THE EMU IN THE SKY · INFORMATION SHEET

The Emu in the Sky

First Nations astronomy, living Lore, and a calendar in the stars

A note before you read. This resource speaks about living First Nations knowledge and Lore. Star knowledge, names and stories are specific to each nation and belong to the communities that hold them. This sheet is general in nature and is best paired with guidance from local Traditional Owners and knowledge holders.

Overview

The Emu in the Sky is one of the best known features of First Nations astronomy. Unlike the constellations of Western tradition, which are drawn from bright stars, the Emu in the Sky is a dark constellation. Its shape is formed by the dark dust lanes of the Milky Way, with the head at the Coalsack, the dark cloud beside the Southern Cross, and the neck, body and legs stretching along the galaxy.

It is recognised by many First Nations across the continent, each with their own name, knowledge and Lore. Far from being a simple picture in the sky, the Emu is a living part of the Dreaming and a practical guide to the seasons. It reflects tens of thousands of years of careful observation, and it is a powerful example of First Nations science and knowledge.

Purpose

This information sheet gives organisations an accurate, respectful and strength-based introduction to First Nations astronomy through the Emu in the Sky. It supports cultural awareness, replaces outdated framing of this knowledge as myth or legend with an understanding of living Lore and science, and celebrates the depth of First Nations knowledge systems. It is general in nature and is best paired with guidance from local Traditional Owners and knowledge holders.

Objective

After reading this sheet, a reader should be able to:

- Describe the Emu in the Sky as a dark constellation formed by the Milky Way.
- Understand it as living Lore and knowledge, never as myth or legend.
- Explain how its position through the year guides seasonal activity on the land.
- Appreciate First Nations astronomy as a sophisticated knowledge system.
- Speak about this knowledge respectfully, recognising that it belongs to community.

Times

Reading time	Around 8 to 10 minutes.
Suggested session	30 to 45 minutes, ideally with an evening sky viewing where the setting allows.
Best paired with	An Acknowledgement of Country, and guidance from local Traditional Owners and knowledge holders.

Finding the Emu in the Sky

You can find the Emu on clear, dark nights away from city lights, when the Milky Way is bright overhead. Look first for the Southern Cross. The dark cloud beside it, the Coalsack, is the Emu's head. From there, the dark lanes of the Milky Way form the long neck, the body and the trailing legs.

The Emu is best seen through autumn and winter. Because it is made of dark space rather than bright stars, seeing it is a shift in the way we usually look at the night sky, from the light of the stars to the dark spaces between them.

A calendar in the stars

The Emu in the Sky is also a calendar. As the Earth moves through the year, the Emu appears to change its position and orientation. First Nations peoples read these changes as a guide to the emu breeding season on the ground.

When the Emu appears stretched across the evening sky around April and May, it is a sign that emus are laying eggs, and a time to gather them with care. Later in the year the Emu's orientation changes, signalling that the breeding season has passed and the eggs should be left. In this way, knowledge held in the sky guides respectful and sustainable practice on the land.

Key facts

A dark constellation	Formed by the dark dust lanes of the Milky Way, not by bright stars.
The head	The Coalsack, a dark cloud beside the Southern Cross.
Recognised widely	Known to many First Nations, including the Kamilaroi and Euahlayi peoples, each with their own name and knowledge.
A seasonal guide	Its changing position signals the emu breeding season and the right time to gather eggs.
Country and cosmos	In some places, rock engravings of the Emu align with the Emu in the sky, linking the land and the stars.
Living science	The Emu reflects tens of thousands of years of observation, part of one of the world's oldest knowledge systems.

Actual outcomes

In practice, organisations that build on this understanding can expect to see:

- The Emu in the Sky and First Nations astronomy spoken about as living knowledge and Lore, never as myth or legend.
- Star knowledge recognised as belonging to the nations that hold it, with specific stories shared only with permission.
- First Nations knowledge presented as science, celebrating its depth and accuracy.
- Strength-based, respectful language used throughout.
- Local Traditional Owners and knowledge holders engaged when this knowledge is used in programs or events.

Summary

The Emu in the Sky is a dark constellation formed by the Milky Way, recognised by many First Nations across Australia. It is a living part of the Dreaming and a practical seasonal calendar, and a powerful example of First Nations astronomy and knowledge. Understanding it honestly, and speaking about it with respect, is a meaningful part of cultural awareness. For Emus Talking, whose story begins with the emu, it is a reminder of the strength and depth of First Nations knowledge.

Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding the Emu in the Sky change the way you think about First Nations knowledge and science?
- Why is it important to speak about star knowledge as living Lore rather than as myth?
- How could your organisation celebrate and learn from First Nations knowledge respectfully?

Reference material

- **Australian Indigenous Astronomy** aboriginalastronomy.com.au
- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies** aiatsis.gov.au
- **Common Ground, First Nations knowledge** commonground.org.au
- **National Museum of Australia** nma.gov.au
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap** closingthegap.gov.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build cultural awareness and culturally safe workplaces and partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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