloists but choral singers.

It is best not to put Kookaburras into an aviary with other birds, especially small ones which they will eat, so house them separately.

Do not place rescued Kookaburras into an aviary with two or more others already in residence for they will most likely kill it, especially during the breeding season.

Kookaburras live in groups so it is best two of them together, as one Kookaburra on its own will not even laugh properly unless others are living nearby.

## **7. RELEASE**

In the wild Kookaburras live in family groups, with only the dominant pair breeding and all the others helping to rear the young and defending their territory fiercely against other Kookaburras.

Any injured Kookaburras which have been rescued and can be returned to the wild must be released exactly where they were found and within a few days or the others in that area will kill them, even if they have come from that same group.

Any Kookaburras that are able to be returned to the wild but have been kept in captivity for longer than a few days should be put into family groups and released as a group into a suitable habitat where there are no other Kookaburras already living. To arrange this or to receive advice, please contact one of the banding team or the BCCS committee.

Kookaburras that have spent more than a few days in captivity will need to spend at least two weeks in a large aviary to enable them to become fit and to strengthen their wing muscles, and also to make sure that they can fly properly. Young Kookaburras that were rescued soon after leaving the nest need to be educated about the sort of food to look for and must realise that people, cats and dogs are to be feared.

Kookaburras must be feeding themselves before release. To check whether the young bird can feed itself place some insects or mice on the floor of the aviary, stand well away from the aviary and watch to see whether the bird knows how to deal with them.

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 feeding for itself again.

## **8. BANDING**

If possible, have the bird banded before release. This can be arranged by contacting the Birdcare and Conservation Society who have banders licensed to band rehabilitated birds as part of a study of the methods used in rehabilitation. If your bird is banded and is a local bird, you will also be able to tell which one it is and see how well it is coping back in the wild.

## **9. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Kookaburras are not normally kept in captivity mainly because of the problems in supplying a suitable diet to keep them healthy and happy. Kookaburras which are kept in captivity need a large aviary and are very noisy at certain times of the day.

If you are able to keep a rescued Kookaburra it will be necessary to apply for a 'Rescue Permit' from 'The Department of Environment and Heritage and if you have more than one you will also need a 'Permit to Keep and Sell Protected Species'.