

BREEDING THE LAUGHING KOOKABURRA

by Stewart Pyper

The Laughing Kookaburra *Dacelo novaeguineae* which measures about 42cm (16½in) long is the largest member of the Kingfisher family coming from Australia and must be one of the best-known Australian birds. It has a stout body, an enormous head and a relatively short but powerful bill. When it raises its crown feathers the head appears even bigger. The upper mandible is dark and the lower mandible is horn-coloured. Youngsters have a uniformly dark coloured bill. The head is creamy white with a brown stripe along the top. The back, wings and tail are mainly various shades of brown and grey. The lesser wing-coverts are marked with light blue. There is also some blue on the lower rump, which is more noticeable on my male. The underparts are buffy cream. Those of my male are darker than those of the female.

This species has been kept in captivity for over 100 years. London Zoo is credited with the first breeding in the UK in 1905. Until Australia introduced an export ban in 1960, it appears to have been exported quite frequently. By the end of the 1970s it was kept in only a few collections. Most were in zoos. However, during the 1980s several of these collections started to breed Kookaburras. The price fell from £1,200 (approx. US\$1,800) to about £300 (approx. US\$450) for a pair of surgically sexed youngsters. Surgical sexing has played a considerable part in this success, as it has with many other species of birds. I had always wanted a pair but the price put them out of my range. In 1988, The Tropical Bird Gardens at Rode reared a single chick which was sexed and found to be a female. It is tame, but has the habit of jumping on peoples' backs when they least expect it to. More were bred later and towards the end of 1992, my friend Mike Curzon, a director of Rode, asked if I was interested in two females? I said, I was, but needed time to provide suitable accommodation, as they cannot be kept with smaller inmates. My father had for many years kept a small stud of light yellow budgerigars, but had difficulty acquiring fresh blood and decided to part with the remaining birds. His birdroom flights were dismantled and an aviary was built which measures 2.10m x 4m x 2.1m high (6ft 10in x 13ft x 6ft 6½in high). Attached to it is a shelter 2.1m x 80cm (6ft 10in x 2ft 7½in) built from concrete blocks, for roosting and where the birds are fed. The shelter has a corrugated plastic roof, partly covered because there is a street light above it. The aviary floor is half sand and half 16mm (approx. ½in) limestone chippings, which make it easy to maintain. There is a 75cm (29½in) circular dish for bathing.

The birds were put into their new accommodation on Saturday 29th May 1993 and settled in immediately. They were offered chopped day-old

chicks sprinkled with SA37 vitamin supplement occasionally. A mouse is given to them from time to time and they have had a frog which they found difficult to digest. They eagerly consume mealworms. At first softbill food was sprinkled on the chicks, but was soon discontinued as they appeared to remove it. At times a few sliced grapes are given by hand and are eaten.

In 1993, a male was bred at Rode and Mike Curzon asked to swap it for one of my females. This took place Saturday 17th November. I kept the female which was bred at Rode in 1988 and when the young male was put in with her, they took to each other immediately.

Their name is well deserved. They have a long, loud call and when one begins the other generally joins in. They throw back their heads and stand almost vertically on their perches. Their calling arouses the interest of people walking past outside. One couple were reported to have told their friends that they had heard Kookaburras calling and thought they were on holiday in Australia! In the summer they call early in the morning and unless one has sympathetic neighbours, or none at all, they are not birds to keep in a built-up area, where their owner could be inviting trouble.

My two can instantly be distinguished from each other, as the male is smaller and has a darker head and a duller coloured breast than the female, which has a ring on one leg. The male is not as tame as the female, he will accept food from the hand but cannot be stroked. The female enjoys this at times, but can give a sharp bite. She dislikes my hat and on various occasions has flown at my head with the intention of attacking it. When the hat is offered to her, she will refuse to part with it for several minutes, until finally it becomes too heavy for her. John Meeke, who used to work at Rode, said that at times Kookaburras will fly straight at a person's head for no apparent reason. I have not found this to be the case with my birds. The male will at times crash about. In 1995, he developed the habit of flying at the wire netting and attacking the wooden fence panel behind it, always at the same point, where there is now a small hole. Even the female has been seen doing this.

Both enjoy the sun and will stretch out one wing at a time when sunbathing. This is usually done on a perch, but occasionally on the floor. When bathing they get really wet and at times have difficulty flying back up onto the perches. They will sit out in the rain with similar results sometimes. At first I was concerned but soon came to accept this as a regular occurrence. In the winter I keep an eye on them, as they will sometimes take a bath after the ice has been broken and fresh water put into the dish.

