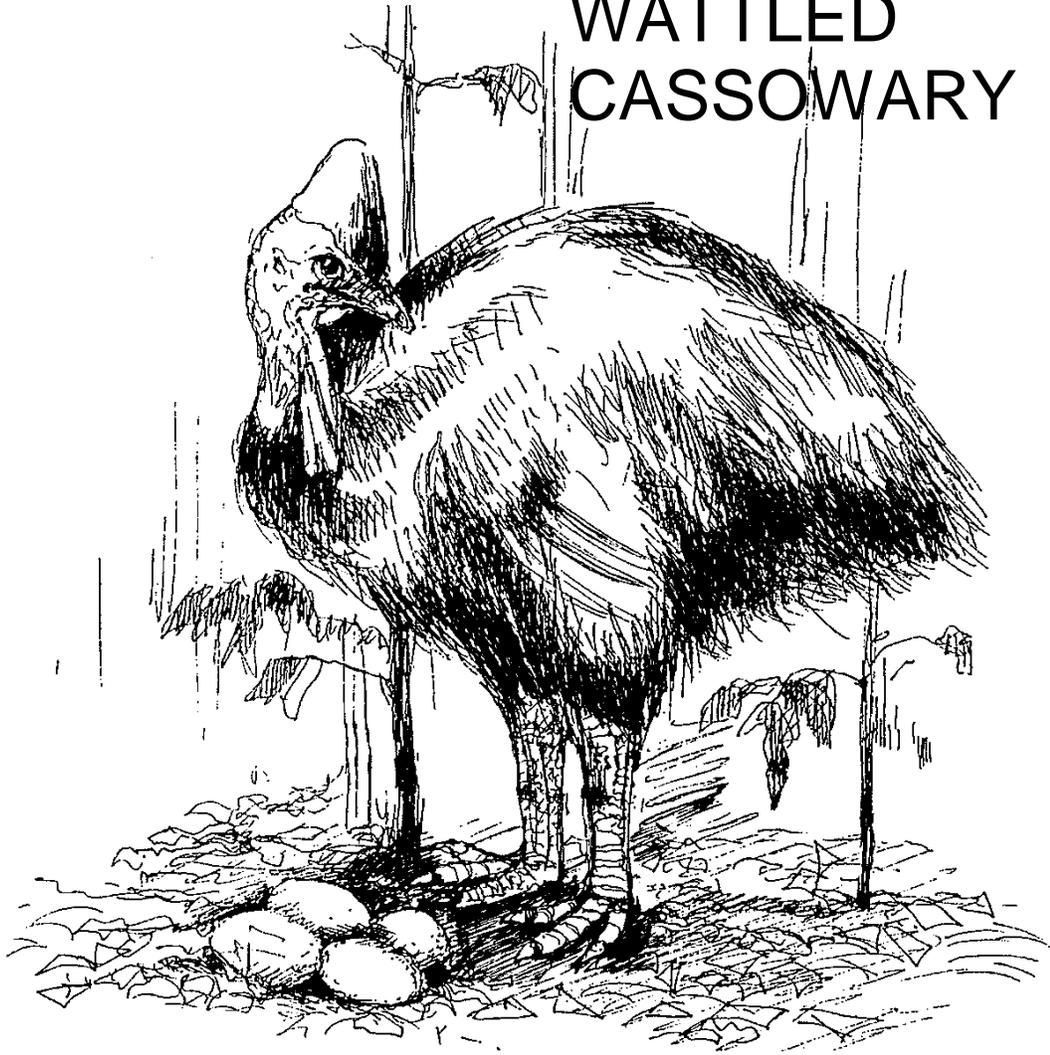


DOUBLE- WATTLED CASSOWARY



notes

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Australia's second largest bird, the Double-wattled Cassowary or Southern Cassowary, is also one of its most threatened. It is important therefore that every effort be made to save this species. Adelaide Zoo exhibits the Double-wattled Cassowary to educate the public about its plight and to assist the national breeding program for its conservation.

One species of cassowary is believed to have become extinct in Australia. The Dwarf or Bennet's Cassowary was an inhabitant of the rainforests of New South Wales. It has not been seen in NSW for many years but is still found in parts of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

Zoos can only do so much to save the Double-wattled Cassowary given their limited space and

resources. If this cassowary is not to become extinct like the Dwarf cassowary then large areas of undisturbed habitat must be preserved.

The natural habitat of the Double-wattled Cassowary is the tropical rainforest of North Eastern Queensland. Here, it prefers the more open areas near streams and natural clearings. It forages on the forest floor for food and seeks protection from predators amongst the undergrowth. The forest also provides a suitable environment in which to raise young.

Many of these birds' observable features are adaptations to its natural habitat. The most striking feature is the casque or blade-shaped crown on the head. Both sexes have a casque.

Just as a helmet protects a person's head against dangerous situations so does the casque on the cassowary's head. As it moves amongst the forest undergrowth searching for food the casque parts the branches for the bird's head. The casque is particularly important when the cassowary is escaping from predators which it does by running with its head lowered and neck out-stretched. The bird's long, powerful legs and toes are adapted for fast running.

Cassowaries can be hard to see even though they are such large birds, because they are well camouflaged. The long, hair-like feathers and general body shape suit the rapid shedding of water, a necessity in an environment where it rains almost every day.

In the dim light of the Northern Queensland tropical rainforest a cassowary will announce its presence with a low rumble. The noise has been compared to the sound of an approaching truck. If an intruder moves closer, the bird will remain stationary and quietly watch the predator or person. If the cassowary feels threatened it will stretch itself up to its full height, raise its feathers and emit a loud hiss. If this fails to repel the intruder the bird will quietly walk off or if chased it will run. Cassowaries are able to slip easily through dense undergrowth that would stop most other animals of a similar size. A cassowary sitting on eggs or with chicks will defend them vigorously. The bird will attack an aggressor by jumping off the ground and kicking. Because of their strong legs and long clawed toes, considerable damage can be done. Fights between cassowaries though are brief with few injuries.

The plumage of both sexes consists of glossy, black hair-like feathers that have two shafts. The facial skin is black. The neck is blue with red on the back. Telling the difference between the sexes can be difficult, but the female is usually larger and more brightly coloured. She is also more dominant than the male.

In the wild, cassowaries are solitary animals, each with their own territory. During breeding season (June – October) the female becomes more tolerant of males in her territory. After a few weeks a pair will form and the female will soon lay approximately four shiny green eggs in a scrape (nest) in the ground. The male will have lined the nest with grasses and leaves. It is then his role to incubate the eggs and raise the chicks. Incubation of the eggs lasts about two months after which the male spends about nine months raising the chicks. A female cassowary may mate with several males.

Cassowaries feed on seeds, leaves and fruits that they find in their rainforest habitat. Cassowaries at the Adelaide Zoo are fed pears, apples, bananas, tomatoes and apricots as well as the occasional cooked carrot and boiled egg.

Threats to Cassowaries include loss of habitat (most tropical rainforest in Queensland has already been cleared for agriculture) and the construction of roads into the surviving rainforest, which increases the number of Cassowaries killed by motorists. There are also concerns about the severity of recent hurricanes which have destroyed the Cassowaries' food source for periods of up to six months. The increased severity may be linked to climate change.

The conservation of the Double-wattled cassowary is important not only because it is an interesting and unique bird, but it is also an important part of the rainforest ecosystem. Cassowaries are seed dispersers of several hundred species of fruiting plants. They may prove to be the only seed dispersers of the larger fruiting species. Without cassowaries the rainforest ecosystems of Northern Queensland will be permanently altered for the worse.

