

TO KILL A KOOKABURRA

by Vincent Serventy

For an Australian, the above heading is not only provocative, it's positively repugnant.

Yet some weeks ago a farmers' group in southern Western Australia called for a culling of kookaburras! The claim was made that these bloodthirsty birds were cutting a swathe through the blue wrens, thornbills, silver-eyes, robins, fantails and other small birds of the district.

The call for destruction of Australia's most popular bird (I have conducted several polls around Australia and the kookaburra always topped the list) aroused a vigorous debate and the matter is still under official investigation.

Yet the cry "death to the kookaburra" is not new. Some West Australians see the kookaburra as a "t'other sider" from the Eastern States, an introduction that has brought nothing but trouble.

The call to destroy kookaburras has come in regular succession in the south-west: in 1958, 1960, 1967, 1968 and 1971. The complaints followed the usual pattern, with eyewitness accounts of this jovial villian devouring robins, thornbills, honeyeaters and other small birds.

Now it is all on again! What should be done?

Under no circumstances should any culling of the kookaburras be allowed. If the authorities have the money to spare there can be an investigation into the problem of the low numbers of small birds in farming areas. It will be a useful exercise because the more we know about our wildlife, the better.

It is common sense that whatever happened to the balance of birdlife, all this took place 50 years ago when the kookaburras had colonised the whole of the south-west. Any recent changes must be due to new causes.

There are plenty to choose from.

First there is the disappearance of native plants from many farms. As mature trees die, they are not replaced since all seedlings are removed by those animated lawnmowers, the sheep.

With the disappearance of these patches of bush have gone the homes and breeding places of many birds. The larger trees were of enormous value to the birds not only for finding food but also for nesting hollows.

About 30 per cent of our birds need hollows of some kind. It is quite probable that even after nesting, birds need hollows for shelter during the rest of the year, particularly from night prowling tuans, brushtail possums and owls.

The first and major reason for the disappearance of any animal is the destruction of habitat, taking place not only in the south-west but over many other places in Australia.

The next reason is that the technique of firing roadside verges in late winter and early spring can cause havoc among nesting birdlife.

Another factor is the increasing use of pesticides on farms. Apart from direct poisoning of birds eating dying insects, there is also much less food available for many kinds of birds.

And of course kookaburras are not the only enemies of small birds. Grey butcherbirds are keen hunters, currawongs take their toll and, as already mentioned some of tree living marsupials eat eggs and nestlings.

Feral cats do not appear to be a major danger to birds around farms, concentrating their attacks on small ground-living mammals. Tree-climbing goannas, however, are a danger.

Most of these have been predators for thousands of years in a natural balance. The destruction of habitat, by direct clearing, by introducing new grazers, and by new burning policies, is the major reason why our wildlife has changed, often for the worse.

Despite all the calls for destruction, I can only echo the words of George Caley, the naturalist who explored the country around Sydney in the early 1800s:



Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo gigas*)

The Laughing Kookaburra has been introduced into Western Australia from the Eastern States. However, the Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachii*) is native to the tropical northern part of the country including Western Australia north of Shark Bay.

Photo Michael Morecombe

“The settlers call this bird the Laughing Jackass and the natives as I think, Cuck’unda . . . It makes a loud noise something like laughing . . . from which circumstance, and its uncouth appearance, it probably received the above extraordinary appellation from the settlers on their first arrival in the colony . . . When sleeping in the woods I have often found its singular voice most welcome in the morning”.

Besides occasionally eating nesting birds in the breeding season, kookaburras eat insects and other small creatures. They devour a number of small reptiles, including snakes, frogs, freshwater tortoises, goldfish, rats and mice.

Veronica Parry, an American girl who, having heard a kookaburra call in San Diego Zoo in California, decided to come to Australia to study them, is now our foremost authority. She found that during the breeding season a group of birds she watched ate the following estimated amounts: 30 per cent snakes and lizards, the same percentage of insects, and 15 per cent earthworms. Freshwater crayfish provided 8 per cent and handouts from friendly humans 8 per cent. As kookaburras are strongly territorial, it is probable that the feeding pattern remains much the same for the rest of the year.

First published in *The Bulletin*. Copyright Vincent Serventy.