Their shelter is not heated and therefore is not frost-proof. Most Kookaburras do not have access to a heated shelter and this does not seem to create any problems, such as frost-bitten toes. Their food freezes sometimes, but fresh food is put in about 7am each day.

There are two plant boxes in which I hoped to grow some foliage to help screen the wooden panel at the back of the aviary. Only partial success can be reported, as at times they pull out some of the grass. A honeysuckle has at present remained in place for about four months. Mint has grown on the floor in one place, as they seem to dislike the taste of it. A clematis proved great fun and was pulled about until all that remained was a root, and this too was pulled out.

When planes go over both birds sit very still looking up at them. Hot air balloons caused panic at first, but this may have been more to do with the fact that as the gas is released there is a loud hissing noise, especially when the balloon is low down.

Rode loaned me a nest-box and a replica was made of plywood. It is 30.5cm square x 38cm deep (12in square x 15in deep), with an entrance chamber 15cm x 10cm x 91.5cm deep (6in x 4in x 3ft deep). It has a 4cm (1½in) landing area. An upturned turf was put inside the box, which was screwed onto a pair of brackets fitted to the side of the shelter. The box is 1m (39in) above the ground and faces west. Upon the box being installed both birds inspected it and over the next two weeks most of the earth was removed, after which the female soon started to spend a lot of time inside. Mating was not observed by me, but was observed by my father. I have subsequently witnessed mating and on two occasions saw the male hold the female's head in his bill. It was hoped that eggs would be laid and sure enough, 10th May 1994, the first egg was seen, followed by a second early in the evening on the 12th May and a third two days later. The female became very protective and when anyone entered the aviary would fly around, and on one occasion, landed on my father's head and attacked his hat, just as she had done to me on various occasions. The eggs, which were white, were not checked to find if they were fertile and were not measured. As the male was under 12 months old, there was some doubt as to whether they would be fertile.

Incubation was undertaken by both birds, with the female doing the major portion. The 6th June an egg shell was seen on the aviary floor beneath the nest-box. The 9th June more egg shell was removed. I had been told that when there were young, I needed to cut the day-old chicks into very small pieces to make it easier for the young to digest them. The food, which was dusted with SA37, appeared satisfactory and consumption increased. When the parents were off the nest, from outside the aviary we could see two chicks and noticed how ugly they looked. Their growth appeared to be satisfactory. When both parents were in the box with the young, it must have been very crowded. On the evening of the 26th June, I was amazed to see there was a third youngster. The young male had done his job well. Generally the female roosted with the young in the box.

On the 9th July the first youngster left the nest, followed at two-day intervals by the others. The weather was dry and the water dish was soon partly emptied. The young had a tendency to thrash around but no damage appeared to be done. They were independent by the 31st July, 21 days after the first youngster had left the nest. The youngsters were, as expected, smaller versions of their parents, except that the buffy cream was very dirty looking and their bills were all brown. The young were taken to Rode on Saturday 13th August, as a buyer had been found for them. The adults were then mine.

The female seemed very annoyed by the removal of the young. The box was taken out to be cleaned and a week later was put back with a new upturned turf, and although it was immediately investigated and some of the earth was thrown out, nothing further happened in 1994.

The winter of 1994/95 was mild and events in 1995 unfolded as follows:-

Monday 10th April	First egg seen at 11.40am.
Wednesday 12th April	Second egg seen at 6.40am.
Friday 14th April	Third egg seen at 6.40am.
Saturday 6th May	Half an egg shell seen on the ledge of the nest-box.
Monday 8th May	Egg shell seen on the aviary floor. My father put in a few mealworms to see what would happen and saw them being taken into the nest-box.
Wednesday 10th May	I saw at least one chick.
Monday 15th May	I saw two chicks.
Tuesday 6th June	Both chicks were well feathered and would, I thought, leave the nest-box by the weekend.
Sunday 11th June	First youngster seen in the flight at 7.53am.
Tuesday 13th June	Second youngster seen in the flight at 7.50am.
Saturday 17th June	A very wet day. One youngster was so wet that I caught it and put it in the shelter. This incidentally was the last really wet day of the summer. There were then over nine weeks of hot, dry weather.
Friday 30th June	First egg seen in the nest-box.
Saturday 1st July	Second egg seen at 5.30pm.

