



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Emus

(*Dromaius novae-hollandiae*)

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By Frank S Todd



Emus in the Wild (northwest NSW)
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Emus are one of the most interesting of all birds in captivity. They are the complete opposite of their pugnacious cousins, the [Cassowaries](#), in that most are extremely tame and curious. They range throughout most of Australia and although quite abundant in some localities, they are disappearing from others. Only one species survives whereas there were formerly four.

The emu *Dromiceius novae-hollandiae* is the second largest of living birds, standing five to six feet and weighing as much as 120 pounds. The plumage consists of coarse, drooping feathers which are double, as the after shaft is of equal length. The wings are vestigial and the legs long and powerful. The sexes are alike or nearly so, but the female may be a shade more colourful around the areas of the face. They can be sexed by voice; the male utters a series of guttural notes in contrast to the resonant and booming calls of the female.

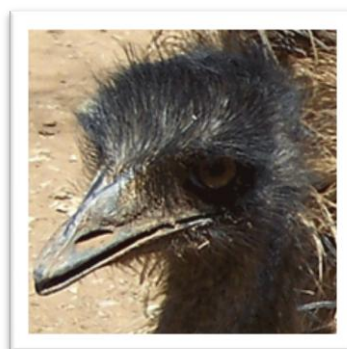
They are swift birds credited with speeds up to 30 mph and are also noted as good swimmers. Moving about in small flocks, they are birds of the open grasslands where they compete with hoofed stock and knock down fences, trampling and eating crops. These qualities do not endear emus to many farmers who declared open war on them in the 1930s. They were hunted with machine guns, but the birds apparently won what has since been referred to as the "emu war", although a bounty on them is still offered in some districts.

Even in the wild they are unwary, curious birds, which often leads to their demise. They are quite omnivorous and feed mainly on fruit, berries, greens, insects, reptiles and small mammals. They are apparently quite fond of caterpillars.

Their breeding season is December through March. The male assumes the incubation and brooding duties. He may become aggressive during this period. The usual clutch consists of seven to ten eggs, but a nest may contain as many as sixteen eggs. The eggs are very dark green, approximately 5 1/2 inches long and weigh about 1 1/2 pounds. As incubation progresses they tend to become darker and smoother.



Emu Plumage
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Adult Emu
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Like the Ostrich, Emus are fairly easy to maintain in captivity. Space requirements are less than that required for ostriches, and they prefer a grassy enclosure. Usually they are compatible and can be kept in a group, although there have been times when we had to remove a persecuted specimen.

They are voracious feeders and are fed a variety of fruits, vegetables and greens in addition to grain, minced meat, day old chicks and hard boiled eggs. During the breeding season add game bird pellets. Emus become sexually mature at two years. Although there has been some success with rearing Emus, allowing the male to incubate, most young are incubator birds. Taking the eggs away also keeps the hen laying. The incubator temperature setting should be 99° to 100° Fahrenheit and the humidity quite high. The eggs should be turned three to four times daily. Due to the dark colouration of the egg, it is almost impossible to candle them. However, the Winnipeg Zoo (International Zoo Yearbook, Vol 8) detected movement by the 37th day. Cheeping sounds were usually audible by the 43rd day and pecking sounds several days prior to hatching. Incubation is reported to be 58 to 61 days but there is a great deal of variance. It would appear that approximately 52 days is more realistic. Assisting the hatching chicks is risky, but a moist paper towel over the cracked egg appears to be beneficial to chicks having difficulty breaking out. Emu chicks are extremely attractive and are basically a sooty white, strikingly marked with longitudinal black and yellow stripes. The chicks can be left in an incubator for the first day and then transferred to a brooder. If the days are warm, they can be moved outside within a week. Their requirements are very similar to Ostrich chicks.



Emu Chicks
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With a single chick, getting it to eat can be troublesome, but with several the problem becomes nonexistent. Again, a young chicken can be used as a stimulant for the baby emus.

I would recommend they be put on soft green grass as soon as possible, with a caution against dry grass due to impaction problems. The diet varies, but finely chopped greens, bird starter or turkey start, lucerne leaves, hard boiled eggs, moistened rabbit pellets, oyster shell grit, mealworms, small balls of minced meat as well as vitamin supplements, such as dicalcium phosphate, and vitamycin or SA-37. Floating finely chopped lettuce on the water often gets them to take the greens more rapidly. Hanging greens is also suggested to strengthen the legs, as it causes the birds to jump. Like most of the ratites or flightless birds, once they start to grow they increase in size very rapidly and usually take adult food in their second or third month.

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