

CASSOWARIES (Map Ref 37)



LP, MP, LS, US



Cassowaries have a very distinctive 'helmet' which they use to crash their way through thick vegetation. This is useful for a bird which lives in the dense rainforest areas of North Queensland. It is because of the destruction of this rainforest that Cassowaries have become an endangered species.

Cassowaries are flightless birds. Whilst the Emu is the tallest bird in Australia, the Cassowary, on average, has a larger body size and weighs more. Cassowaries grow between 1.5 and 2 metres tall. The female is always larger than the male, more brightly coloured and usually more aggressive. It is unusual that it is the male Cassowaries which take care of the eggs once they have been laid. After laying, the female has nothing more to do with them. The males sit on the nest, incubating the eggs for two months. After they have hatched he continues to raise them alone for a further nine months. Females may mate with up to three different males and lay three different clutches of eggs within a single breeding season.

Cassowaries are known for their aggressive natures and have killed humans in the past. Even though they have sharp spurs on their feet, they will mostly use their helmet in defence, running at high speeds with their head down towards any threats.

Cassowaries play an important role in our environment. Many rainforest plants depend on the Cassowary to distribute their seeds. In particular, the Blue Quandong. The seeds of this tree are extremely large and are only able to be swallowed by Cassowaries. Without these birds, this tree would simply become extinct as it has no other way of spreading its seeds.

A1

Ask students to do the following...

Imagine an apple seed. Could you swallow it?

Imagine a watermelon seed. Could you swallow it?

Imagine an avocado seed. Could you swallow it?

Discuss the important role of Cassowaries in the rainforest and why only Cassowaries are able to fulfil this role - consider the size of the seed and the path it must take through Cassowaries bodies!



Give some suggestions to why Cassowaries have their bright colouring.

Discuss why emus & cassowaries may have adapted to become flightless birds, suggest some advantages of being a large flightless bird.

Try and think of any uses their small wings might still have.

- DARK PLUMAGE WITH AREAS OF BRIGHT COLOURATION - TO HELP CAMOFLAGE AMONGST RAINFOREST FOLIAGE AND FRUITS & FLOWERS.
- SMALL WINGS - NON-FUNCTIONAL, MAY BE OF SOME USE FOR COOLING BY FANNING. THEY ARE REMNANTS OF LARGER WINGS WHICH HAVE DISAPPEARED AS THE ANIMAL HAS EVOLVED, MUCH LIKE SPURS ON SNAKES (REMNANTS OF LEGS), AND SMALL TAILS ON KOALAS. LARGE WINGS WOULD NOT BE SUITABLE FOR A RAINFOREST DWELLER DUE TO THE DENSE FOLIAGE.