Wednesday 5th July	Third egg seen.
Saturday 15th July	One of the earlier youngsters was removed and sent with one of Rode's youngsters to Abbotsbury Swannery, Dorset.
Wednesday 26th July	Egg shell seen on the ledge of the nest-box.
Thursday 27th July	Two chicks seen.
Friday 28th July	Third chick seen.
Tuesday 1st August	The three chicks seem to be growing okay - they are very near the entrance to the nest-box. The food intake appears to be satisfactory. It is the hottest day so far and the parents are not brooding the chicks. My father sprayed the nest-box. Wasps are a particular pest, as they appear to be eating the cut-up day-old chicks.
Wednesday 2nd August	All appears to be going well. The young bird from the first brood was seen carrying food into the nest-box.
Thursday 3rd August	The three chicks appear to be growing satisfactorily.
Tuesday 8th August	I saw all three chicks.
Friday 18th August	All appears to be going well. It has been a very hot week.
Wednesday 23rd August	The first wet day for over nine weeks.
Thursday 31st August	The first youngster is out of the nest.
Friday 1st September	The second youngster is out of the nest.
Sunday 3rd September	The third youngster is out of the nest.
Sunday 8th October	The birds are sold.

Summing up, I have had great pleasure from my Kookaburras. The fact that the female of the pair was hand-reared has not presented any problems over imprinting. To have bred eight youngsters has been the icing on the cake for me. Their food may not be to everyone's taste, but they are certainly interesting birds, perhaps more so in the case of my pair because the female is reasonably tame.

Stewart Pyper is on The Avicultural Society Council and is the Membership Secretary of the Society.

BIRDWATCHING IN BRAZIL

by Roger Wilkinson

Brazil is the largest country in South America but it does not have the greatest number of bird species. This honour is held by Colombia which has the advantage of including the extra habitats of the Andes within its boundaries. However, Brazil does have the dubious distinction of a longer list of threatened species. This, in part, is the result of deforestation on the eastern Atlantic seaboard, where remnant forests now hold so many of the country's threatened species.

Among the birds of Brazil are many presently or previously held at Chester Zoo, so it was with particular anticipation that I arrived at Rio de Janeiro with four other birdwatchers in July 1992. We headed for Brazil's only mountainous region which is situated some 150km north-west of Rio and is now protected as the Parque Nacional do Itatiaia. There we spent four days birding the tracks from the lower forests, through cloud forest and above the tree-line into the thin air of the paramo. The forested areas were the hardest to bird, and while the tracks gave good opportunities to see the larger and more conspicuous species the smaller grovellers needed to be encouraged to show themselves by playing tape-recordings of their calls.

That was how such elusive birds as Large-headed Flatbills *Ramphotricon ruficauda* were persuaded to come out into the open in response to the apparent intruder calling in their territory. Other species were first located by ear and then searched for. Swallow-tailed Manakins *Chiroxiphia caudata* only gave away their presence by their distinctive calls. These gorgeous birds were surprisingly difficult to see in the shadows of the thick bush vegetation.

More conspicuous were the many species of tanagers. These included Diademed *Stephanophorus diadematus*, Black-goggled *Trichothraupis melanops*, Golden-chevrons *Thraupis ornata*, Green-headed *Tangara seledon*, Burnished Buff *T. cayana*, Brassy-breasted *T. desmaresti* and Gilt-edged *T. cyanoventris*. Several Red-breasted Toucans *Ramphastos dicolorus* and a pair of Saffron Toucanets *Bailloni bailloni* (both species considered 'near-threatened') were among the many avian highlights.

Birds restricted to this small montane area of Brazil include the Itatiaia Spinetail *Schizoeaca moreirae*, a small brown bird found only in the short moorland-like habitat above the tree-line. Birds of the cloud forests included the handsome and local Black and Gold Cotinga *Tijuca atra*. The cotingas are a beautiful and fascinating family which includes cocks of the rock, bellbirds and umbrellabirds - some of the most spectacular species in the

world. David Snow's excellent book, *The Cotingas*, is not only a classic and a joy to read but includes some stunning plates. One bird illustrated in the work is the tiny, Goldcrest-like, Kinglet *Calyptura calyptura cristata*, which is known only from a few museum specimens collected in the vicinity of Rio de Janeiro and the nearby Serra dos Orgaos. The Kinglet *Calyptura* has not been seen this century and is almost certainly extinct.

Leaving such an excellent area as Itatiaia was difficult - but made easier by the knowledge that our next birdwatching was to be in that tremendous wetland, the Pantanal which borders on Bolivia and is a five-hour flight from Rio de Janeiro.

