

LEVEL B1

The Great Emu War

When Australia Lost to Birds

In 1932 the Australian army went to war against twenty thousand emus. Sean tells Olivia how it went.

Key words

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| ● headline | ● ambush |
| ● survive | ● jam |
| ● crops | ● bumpy |
| ● fence | ● lookout |
| ● in charge | ● injury |
| ● target practice | ● claim |

In this workbook

Key words	2
Full transcript	3
Did you understand?	9
Two truths and a lie	9
Code breaker	10
Your turn	10
Answer key	11

How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
headline <i>noun</i>	The large title at the top of a news story.	<i>The headline said the town had won the lottery, but the article told a different story.</i>
survive <i>verb</i>	To stay alive after something dangerous or very difficult.	<i>My grandmother's old car survived three winters without a garage.</i>
crops <i>noun</i>	Plants that farmers grow for food, like wheat or corn.	<i>A late frost damaged the apple crops in our valley this spring.</i>
fence <i>noun</i>	A low wall of wood or wire around a field or garden.	<i>Our dog found a hole in the fence and went to visit the neighbours.</i>
in charge <i>phrase</i>	Having control of a group of people or a situation.	<i>Who is in charge of the music at the party tonight?</i>
target practice <i>noun</i>	Shooting at something again and again to get better at hitting it.	<i>The archery club opens its field for target practice every Sunday morning.</i>
ambush <i>noun</i>	A surprise attack from a hidden place.	<i>The kids hid behind the sofa and planned an ambush with water balloons.</i>
jam <i>verb</i>	When a machine gets stuck and suddenly stops working.	<i>The printer jammed five minutes before my presentation.</i>
bumpy <i>adjective</i>	Not smooth, so you move up and down a lot.	<i>The bus ride to the village was so bumpy that I couldn't read my book.</i>
lookout <i>noun</i>	Someone who watches for danger while the others do something else.	<i>While the others swam, Jack stayed on the rocks as the lookout for jellyfish.</i>
injury <i>noun</i>	Damage to the body of a person or an animal.	<i>She missed the final match because of a knee injury.</i>
claim <i>verb</i>	To say that something is true, even when other people can't check it.	<i>My uncle claims he once met a famous singer at a bus stop.</i>

Full transcript

The Great Emu War: When Australia Lost to Birds

- OLIVIA** Hold on. The army actually brought machine guns?
- SEAN** Two machine guns and ten thousand bullets.
- OLIVIA** Against how many birds?
- SEAN** About twenty thousand emus.
- OLIVIA** And let me guess. The emus won.
- SEAN** This is Aprendos English, level B1. I'm Sean.
- OLIVIA** And I'm Olivia.
- SEAN** Olivia, I've been waiting all week to tell you this one. Have you heard of the Great Emu War?
- OLIVIA** I know the name. I always thought it was an internet joke.
- SEAN** Most people do. It happened in Western Australia in 1932. There are army reports and old newspaper stories. It's all real.
- OLIVIA** Okay, but I have a problem already. "Australia lost a war to birds" sounds like a clickbait headline.
- SEAN** It is a headline. It's also basically true.
- OLIVIA** Basically. I'm a journalist, Sean. I hate the word "basically."
- SEAN** Fine. Give me fifteen minutes, and then you can judge.
- OLIVIA** Deal. So who starts a war with birds?
- SEAN** Farmers. We have to go back a bit first, though. After the First World War, thousands of soldiers came home.
- OLIVIA** And they needed jobs.
- SEAN** Exactly. So the government gave many of them land in Western Australia. The plan was to grow wheat and build a new life.
- OLIVIA** That sounds nice, actually.
- SEAN** It sounds nice. But the land was dry and hard to work. Much of it was wild bush before they arrived.
- OLIVIA** Let me guess. Then the Depression arrived.
- SEAN** In 1929, yes. Wheat prices fell badly. The government promised to help with prices...
- OLIVIA** ...and the help never came.
- SEAN** Not by 1932, no.
- OLIVIA** Oh, those poor guys. They survived a war, and then this.
- SEAN** My dad knew that feeling a bit. He was a coal miner in Yorkshire, and he watched his whole industry disappear. You work hard, and the ground moves under your feet.
- OLIVIA** That must be hard to watch as a kid.
- SEAN** It was. Anyway, the farmers are already in trouble. And then, after the breeding season, the emus start to move.
- OLIVIA** Move where?

