



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

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

Avian Intelligence

The term "[bird brain](#)" came about because humans felt that a bird's brain was inferior to that of a human. But new research has shown that avian brains actually process information in much the same way as a human's brain.

It has been found that there are species of birds that do possess a high level of intelligence and those who do not.

Tim Nielsen is the supervisor of birds at the [Royal Adelaide Zoo](#) and believes that [emu](#) could be a contender for one of the dumbest birds on the planet and he has some amusing anecdotes to back this up.

One such story belongs to a colleague of Tim's, who was working in outback New South Wales. The colleague was driving along a dusty old road and noticed that an emu was running parallel with his car and the fence. Out of curiosity he accelerated ahead, pulled over and continued to observe the emu, which by this stage was several hundred metres away. The emu continued to run towards the car and, upon reaching it, proceeded to run straight into it, knocking itself out in the process. Such stories of extreme stupidity are not uncommon when it comes to the emu and it may come as no surprise to learn that the emu has a very small brain. Tim once helped a vet conduct an autopsy of an emu and they both struggled to even locate the animal's brain (it was eventually found at the base of the skull, close to the spinal cord). Generally both birds and mammals have a brain that is two to nine per cent of their total body mass, but on account of the emu's small brain, Tim believes "if you go by brain capacity in sheer size, then no, there's not a lot going on there at all."



Is the Emu the world's dumbest bird?
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Avian intelligence has been the subject of much research in recent decades and it has turned out that some species of birds do possess a high level of intelligence. Some 'bird brain' intelligence levels have even been compared to that of primates and young children.

Such levels of intelligence are something [Doctor Irene Pepperberg](#) knows all about. Dr Pepperberg has been involved in the avian intelligence field since the late 1970's and knows firsthand just how smart some birds are. Dr Pepperberg and her team work with [African Greys](#), a breed of parrot that is considered perhaps one of the most intelligent birds on the planet. One African Grey in particular, named [Alex](#), is quite adept in the skills of communication, so much so that if Alex requests a banana and receives a grape, he gets quite upset and demands the banana! Not only that Alex will also dictate what he wants to do, if he has been subjected to observation for long periods of time and feels tired, he will refuse to work and ask to be returned to his cage.

For many years humans have believed that bird brains were inferior because of their size in comparison to the human brain, but in reality birds process thought in much the same way as us; they process different functions on the right and left side of the brain and they can also communicate.

So next time you're tempted to insult someone by calling them a "bird brain," think again.

The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW): <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org>

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