

## A cry for a mate .....well a laugh really!!!

By John Read



*Kookaburra - Dacelo novaeguineae*

Just over a year ago, I received a phone call from a close friend, asking if I could house a "large female softbill". My immediate thoughts turned to the Starling or Thrush family, so without asking what the bird species was, I said yes. I thought I would be able to house the bird in a large planted aviary along with many other breeding pairs of softbills. Imagine my surprise, when the bird in question turned out to be a female laughing Kookaburra!!! I defiantly would not be able to house this bird within my breeding pairs.

I suppose as a softbill breeder, I had always wanted to own a pair of Kookaburras, it just came a bit quicker than I expected. A couple of hours later we turned up at my friend's house complete with a large travelling box to collect the bird. Instruction received, the car journey home was quite an event, with the radio being interrupted regularly by her loud bellowing call.

Overnight we had to house her in a large indoor flight; this was a mistake because when she started to call, her voice echoed even louder. The next couple of days were quite a learning experience. She settled into a large flight quite quickly. Her diet proved to be quite a problem, only I could pick-up a fussy eater. She only really likes to eat day-old-chicks.

The Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*) is really a giant kingfisher, found in the E and SE of Australia. They do not feed on fish, indeed, they are not closely associated with water, but prefer to hunt in forest and open bush land. Their main natural diet consists of small mammals, reptiles, birds and nestlings, they have even been known to take snakes up to 3ft long. To aid their hunting techniques, their bill is quite broad and powerful. This shape is well adapted for grabbing the selected prey and crushing it before swallowing it head first.

They are quite well known for living in small family groups, with the year old fledglings aiding the parents in both incubation and rearing a new clutch of youngsters. In such groups they will often defend the same territory all year round, from other invading family tribes.

I decided that I had to change her feeding habits and wanted as varied a diet as possible. We continued with the standard diet of frozen day old chicks. These were thawed thoroughly and chopped into manageable size pieces. It was quite easy to dust these pieces with multi vitamin powder. Other items introduced onto the menu include small frozen mice; beef mince, dried dog chow (soaked overnight), tinned dog meat, mealworms, morios, large crickets, and large locusts and even on some occasions some universal softbill food. Large softbill pellets have proved to be quite acceptable, and usually she will devour these before any other food supplied. The beef mince is another way that we are able to get a suitable multi vitamin into the bird, as it can be mashed into the mince before being rolled into small marble size pieces. I have been advised to offer her the occasional hens egg - still in the shell - is there anyone out there that could offer any further suggestions. Every couple of days she casts up a pellet, this contains all of the undigested material from her diet. Usually, fur from the mice, downy feather from the chicks and other skeletal remains, Similar to those pellets cast by owls etc.

Her call is infectious, just as her name suggest a laugh, punctuated with loud fits if what can only be described as giggling or chuckles. Somehow, now she is settled into her flight, she is able to keep quite good time and regularly calls the same times daily, normally when she is hungry or wants attention.

At 18 inches in length, she needed quite a large flight, and is currently housed in a flight 10' by 12' and 6'6" high. Kookaburras are quite hardy and able to stay outside all year round. However we have provided a small heated shelter at one end of the flight that we can lock her into should there be a need to do so. The perches are placed at either end of the flight to encourage her to fly between them. I would like to extend the flight during the year, but at present this is sufficient to keep her active and healthy, at least until she gets a mate.

Books and articles on Laughing Kookaburra are few and far between. Fortunately, I have quite a few friends within the zoo circuit, which have been very helpful to date.

Fortunately the neighbours have not objected to us owning a Kookaburra, they think it's quite amusing hearing such a call in the middle of the countryside. I'm sure that the noise has been quite a discussion point, especially when they have a B-B-Q. I wonder what it will be like when we get a mate for her....then the objections may start to be raised.