

Double-Wattled Cassowary

Casuarus casuarius

Head Ornament

One of the most distinctive features of the cassowary is the large growth on top of the head. The casque continues to grow throughout the bird's lifetime and can be up to six inches (cm) high. The casque helps protect the bird's head from the dense undergrowth as the cassowary moves through the forest and is also used like a shovel to push aside vegetation on the ground.

Seed Dispersers

Cassowaries are important seed-dispersers of more than 150 species of rainforest trees and plants. They swallow many fruits whole and the seeds pass through the bird's digestive system nearly intact. As cassowaries move through the forest they deposit the seeds in their dung far away from the original plant resulting in widespread dispersion of seeds that develop into new plants.

Classification

The double-wattled cassowary is also known as the southern cassowary, and also is referred to by some scientists with a subspecies name, *Casuarus casuarius johnsonii*. While the cassowary has a casque structure on top of its head, it is only distantly related to the hornbills (order: coraciiformes).

Class: Aves

Order: Casuariiformes

Family: Casuariidae

Genus: *Casuarus*

Species: *casuarius*

Distribution

The double-wattled cassowary is native to New Guinea, northern Australia and some of the eastern island groups of Indonesia.

Habitat

Double-wattled cassowaries inhabit rainforest and occasionally swampy forested areas, savanna forests, mangroves and fruit plantations.

Physical Description

- Adult cassowaries are five to six feet (1.5-1.8 m) tall.
- Males weigh 64-100 pounds (29-45 kg); females are larger weighing up to 128 pounds (58 kg).
- Their bodies are covered with glossy black feathers with the exception of the head and throat that are sparsely covered with coarse bright red and blue feathers.
- They have a helmet-like crest on top of their heads called a casque.
- They have brilliantly colored folds of skin called wattles hanging down from the neck.
- Their strong legs have three toes with sharp claws.
- The wings are extremely small and there are vestiges of primary flight feathers in the form of five or six long white spines.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: The majority of the double-wattled cassowary diet consists of fruit that has fallen from trees or fruit on low-hanging branches. They also eat fungi, seeds, insects, snails and small vertebrates.

At the zoo: Fed primarily fruit and a ratite pellet diet.

What Eats It?

Feral pigs and dogs prey on the young.

Social Organization

Cassowaries are generally solitary birds except for mating pairs and males with young. They are rarely seen since they are shy and live in dense forests.

Life Cycle

Cassowaries are not fully mature and capable of breeding until they are three to four years of age. Breeding occurs when food is most plentiful. The male initiates courtship when a female enters his territory. The smaller male must carefully approach the female because if she is not receptive she may become aggressive. After mating, the male makes a nest by lining a shallow hollow in the ground with leaves and grass. The female lays four to eight light green eggs in the well-camouflaged nest and then leaves to search for another male to mate with. The male incubates the eggs until they hatch after about 50 days. The newly hatched chicks are brown striped and are able to follow the male in search of food a few hours after

hatching. The male stays with the chicks for about nine months protecting them from predators and teaching them how to find food before they go off to establish their own territories. During the first year, the chicks lose their striped markings and molt into light brown feathers. Over the next two years, they molt into the black adult plumage, develop the distinctive red and blue coloration on the head and neck and develop the casque and wattles. Because these birds are so secretive, their lifespan in the wild is uncertain but they have lived 20-40 years in captivity.

Adaptations

Head Ornament

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Flightless and Fast

Double-wattled coassowaries have very small wings and are unable to fly. Like many other birds without functional wings, they have adapted other ways to get around and that aid in survival. Instead of flying they rely on their powerful legs for mobility and defense. These birds can be almost silent while moving slowly through the forest. When alarmed, they are capable of crashing through the forest at almost 31 mph (50 kilometers per hour), using the bony casques on the top of their head to push vegetation out of their way. Southern cassowaries are very good swimmers and are also good jumpers. Southern cassowaries are solitary and shy, but they can be aggressive and will occasionally attack humans using their powerful legs to lash out with their large claws.

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Conservation Connection

IUCN Status: Vulnerable

Cassowaries are listed as vulnerable due to loss of habitat. They need large areas of diverse forest that will supply continuous food sources throughout the year.

Fun Facts

- Although they are usually silent, cassowaries do emit a low booming sound that is a territorial or mating call.
- Cassowaries are flightless but can sprint at 30 mph and can jump five feet in the air.
- The double-wattled cassowary is the second heaviest bird in the world. Only the ostrich is heavier.