- SEAN Emus travel from the dry inland areas toward the coast. And suddenly there was all this lovely farmland in the way. The farmers had water for their animals, and fields full of wheat.
- OLIVIA So for the emus it was basically a free buffet.
- SEAN You said "basically."
- OLIVIA That's different. I'm not writing headlines.
- SEAN Around twenty thousand emus came into the area near a small place called Campion. They ate the crops and pushed through the fences...
- OLIVIA ...and then the rabbits got in too?
- SEAN How did you know that?
- OLIVIA I didn't! I just know rabbits are always a problem in Australia.
- SEAN Well, you're right. The emus left big holes in the fences, and the rabbits came in after them.
- OLIVIA Okay, I understand these farmers a little. I have a tiny vegetable garden at home. Last summer the crows ate every single strawberry.
- SEAN And did you call the army?
- OLIVIA I thought about it. Seriously.
- SEAN So you're on the farmers' side.
- OLIVIA For now. Quick question, though. How big is an emu, really? In my head it's a big chicken.
- SEAN Oh, you're very wrong there.
- OLIVIA No, wait, I know this one. They can be over six feet tall. And they can run about thirty miles an hour.
- SEAN So why were you picturing a chicken?
- OLIVIA Because I forgot for a second! They have dinosaur legs, Sean. Scary legs.
- SEAN Right then. So the farmers are angry, and many of them are ex-soldiers. What did they learn about in the war?
- OLIVIA Uh-oh. Machine guns.
- SEAN Machine guns. A group of them went to the Minister of Defence...
- OLIVIA ...and asked him for soldiers.
- SEAN Soldiers with machine guns, yes. The minister was Sir George Pearce.
- OLIVIA And he said no, obviously.
- SEAN He said yes.
- OLIVIA He said yes? Why?
- SEAN Pearce thought the birds would be good target practice for the army. Some historians also think the government wanted to look helpful to farmers in the west.
- OLIVIA Target practice. With real, running targets.
- SEAN Very fast, running targets. So they made a deal. The army sent the men and the guns. The farmers gave them food and a place to sleep. And they also paid for the bullets.
- OLIVIA Wait, the farmers paid for the bullets?
- SEAN They did.
- OLIVIA Okay, now I'm worried about the farmers' money.

- SEAN** You should be. The man in charge was Major Meredith, from the Royal Australian Artillery. He had two men with him, a sergeant and a gunner.
- OLIVIA** Three men against twenty thousand birds.
- SEAN** When you say it like that...
- OLIVIA** I'm just saying the numbers, Sean. That's journalism.
- SEAN** Right. They planned to start in October, but it rained. The rain spread the emus out over a much bigger area. So the war really began on the second of November, 1932.
- OLIVIA** Okay. Day one. What happens?
- SEAN** They see about fifty emus. The farmers try to push them toward the guns, like an ambush.
- OLIVIA** And the emus walk right into it. Game over.
- SEAN** Not quite. The birds split into small groups and run off in every direction.
- OLIVIA** Oh, they're clever.
- SEAN** Or just lucky. They only hit a few that day. Two days later comes the big moment. Near a dam, they see more than a thousand emus.
- OLIVIA** A thousand? Okay, this is it. This is where the emus lose.
- SEAN** Meredith waits until the birds come really close. Then they start firing...
- OLIVIA** ...and?
- SEAN** They kill twelve. And then the gun jams.
- OLIVIA** No! Twelve?
- SEAN** Twelve birds. The rest just ran away.
- OLIVIA** I'm sorry, but I'm on Team Emu now.
- SEAN** What happened to your strawberries? You were on the farmers' side five minutes ago.
- OLIVIA** The crows are the bad guys in that story. The emus are just hungry.
- SEAN** That makes no sense at all.
- OLIVIA** It makes perfect sense to me.
- SEAN** Then Meredith has a new idea. He puts one machine gun on the back of a truck.
- OLIVIA** Oh, a car chase! I love it.
- SEAN** It sounds great in your head. But the ground was rough, and the emus were too fast. The truck couldn't catch them...
- OLIVIA** ...thirty miles an hour. I told you.
- SEAN** Yes, yes. And the ride was so bumpy that the gunner couldn't shoot anyway.
- OLIVIA** So he's bouncing around in a truck with a machine gun. And he's chasing a bird that's faster than him.
- SEAN** Pretty much.
- OLIVIA** Honestly, that's better than most action movies.
- SEAN** And then an army observer noticed something strange. Each group of emus seemed to have its own leader.
- OLIVIA** Wait. A leader?

