

# Animal Crackers

Roddy Phillips

Very little prepares you for the hair raising experience of coming face to beak with an Emu of an afternoon. They are the descendants of the 7ft Terror birds that apparently terrorised smaller birds and mammals when the dinosaurs faded out. I've seen an illustration of a Terror bird and it appears to have possessed the power and resilience of an armoured vehicle tank with a beak like a bazooka, but the principal is the same. The long neck of an emu, suspiciously like an arm – or in the late Rod Hull's case an actual arm, also closely resembles a big snake. The topping of the goofy head and the beak turns it into a nightmare snake on skinny legs; make that a nightmare snake that's swallowed a sheep whole and is experiencing some trouble digesting it.

That big old lump of a body looks large enough to throw a saddle onto and I'll bet that somewhere in Australia there are probably organised races - an Emu can sprint at over 30 mph, something worth bearing in mind when you're a couple of nervous feet from one and it's giving you the come-hither eye. But definitely worth a fiver each way. They have of course a certain elegance, a wary, slightly snobby grandiose air that lures you into thinking they'll pass by you with their beak in the air because you're too far down the food chain to bother about.

And then there is Michael Parkinson, assaulted on his own chat show by a psychotic emu owned by Rod Hull. That image of Parky fighting off that mad bird left a lasting impression and probably did untold harm to the emu's reputation, branding it as a long-necked, long-legged harbinger of chaos. So much so that when we spotted an emu in the distance at the Safari Park my son Adam and I stopped dead in our tracks, my wife meanwhile thought we were over reacting.

"Honestly," she chided, "it's not a Sumatran tiger."

We had just seen one of those running vertically up a thirty-foot telegraph pole to snatch a family size lump of raw meat. It slid half way back down the pole and then dropped to a perfect standstill, snarling and staring round in case anyone got any stupid ideas. Women clutched their toddlers revisiting a primitive response that seemed to take them by surprise. As the tiger got stuck into its lunch you could hear bones cracking and splintering under its enormous teeth. I heard someone say that a lemur had wandered into the tiger's feeding enclosure the previous week and walked straight into the snack department. Some lemurs met us at the Safari Park gate. An interesting experience for people who don't own pets or share their living space with anything with four legs larger than the odd field mouse.

"Do you think they know they're out?" asked my wife, smiling nervously.

"Who, the lemurs?" I asked and was rewarded with a thump.

Anyway they looked playful enough, if not downright talented. A young couple in front of us were photographing them and the lemurs were striking well-rehearsed poses – the cute family group, the whacky comedians, the peanut juggler and for a finale, the gravity defying lemur pyramid where they all jump on top of another. At the outdoor café the lemurs were lounging on the table tops like louche old-fashioned rakes waiting for someone to attend to their every whim after wasting themselves on a night of wine, women and free nuts. Mostly they got short shrift. Particularly from the shop where apparently they go on regular robbing sprees. Presumably they steal stuffed versions of themselves that they later deploy as dummies to fool the keepers when they're digging the tunnel under the wire.

We had each bought a bag of food for the animals but mostly it seemed to be for ducks and birds. They all looked as if they had enough food to be going on with so we clung on to our little paper bags in the hope that something more interesting would come along that we could feed. And of course they did. The gate to the Australia section was closed and there were two six-foot emus on the other side of it gazing around like bouncers on the lookout for trouble.

“Kangaroos are cancelled!” I announced turning back but I was immediately caught by my wife.

“Don’t be daft, if they were dangerous they wouldn’t let them roam about would they?” she laughed. I was happy for her to find out and so was Adam so we hung back as she strode up to the gate for a quick chat with emu number one.

“They’re perfectly harmless,” she announced but Adam and I were already walking backwards. Watching with rapt attention as my wife opened the gate.

“It’s like the scene in King Kong when the woman is offered up in sacrifice to the giant ape,” reflected Adam gravely.

“But with emus,” I added.

“Hallo there hen!” she said to the first curious emu, “come away in, you’ll have had your tea?”

Obviously they hadn’t because one of them immediately started eating my wife’s hairband.

“Quick, distract it, give it some food!” she growled as she tried to get her head out of the way of that big beak.

I couldn’t remember if emus were named on the food bag so I took my specs out to check and the moment the bag was visible this horrible beak on the end of a hairy head appeared from nowhere and took a stab at my hand. Everything went dark red after that as I leapt into flight or even faster flight mode and ran off closely followed by Adam. We were at the bottom of the path panting and congratulating ourselves for making such a slick escape before I realised my wife was still up at the gate cornered by two mad pecking emus.

“This kind of thing never happens to Ben Fogle on Animal Park,” observed Adam.

Personally I think it does, it’s just that all the bits when he scarpers are edited out.

“Anyway,” added Adam as he watched his mother’s plight with interest, “I like my birds in the sky or in trees, not six feet high and staring me in the face, it’s downright primeval!”

He had a point. My wife was now involved in what looked like a dance routine from Dr Dolittle the Musical. It was kind of weird and slightly hysterical but with a giant bird on each side the presentation at least had a sort of symmetry. Eventually my wife reluctantly surrendered her bag of food and her hairband and legged it, quite elegantly I should add in true emu style.

“What a pair of Jessies!” she shouted as she approached us, but we were running again because one of the emus was about three feet behind her. In our spineless defence I have to say, she was warned.