



CASSOWARY CONUNDRUM

photography BIANCA KEELEY & DAVID WRIGHT, BK FILMS

IN SPITE OF THEIR REPUTATION AS THE BAD BOYS OF THE BIRD WORLD, THE ENDANGERED SOUTHERN CASSOWARY DESPERATELY NEEDS OUR HELP.

As far as subject matter goes, filmmaker Bianca Keeley admits she probably couldn't have chosen a more difficult creature for her first solo documentary than the giant flightless endangered southern cassowary.

To start with, there aren't many of them. They occur only in far north Queensland and New Guinea and what limited research has been done on the ancient giant flightless birds with the brilliant neck display, dangling wattles and wild punk headdresses (casques) suggests the total Australian population is reduced to about 1500.

They are highly mobile, constantly foraging for the five kilos of fruit they need to eat each day. The rainforest, with its dense undergrowth and often swampy sections, is their natural habitat, which added to the complexity of filming.

"Rainforests may look beautiful, but they are truly nasty places to film in," Bianca adds. "There are no ticks, lice, leeches, mosquitoes or other biting insects that we are not closely familiar with. Cassowaries are also incredibly fast and will lose

you in an instant through thick, spiny vines when they've had enough of you. Fortunately, cameraman and co-director David Wright had immense patience and would spend hours following the birds through difficult terrain, lugging a very heavy HD camera, often in searing heat or torrential rain."

Persistence paid off and the hour-long documentary, *Cassowaries*, the former Queensland television reporter's first film for her own Australian production company, has recently been released on DVD. Bianca, who grew up in Darwin and spent a lot of time in the bush with her family, says it was a natural progression to move into making wildlife documentaries.

"I saw my first cassowary in the wild when I was visiting Mission Beach about 10 years ago," she says. "Then I travelled overseas, working in new and interactive media, and worked on some other people's wildlife documentaries. But my interest in cassowaries was never far away and it seemed natural that I should return to them when I came to make my own."

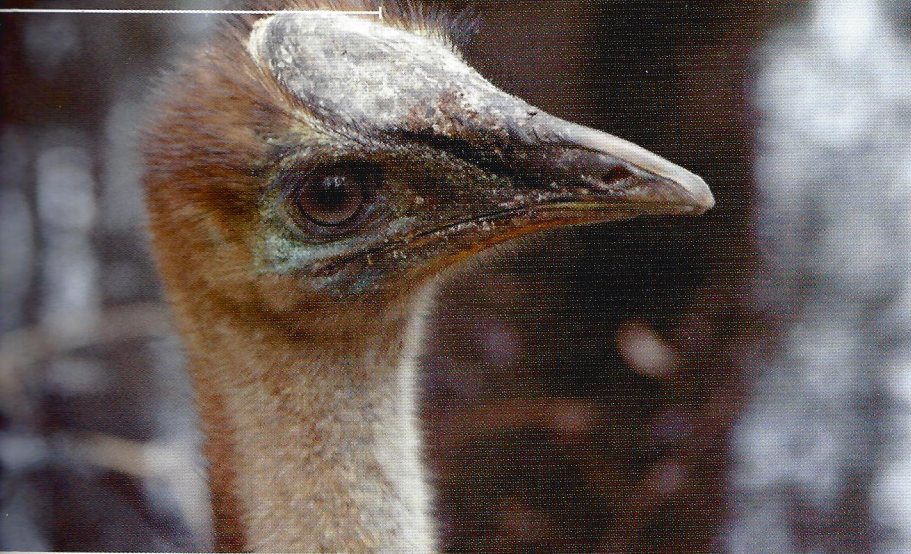


Clockwise from above:

Parks staff wore reinforced vests when they were capturing the cassowaries to relocate them after the cyclone devastated their habitat around Mission Beach; with their wild punk hairdos, brilliant neck displays and dagger-like claws in their feet the ancient birds have earned a reputation as the bad boys of the avian world.

The program she ended up making was a very different film from what she initially proposed. She'd successfully pitched a plan to make a film about a project that intended to radio-tag young cassowaries to learn more about their habits. But that all went out the window in March 2006 when Cyclone Larry hit the Queensland coast.

"The forest was trashed, all their food was gone and the cassowaries around Mission Beach were starving," Bianca recalls. "The people were becoming concerned about them wandering around the town and, all of a sudden, all the cassowaries' problems, the loss of their natural habitat, the threat of being run over on the road or attacked by dogs were drastically increased."

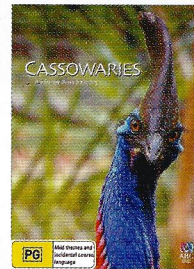


With narration from actor William McInnes, the plight of this threatened population dramatically unfolds as Bianca and her crew follow the fate of the birds for almost two years. The story begins with the cyclone and the devastated rainforest, then focuses on one particular family, following a father and his four young chicks from the moment they emerge from their bright green eggs until they are mature enough to become independent of his care after almost a year of intensive parenting.

"Cassowaries have this reputation for being killer birds," Bianca says. "Adult birds can weigh up to 85kg, they can swim across crocodile-infested waters, run at 40km/h, and they have this amazing weaponry of a huge dagger-like claw on their inside toes, which could certainly do a great deal of harm if they felt they were under attack. But in all the time I spent with them, particularly the family

we had so much to do with, I never once felt any aggression towards us. In fact, I vividly remember one day when we were filming. The dad was nonchalantly looking on completely unconcerned while the chicks picked insects off David's leg."

Between the birds themselves, however, the film crew witnessed amazing scenes of aggression, particularly at mating time. They also chronicled some very intimate moments with the dad and his family and also the moving tale of a mature female, Reggie. She is causing concern to Mission Beach residents with her constant hassling for food and frightening children by chasing them, and has to be relocated to another habitat. Next thing, however, she's back, with a mysterious illness that causes her to lose her plumage and baffles vets and parks and wildlife officers monitoring her progress. Unsure of whether or not she's suffering from stress from the cyclone, a hormone



Clockwise from top left: There are approximately 1500 cassowaries left in the wild in Australia; the male bird is a vigilant parent; the documentary runs for an hour; Bianca Keeley with a chick; the father stays with his chicks for their first year.

imbalance or a transmittable disease, her custodians have little choice but to put her in quarantine.

Almost three years down the track, Bianca reports that Reggie is still alive but still without feathers and still in quarantine. "It's very sad," she says. "But I hope that by telling her story we will raise awareness about how little is known about these magnificent birds. Unless something is done to protect them, their future is looking very bleak. They urgently need help."

Meanwhile, Bianca has many plans for future documentaries, but the most developed both involve animals with sharp teeth. "There seems to be a bit of theme developing there," she says. "Next time, however, I'd like to focus on an animal that sleeps a lot. Cassowaries are almost hyperactive and, as their day starts very early, so did ours. Maybe I'll make a film about sloths. It mightn't have much action, but at least I won't end up sleep deprived."

If you would like to help cassowaries, you can support the Mission Beach Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation. www.cassowaryconservation.asn.au



Cassowaries is available on HD DVD from ABC DVD. RRP \$19.95. 