- SEAN** A big bird with black feathers, about six feet high. He kept watch while the others ate. When the soldiers came near, he warned the group.
- OLIVIA** They had a **lookout**! I'm calling him Kevin.
- SEAN** Why Kevin?
- OLIVIA** He looks like a Kevin. He's tall, and he never takes a day off.
- SEAN** Fine. Kevin. So after six days, they've fired about two and a half thousand rounds.
- OLIVIA** Okay, let me guess the result. Maybe a thousand...
- SEAN** ...oh, nowhere near. To be fair, nobody really knows. The numbers go from about fifty birds to a few hundred.
- OLIVIA** That's a huge difference.
- SEAN** It is. The newspapers said only a few birds died. And on the eighth of November, Pearce took the soldiers and the guns away.
- OLIVIA** And this is where I come in, actually. Because I read about the politics.
- SEAN** Go on then.
- OLIVIA** So the politicians in Canberra loved this. One MP asked the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, if the soldiers would get a medal.
- SEAN** Brilliant.
- OLIVIA** And a senator started calling Pearce "the Minister of the Emu War." Imagine that on your business card.
- SEAN** That's rather cruel.
- OLIVIA** Cruel, but good. Some people in Britain were upset too. Bird protection groups there said Australia was killing a rare bird.
- SEAN** Rare? There were twenty thousand of them in one area.
- OLIVIA** Well, they didn't know that in London! Anyway, the war is over. Emus one, army zero.
- SEAN** Not so fast.
- OLIVIA** No. They didn't.
- SEAN** They did. The farmers kept complaining, and the emus were still eating...
- OLIVIA** ...everything. Of course they were.
- SEAN** The Premier of Western Australia supported the farmers too. So a few days later, the army went back.
- OLIVIA** With more soldiers this time, right? A proper...
- SEAN** Same major, same guns. They were back in the fields on the thirteenth of November.
- OLIVIA** Doing the same thing and hoping for a different result. My old editor had a word for that.
- SEAN** Well, it went a bit better this time. In the first two days they got about forty birds.
- OLIVIA** Forty. Out of twenty thousand.
- SEAN** I didn't say it went well. I said better. By early December, they were killing about a hundred a week.
- OLIVIA** Were the birds easy to hit, at least?
- SEAN** Not really. Some reports said the emus got hit and just kept running. Serious **injuries** didn't seem to stop them.

OLIVIA Great. So they're fast and bulletproof.

SEAN Nearly bulletproof. So on the tenth of December the army called Meredith back, and he wrote a report. Guess how many emus he claimed.

OLIVIA Hmm... five thousand?

SEAN Nine hundred and eighty-six.

OLIVIA Okay, that's a lot less. And how many bullets did they use?

SEAN Nine thousand, eight hundred and sixty.

OLIVIA Wait, that's exactly...

SEAN Ten bullets for every bird. Yes.

OLIVIA That's a very neat number. Too neat, maybe.

SEAN He also said about two and a half thousand more birds died later from their injuries.

OLIVIA Can anyone check that?

SEAN No. Historians think that number is probably far too high.

OLIVIA See? This is why I don't trust neat numbers. Or headlines.

SEAN But Meredith did say something nice about the emus. He talked about how many bullets they could take.

OLIVIA He's a fan!

SEAN A big fan. He said an army with soldiers like these birds could face any army in the world. And he compared them to tanks.

OLIVIA Tanks with feathers. And Kevin on lookout.

SEAN So, Olivia. Fifteen minutes later. Did Australia lose a war to birds?

OLIVIA Hmm... The army left twice, and the emus stayed. So yes, I think the birds won.

SEAN So the headline was true.

OLIVIA The headline was lucky. That's different.

SEAN Journalists.

OLIVIA But seriously, I feel bad for the farmers. They lost their crops, and they paid for all those bullets.

SEAN And it didn't really stop there. The farmers asked for the army three more times, the last time in 1948.

OLIVIA And?

SEAN The answer was no every time. The government kept paying people for dead emus instead. In 1934, people claimed over fifty-seven thousand of those payments in just six months.

