

# JR FACT FILE



## EMU

*Dromaius novaehollandiae*



### AT A GLANCE

#### Size:

Up to two metres tall. The second largest bird in the world.

#### Diet:

Fruits, seeds, growing shoots of plants and insects.

#### Life Span:

Ten to twenty years.

#### Habitat:

Arid inland plains, tropical woodlands, heathlands and coastal dunes.

#### Threats:

Cats, wedge tail eagles and humans.

#### What Is an Emu?

The emu is Australia's largest native bird, and the second largest bird in the world. The ostrich is the largest bird in the world, inhabiting Africa and parts of Asia. The word emu comes from the Portuguese word 'ema' which means large bird. The emu grows to be about 185 centimetres (6 feet) tall and weighs 65 kilograms (140 pounds). This is bigger than many adult humans!

The emu belongs to a group of flightless running birds with flat breastbones known as ratites. Ratites are the oldest of modern bird families and whilst they do have wings, they are not used for flying. Emu wings are about the size of a human hand and are useful in hot weather helping the bird to cool itself.

What the emu lacks in flying it certainly makes up for in running. The emu's powerful legs allow it to run very fast, up to 50 kilometres per hour (kph). Emus are also good swimmers – in fact they love to play in water or mud.

Adult emus are covered with shaggy grey-brown feathers which look like a form of coarse hair. The feathers are important in allowing emus to cope with extreme changes in weather. Their neck and head is largely naked and bluish-black and their beaks are wide and soft for feeding on grasses and herbs and browsing in bushes. Emus have long and powerful legs and each foot has three forward facing toes and no hind toe...

To protect themselves from predators, the emu's main defence is a swift kick or two using their

powerful legs. When being chased by predators from the sky, for example the wedge tailed eagle, the emu will run in a zig zag pattern. If they are being chased by cats (which can run at close to double their speed) they employ a clever manoeuvre utilising their wings. The emu, running along at top speed, will raise one of its little wings towards the sky and point the other towards the earth. This causes the emu swivel around almost 180 degrees, still at top speed, and it takes off in a different direction. A cat can't turn this quickly and its momentum will keep it going for almost 30 metres, by which time the emu is far away. The emu can exhaust its predator before the predator can catch up with it.

The emu's calls consist of booming, drumming and grunting. Although emus are not very social, they have a curious and docile nature. You may remember seeing the emu in company with the Kangaroo on the Australian Coat of Arms.

#### Where Does an Emu Live?

Emu's are only found in Australia. They live throughout most of the country, ranging from coastal regions to high in the Snowy Mountains to

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## FASCINATING FACTS:

- MALES INCUBATE AND RAISE THE YOUNG.
- EMU FEATURES ON THE AUSTRALIAN COAT OF ARMS.

the dry plains at Australia's centre. They are highly nomadic, moving within their range according to climatic conditions. If sufficient food and water are present, the birds will stay in one area. Where these resources are more variable, emus move as needed to find more food and shelter. Emus can move hundreds of kilometres at a rate of 15-25 kilometres per day.

### **What Does a Emu Eat?**

Emus eat a simple diet of fruits, seeds, growing shoots of plants and insects. They swallow small stones (called gastroliths or gizzard stones) which stay in the gizzard and help grind up food. They require a large amount of water, drinking 9-18 litres daily.

### **A Emu's Family Life:**

Emus generally find partners in summer and breed during the winter months.

Their nest consists of a platform of grass on the ground about 10 centimetres thick and 1-2 metres in diameter. They lay between 5-15 eggs over a period of 2-4 days. Whilst the female dominates the male during pair formation, once incubation begins the male becomes aggressive to other emus including his mate. The female then leaves, after which she shows no more

interest in her eggs or partner. She may join a group of non-breeding birds or find another mate and lay again. Meanwhile, the male emu incubates the eggs for a period of 7-8 weeks, without drinking, feeding, defecating or leaving the nest for any other reason.

Newly hatched chicks are cream-coloured with dark brown stripes. They are cared for by the male for a further four to six months. Emus are fully grown at one year and may breed at 20 months.

Emu farming has been tried for several decades for low fat gourmet meat, leather, emu eggs for carvings and oil. Emu oil is used in cosmetics and in the treatment of muscle and joint pains such as arthritis.

Today emus are absent from areas where there are high populations of humans, however despite this loss, emu numbers may have increased since European settlement. The provision of water for domestic stock, together with the emus ability to reproduce rapidly, has favoured its survival.

### **Where to spot an Emu in Victoria's parks?**

Wilsons Promontory National Park, Grampians National Park, Barmah National Park as well as parks in the north west of Victoria.