The Pantanal was outstanding. Within a few hours of arriving we saw a group of four Greater Rheas *Rhea americana*, then a pair of Red-legged Seriama *Cariama cristata*, before we stopped for the first of many Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria*. A pair of these huge storks stood, unperturbed by our camera clicking, beside a tiny roadside pool. The wealth of birds was astonishing with 'Chester Zoo Specials' including a trio of Bare-faced Curassows *Crax fasciolata* and two Sun-Bitterns *Eurypyga helias*. The night was spent at Hotel Poussada Pixaim, where our room mates included mole crickets and two frogs. Next day we set off down the 240km dirt track known as the Transpantanal Highway. More than 50 Jabiru, 11 Maguari Storks *Ciconia maguari* and numerous Wood Storks *Mycteria americana*, plus spoonbills and many kinds of ibis and herons were seen, as was an astonishing total of 34 Southern Screamers *Chauna torquata*.

The Pantanal is seasonally flooded and our visit was made in the dry season when waterbirds were concentrated in the remaining wet areas alongside the elevated highway. Familiar birds included Blue-fronted Amazons *Amazona aestiva* and Toco Toucans *R. toco*. More unusual birds included the amazing Red-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus trochilirostris* - a rather drab, brown bird with a very long, curving red bill - and the shy Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica*. Five Chestnut-bellied Guans *Penelope ochrogaster* (now included in the Birdlife International checklist of threatened birds) appeared briefly, as did the more numerous Common Piping Guans *Aburria pipile* and Chaco Chachlacas *Ortalis canicollis*.

Halfway along the Transpantanal Highway we arrived at a small kiosk set in a grove of palm trees. An old lady hobbled across from a derelict cottage to open the 'shop' and we were offered either a warm beer or cold coke. This was the area where we had been told the Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* had occasionally been seen. The Hyacinth Macaw was really the one bird I had to see whilst in Brazil. I searched the ground beneath the palm trees and found palm nuts that had been opened by a clean bite across their top. Surely this was the work of Hyacinth Macaws...but the nuts looked old rather than fresh and the trail appeared cold.

My companions were more concerned with getting to grips with the challenges posed by the grovellers and skulkers, and thus we entered the swamps, drawn on by the ventriloquial calls of an elusive Undulated Tinamou *Crypturellus undulatus*. On returning to the drinks kiosk the old lady told us she had heard Hyacinth Macaws calling while we were away conducting our fruitless search for the tinamou. That was more than I could take and I set off walking along the road, cutting into an area of tall trees where I suspected the Hyacinth Macaws might be hiding. Excited calls preceded the birds flying-off across the road in full view, much to the delight of my companions.

From within the trees, I could see only trees. My disappointment was not to last, for within a short time I had excellent views of two pairs of Hyacinth Macaws - and a pocketful of the palm nuts they had been eating. These were later identified by John Dransfield of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, as fruits of the palm *Attalea maripa*. These fruits are incredibly hard but the macaws are adept at biting them open to secure the small fatty seeds inside.

I then relaxed, enjoying the rest of the day's birds which included Yellow-naped Macaws *Ara auricollis*. Hundreds of caiman were seen in pools beside the road and these were most concentrated in the deeper water crossed by bridges. The last of the many rickety bridges over water channels along the Transpantanal Highway was in total collapse. We had no choice but to pay the extortionate price of 150,000 cruzeiros (nearly £20 or US\$30) to have ourselves and our vehicle rafted to the other side. It was a case of either that or returning in the dark over 200km back along the dirt road. There was only one hotel at Porto Jofre at this far end of the road and that monopoly allowed them to charge a million cruzeiros for two rooms shared between seven of us. Our room was also occupied by leeches, several frogs and a scorpion.

The next day was also outstanding with early morning views of an Undulated Tinamou glimpsed between clumps of dense undergrowth. Four Bare-faced Curassows, five each of Sungrebes and Toco Toucans, and a total of 13 Hyacinth Macaws were seen as well as concentrations of waterside birds including 25 Maguari Storks, dozens of Jabiru and hundreds of Snail Kites *Rostrhamus sociabilis*. Other common raptors included Roadside *Buteo magnirostris*, Savannah *Buteogallus meridionalis* and Black-collared Hawks *Busarellus nigricollis*. Two more days in the Pantanal added further sightings of many of these birds, including more Hyacinth Macaws. New birds included Great Horned Owls *Bubo virginianus* and White Woodpeckers *Melanerpes candidus*.

On the return journey we again stayed at the Hotel Poussada Pixaim and allowed ourselves a little time to photograph the rather tame Yellow-billed Cardinals *Paroaria capitata* and Silver-beaked Tanagers



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