

Agriculture Protection Board
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THE EMU



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THE EMU (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) is a large flightless bird which was formerly widespread throughout Australia, except for the tropical rain forests. It is still widespread and abundant in some districts although its numbers have been considerably reduced in the agricultural areas.

Damage:

Emus cause damage to agriculture mainly by trampling wheat and lupin crops and eating ripening grain.

A single emu can cut a swath by running through a crop, while 100 could virtually destroy it.

In addition, emus are large birds with large food needs. When grain is available they will consume large amounts. They also damage pastures by grazing and trampling and frequently destroy fences. Emus are a problem mainly on farm land close to large areas of uncleared bush. They do not compete to any serious extent with sheep for food in the pastoral areas.

Breeding:

Emus form pairs in mid summer and remain together for about five months. Breeding appears to be initiated in response to day-length and temperature changes. The female lays a clutch of five to twelve eggs each weighing nearly one kg usually in May-June but the breeding season lasts until September-October in some areas. She then wanders off and shows no more interest in the nest.

Time of breeding is vitally important because of the food needs of both the parents and the chicks.

The eggs are incubated by the male who remains on the nest leaving it rarely even for food and water. During this time he may lose up to eight kg

or 20 per cent, of his body weight. The chicks hatch after about eight weeks. The male then broods the chicks under his feathers by night and leads them around by day for up to 18 months.

Migration:

Emus migrate vast distances. They tend to move south-west in winter-spring and north-east in summer-autumn—probably moving in the direction of dense cloud banks. Migrations take place in response to population increases. Emus tend to avoid each other moving singly or in pairs. Too frequent contact with other emus triggers the need to migrate.

Good rains in pastoral areas leads to run off and the recharging of creeks and consequent abundant food. In the following year this results in a rapid population build up which in turn causes mass migration of emus.

In some years thousands of migrating birds may threaten agricultural areas and are stopped only by the state barrier fences.

Diet:

In pastoral areas emus eat mainly seeds, wild fruit and flowers and the young green shoots of herbs and shrubs. They also eat insects when they are available in sufficient numbers, particularly grasshoppers and beetles. In the agricultural areas they attack pastures and occasionally crops of lupins and other grains.

Feeding is restricted in winter by the limited day length, although some feeding may occur on bright moonlit nights.

Appearance

Emus are large flightless birds up to 2 metres high and weighing up to

50 kg. Their plumage is a dull grey-brown in colour with a whitish ruff round the neck. The face and part of the throat is bare of feathers and pale grey-blue in colour, darker in females than in males.

They have large feet with three toes. The legs, feet and bill are dark brown to black.

The chicks are covered with a dark brown down with creamy stripes. The immature feathers are similar to the adult but paler and streaked in appearance.

Population Management:

Emus are native birds and are therefore protected, however landholders have a right to protect their crops. The State Barrier Fence is the major bulwark for farmers against emu incursions.

At present there is a restricted open season on emus in the south-west of the State. There, they may be shot by landholders or their agents only. In order to prevent abuse of the open season, trade in skins or carcasses is not allowed.

In other parts of the State emus may be controlled by shooting or poisoning. The aim of this policy is to conserve the bird as a species while allowing farming to continue without suffering economically unacceptable damage. The situation is reviewed at intervals in the light of current population estimates.

For advice on controlling emu damage contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth W.A. 6151. Telephone (09) 367 0111 or any country office of the Agriculture Protection Board or the Department of Agriculture.