

KIDS CORNER CASSOWARY

This presentation aims to teach you about the cassowary.

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What is a Cassowary?

The cassowary is a flightless bird (also known as a ratite) that is endemic to north-east Australia, New Guinea and neighbouring islands. There are three species of cassowary in the world, however, only the southern cassowary, *Casuarius casuarius johnsonii*, is found in Australia.

Cassowaries are found in tropical rainforests in north-east Australia in three broad populations; one population is found in the Wet Tropics, and two populations in Cape York.

The southern cassowary is the third-tallest and second-heaviest living bird in the world, after the ostrich and emu, respectively.

In Australia, the southern cassowary is listed as Endangered by the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC) Act 1999.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List currently lists the southern cassowary as 'Least Concern'.



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Cassowary Appearance

Adult cassowaries range from 1.5 to 2 metres (or, 4 ft 9 in –6 ft 6 in) tall – as tall as an adult human! Females are bigger and boast brighter colours than males. Females can weigh up to 76 kilograms, while males reach up to 55 kilograms.

The adult cassowary is a striking bird with glossy black plumage and a tall, brown casque (helmet) on top of its head. They boast a featherless and vivid blue and purple neck with long drooping red wattles (bare fleshy skin that hangs from the bill, throat or eye of birds) and amber eyes.

The cassowary has heavy, well-muscled legs with three toes. The inside toe bears a large dagger-shaped claw that is used for scratching and fighting other birds. The cassowary claw is particularly formidable as they can sometimes kick at opponents (even, in some cases, humans) with their incredibly powerful legs.

Newly-hatched cassowaries are brown with creamy white stripes. After three to six months the stripes fade and their plumage changes to brown.



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Cassowary Behaviour

The cassowary is generally a shy bird, adept at disappearing before capturing the attention of humans. Their behaviour can be somewhat unpredictable and when disturbed they can display aggressive behaviour that has been known to cause serious injury to humans and other species. Cassowaries can run at up to 50 km/h and can jump up to 1.5 m (4.9 ft). They are strong swimmers and will cross wide rivers and swim in the sea.

The cassowary is a solitary bird, except during courtship, egg-laying, and in rare cases of an abundance of food supplies. They are territorial, and contact between adults generally only occurs during mating season, from May to November. Between June and October, the female cassowary will lay three to five large, olive-green eggs. The male then incubates and guards the eggs for up to 50 days, before raising the chicks. Juveniles generally begin fending for themselves anywhere between eight to 18 months of age, when they are chased away by the male.

Cassowaries are predominantly frugivorous, living mainly on fallen fruit. However, they will also eat small vertebrates, invertebrates, fungi, carrion and plants. Cassowaries play an important role in maintaining the diversity of rainforest trees, carrying and dispersing large seeded fruits over long distances.



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Threats to the Cassowary

The southern cassowary is listed as Endangered under Australia's Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC) Act 1999. Major threats to the cassowary include habitat loss, fragmentation and modification, vehicle strikes, dog attacks, human interactions, pigs, disease and natural catastrophic events. Their habitat, particularly on the coastal lowlands, has been dramatically reduced by land clearing for farming and urban settlement and development.

Hand-feeding cassowaries can pose a serious risk to both birds and people. Often, wild cassowaries will become conditioned to human food sources and can become aggressive when protecting themselves or their chicks, or when seeking other human food.

Cassowary survival depends on access to large areas of rainforest. Additionally, there is a need for protection of existing habitat and greater control of dogs and pigs, as well as the creation of more protected areas such as national parks. Some local residents in Queensland are undertaking projects that establish cassowary food supplies through nurseries as well as restoring rainforest on cleared land and creating corridors linking to remaining patches of vegetation.



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Cassowary Facts

- The southern cassowary is Australia's heaviest bird (though the emu is taller), and the second heaviest bird on the planet, after the ostrich.
- In Australia, it is illegal to feed a wild cassowary without a permit.
- The southern cassowary plays a vital role in Australian ecosystems, eating fleshy fruits of over 200 species of plants and dispersing seeds long distances in the process. This makes them a keystone species in the World Heritage listed rainforests of tropical Queensland.
- The female southern cassowary is dominant over the male. The male not only incubates the egg but also raises the chicks.
- The southern cassowary got its name from a Papuan word meaning 'horned head'.
- There has been one documented human death caused by a cassowary. On 6 April 1926, 16-year-old Phillip McClean tried to kill a wild cassowary with a club and was subsequently kicked by the bird, dying shortly afterwards.



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Australian Curriculum Mapping

GRADE 5 SCIENCE (ACSHE083): Scientific knowledge is used to solve problems and inform personal and community decisions.

GRADE 6 SCIENCE (ACSSU094): The growth and survival of living things are affected by the physical conditions of their environment.

YEAR 7 SCIENCE (ACSSU112): Interactions between organisms, including the effects of human activities can be represented by food chains and food webs.

YEAR 9 SCIENCE (ACSSU176): Ecosystems consist of communities of interdependent organisms and abiotic components of the environment; matter and energy flow through these systems.

SUSTAINABILITY (01.2): All life forms, including human life, are connected through ecosystems on which they depend for their well being and survival.



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This booklet was created in
conjunction with Edge Pledge.

