

Kingfishers are small to large birds with a dumpy body, short neck, short legs, large head, and a bill that looks too large and heavy. Sexes alike. Often but not always associated with water. They sit patiently on a branch, powerline or other prominent perch and dart or glide to snatch prey from the ground surface, or to plunge into shallow water. Calls are harsh.

KOOKABURRA *Dacelo novaeguineae*

Rare Australian introduction

45 cm, 350 g. *Very large bird with heavy black and yellow bill; pale head and underparts, brownish back; tail rufous, barred black.* Perches prominently on bare branch or powerline. In flight, clear white wing flashes. Voice a *raucous laughing cackle*, mainly at dawn and dusk. **Habitat:** Lightly forested open country, mainly from Orewa and Kaukapakapa to Whangarei, especially south of Wellsford. **Breeding:** Nov–Mar.

[Sp 280]



KINGFISHERS

Alcedinidae

About 86 species worldwide; 1 is native to New Zealand, and 1 is introduced and also possibly a vagrant.

and dart down to the ground, or dive into water, to catch their prey. Despite their name, kingfishers do not necessarily eat fish; some species are entirely terrestrial.

The kingfishers are brightly coloured birds with a plump body, short legs, tail and neck, a large head and a long, broad and dagger-like bill. Their flight is fast and direct. They often perch on posts, branches and powerlines

They nest in tree hollows or earth banks, which they excavate by repeatedly flying at the vertical surface and spearing with their bill; the skull has special shock-absorbing structures.

280. KOOKABURRA *Dacelo novaeguineae*

Plate 63

Other names: Laughing Kookaburra, Laughing Jackass

Size: 45 cm, 350 g

Geographical variation: Two subspecies: *minor* of Cape York Peninsula, and the more common *novaeguineae*, which is the subspecies in New Zealand.

Distribution: Despite the scientific name, this species is native to Australia, not New Guinea. Kookaburras are common in eastern and southeastern Australia, and have been successfully introduced to southwestern Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. Sir George Grey introduced them to Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf in the early 1860s. Introductions to Wellington, Nelson and Otago in the 1860s and 1870s did not establish. They are now found in open country and on forest margins from near Whangarei in the north to the northern Waitakere Range in the south. The main places where they are reported include: Glenbervie, Whangateau, Dome Valley, Warkworth, Kaukapakapa, Puhoi, Wenderholm and Waiwera. Reports of single birds elsewhere, from Waikato and Gisborne to Westland and Otago, are vagrants from Northland or, more likely, Australia. **Population:** Scarce and with a limited distribution in New Zealand; probably fewer than 500 birds.

Breeding: Little New Zealand information. Pairs remain on territory all year; their young stay with them as helpers. The nest is in a tunnel bored in a rotten tree trunk, e.g. in a Phoenix palm at Wenderholm, or in a natural cavity in a pohutukawa. Eggs are laid in November–February. They lay 2–3–4 white eggs (44 x 33 mm). The incubation period is c. 23 days, and the fledging period is 33–39 days. Chicks may be fed for several weeks after fledging. Kookaburras are long-lived, the oldest known in Australia lived over 13 years, but some probably live much longer. **Behaviour:** Family groups roost and breed together. The common call is a loud, boisterous ‘koo-hoo-hoo-hoo . . . hoo-hoo-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha’, often uttered in undisciplined chorus by a family group. It is heard all year, mostly at dawn and dusk, and both advertises the territory and keeps the family together. **Feeding:** Kookaburras sit rigidly on a prominent branch or post, bill pointing down, and suddenly swoop to the ground or into shallow water. They catch mainly earthworms, snails, insects, freshwater crayfish, frogs, lizards, rats, mice and small birds.

Reading: Parry, V.A. 1970. *Kookaburras*. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press. Parry, V.A. 1973. *Emu* 73: 81–100.