OLIVIA Wow. So the farmers did more than the army ever did.

SEAN Much more. Later, they also built long fences to keep emus and rabbits out.

OLIVIA So in the end, a fence won the war.

SEAN Quite possibly. And emus are still doing fine today. There are plenty of them in Australia.

OLIVIA Good for Kevin.

SEAN Kevin is almost certainly dead, Olivia. This was in...

OLIVIA ...in 1932, I know. Kevin's great-great-grandchildren, then.

- SEAN** Fair enough. Now, folks, imagine you're one of those farmers in 1932. What would you try against Kevin's family? Leave your plan in the comments.
- OLIVIA** The whole story is written out in a free PDF, with the useful vocabulary too. There's a link in the description box.
- SEAN** We've got a long list of strange true stories still to tell, so subscribe if you want them.
- OLIVIA** Bye for now!
- SEAN** Cheers. See you.
- OLIVIA** Oh, one more thing. The emu is on Australia's coat of arms, partly because emus can't easily walk backwards.
- SEAN** Unlike the army, who walked backwards twice.

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. Why did many of the farmers have land in Western Australia?

- ☐ They were ex-soldiers, and the government gave them land after the war.
- ☐ They won the land in a lottery.
- ☐ Their families had farmed there for hundreds of years.

2. What did the farmers pay for?

- ☐ The soldiers' train tickets.
- ☐ The bullets.
- ☐ New trucks for the army.

3. What happened near the dam, when the soldiers saw more than a thousand emus?

- ☐ They killed hundreds of birds in one hour.
- ☐ The emus ran toward the soldiers.
- ☐ The gun jammed after twelve birds.

4. Why didn't the machine gun on the truck work well?

- ☐ The truck had no fuel.
- ☐ The ground was rough, the ride was bumpy and the emus were too fast.
- ☐ The farmers didn't let the soldiers use it.

5. What helped the farmers most in the end?

- ☐ Payments for dead emus and long fences.
- ☐ A third army mission in 1948.
- ☐ Moving their farms closer to the coast.

Exercise 1. Two truths and a lie

Each group has two true sentences about the story and one lie. Find the lie.

1.

- ☐ The emus pushed through the fences, and the rabbits came in after them.
- ☐ Near Campion, the farmers' main crops were rice and potatoes.
- ☐ Many of the farmers had survived the First World War.

2.

- ☐ Pearce thought the emus would be good target practice for the army.
- ☐ Major Meredith was in charge of the soldiers.
- ☐ On day one, the ambush caught hundreds of emus.

3.

- ☐ The machine gun jammed near the dam.
- ☐ The ride in the truck was so bumpy that the gunner couldn't shoot.
- ☐ Each group of emus had a lookout with white feathers.

4.

- ☐ Some emus kept running even with serious injuries.
- ☐ Meredith claimed that his men killed 986 emus.
- ☐ The newspapers said that thousands of emus died.

Exercise 2. Code breaker

Write the word from the list for each clue. The pink letters spell the name Olivia gave to someone in the story.

1. Someone who watches for danger while the others eat.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

2. The big title on top of a news story.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

3. To stay alive after something very dangerous.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

4. Damage to your body, for example after an accident.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

5. A low wall of wire or wood around a field.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

WHO IS IT?

--	--	--	--	--	--

Exercise 3. Your turn

Imagine you are a farmer near Campion in 1932. What would you try against the emus? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. They were ex-soldiers, and the government gave them land after the war.
2. The bullets.
3. The gun jammed after twelve birds.
4. The ground was rough, the ride was bumpy and the emus were too fast.
5. Payments for dead emus and long fences.

Exercise 1. Two truths and a lie

1. Near Campion, the farmers' main crops were rice and potatoes. The farmers grew wheat.
2. On day one, the ambush caught hundreds of emus. The birds split into small groups and ran off. The soldiers only hit a few.
3. Each group of emus had a lookout with white feathers. The lookout was a big bird with black feathers.
4. The newspapers said that thousands of emus died. The newspapers said only a few birds died.

Exercise 2. Code breaker

1. lookout
2. headline
3. survive
4. injury
5. fence

KEVIN Kevin is Olivia's name for the emu lookout.

Exercise 3. Example answer

I would not call the army, because soldiers know nothing about farms. First, I would build a taller fence around my crops. Then my son would be the lookout at night. If the emus still came, I would claim money from the government for every bird.