

Gambel's Tales

Southern Cassowary: Down Under with Jerry Theis

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Just as the koala and kangaroo are iconic natural animal symbols of Australia, the cassowary could easily be the avian equivalent. The **Southern Cassowary** (*Casuarius casuarius*) was high on all our wish lists when I visited Australia and Papua New Guinea in the fall of 2015 with Field Guides. As with most groups, we planned to visit the aptly named Cassowary House in far northern Queensland, even though it was raining steadily as we began driving. The famous Cassowary House is a family run guest house with Phil and Sue Gregory as proprietors.

The Southern Cassowary, also known as double-wattled cassowary, Australian cassowary or two-wattled cassowary, is a large flightless bird found in Australia only in N. Queensland. It is classified as a ratite, related to the emu and ostrich, as well as the Rhea and Kiwi genera. It



is also found in New Guinea, along with the two other species of cassowary, the Northern (single wattle) and the Dwarf (wattle-less). The Southern Cassowary has stiff, bristly black plumage, a blue face and neck, red on the nape and TWO red-to-crimson free-swinging fleshy wattles measuring around 7 in. in length hanging down around its throat, varying in placement. A horn-like casque, measuring 5.1 to 6.7 in. high, sits atop the head (cassowary means horned head). The bill can range from 3.9 to 7.5 in. The three-toed feet are thick and powerful, equipped with a lethal

dagger-like claw up to 4.7 in. on the inner toe (the blade-like claws are capable of disemboweling humans and dogs if the bird is provoked). The plumage is sexually monomorphic, but the female is dominant and larger with a longer casque, larger bill and brighter-colored bare parts. The juveniles have brown longitudinal striped plumage. The Southern Cassowary is the largest member of the cassowary family and is the second heaviest bird on earth (second only to the ostrich), at a maximum size of 187 lbs and 75 in. tall. Most adult birds weigh between 37 and 154 lbs. It is the largest australasian bird although the emu may be slightly taller.

The Southern Cassowary is distributed in Indonesia, New Guinea and NE Australia (although the Univ of Michigan has a two-legged, 66 lb, 3.25 ft. tall search-and-rescue prototype robot called Cassie, named after

the cassowary). The Southern Cassowary mainly inhabits tropical rain forests, preferring stream banks and clearings, but may make use of nearby savanna forests or mangrove stands. This species prefers elevations below 3600 ft. in Australia and 1600 ft. in New Guinea.

Getting back to our rainy hotel departure in Cairns, our guide soon had disheartening news for us. Both regularly occurring cassowaries at the Cassowary House were gone, one losing a battle with a vehicle and the other reportedly succumbing to a bowel disorder. These birds had been fed fruit from the balcony of the Cassowary House for years, making them an easy "tick" for bird listers, similar to watching a bird feeder! They even had names, Dad and Missy, and dad had come to the balcony for about 30 years. Now we were left to search for a cassowary in its natural habitat. As we searched, we frequently huddled in

heavy rain under a canopy next to fruit baskets hung on trees as our local guide continued the search. After what seemed an eternity he wildly waved us to him. He had spotted a shy male cassowary with two chicks, which we finally observed after a long spirited hike, far from where he had originally spotted them. We felt, as do many birders, that it was actually more rewarding to find a bird away from a "feeder."

The Southern Cassowary forages on the forest floor for fallen fruit (frugivore) and is capable of safely digesting some fruits toxic to other animals. It also eats fungi, worms, and some insects and small vertebrates. It is a solitary bird, pairing only in the breeding season, in late winter or spring. The male builds the nest on the ground, a mattress of herbaceous plant material 2-4 in. thick. This is thick enough to let moisture drain away from the eggs (3-4, pea-green in color). The male also incubates the eggs and raises the chicks alone.

Cassowaries make a booming call during mating season and hissing and rumblings otherwise. Chicks make whistles to call the adult. Chicks stay with dad for 9-11 months, then are driven away as the next breeding cycle begins. The chicks have only a

10% chance of survival when they leave dad to find their own territories. Due to ongoing habitat loss and over-hunting in some areas, as well as feral egg-eating animals and vehicle accidents, even the adult Southern Cassowary is considered vulnerable. A 2002 study estimated the Australian population at 1500 to 2500 individuals. The cassowary has been bred outside of Australia in captivity, namely in Yulee, Florida, although they are notoriously difficult to rear in a managed care setting.

Even though we didn't see the cassowary at the Cassowary House, we had a delightful breakfast on the balcony and saw many bird species, including the Macleay's Honeyeater at arms length. We also observed the primitive-looking Musky Rat-Kangaroo, a strange denizen of the N. Queensland rain forest depths, as it worked through their garden.

The Southern Cassowary may be flightless, but it can jump 7 ft. straight up in the air and can swim like a champ. Because the Southern Cassowary's wattle color changes with its mood, I would be WARY of an approaching individual whose wattles have changed to a bright crimson!



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