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**Top:** When big birds do 'day care daddy', the results are surprisingly sensitive and appealing.

**Above left:** The amazing cassowary stare begins early.

**Above right:** Traffic is a danger in built-up areas.

**Main photo:** The few remaining fragments of lowland rainforest in the Wet Tropics are vitally important cassowary habitat.

Many smaller birds are popular with backyard wildlife enthusiasts – visible, sometimes colourful, often active in daylight. Then there are cassowaries.

In parts of north Queensland, where roads and residences cut into their rainforest habitat, southern cassowaries (*Casuarius casuarius johnsonii*) will occasionally visit backyards. At up to 1.8m and 80kg, with a pale casque, iridescent blue neck, red wattles and powerful legs, these are visible, colourful, remarkable birds and yet – they are being overlooked in seriously important ways. **Bianca Keeley** talks to WAM about the endangered subjects of her documentary *Cassowaries*.

**After more than two years working on the documentary, what is your abiding impression of cassowaries?**

The first time I saw a cassowary, I was absolutely captivated. They have huge, long eyelashes and can look almost goofy from one angle, yet from another angle, they'll look as intimidating as a dinosaur from *Jurassic Park*.

However, what I really love is the way the father brings up the chicks. He is so sensitive and doting, worrying about them scurrying off or trying to eat something too big. Such tender, dainty, protective movements from this big father bird.

Cassowaries often get a bad rap in the media, portrayed as dangerous killers. So to watch the father caring for his chicks – it's lovely to see cassowaries in that light. It surprises lots of people. Sometimes you almost forget they're a bird. They have very individual personalities. The documentary includes episodes of youngsters playing just for the joy of play.

**Do cassowaries really show up as backyard wildlife?**

Yes. Humans like to live in tropical paradises and in coastal north Queensland, you have tracts of tropical rainforest. Some is protected, but residential developments are eating away at the edges of unprotected forest. You can see cassowaries coming out of the forest. Their territories are being fragmented, and cassowaries are territorial. They continue to travel their regular routes, even though a house or road has appeared. They'll feed in native gardens and also eat commercial fruit that people are growing. I've even heard of cassowaries raiding dog and cat food bowls.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BIANCA KEELEY

# The bigguys

### Is there a problem with that?

It can create deadly situations for the birds, especially if people feed them. Often, people do so for admirable reasons – they like the birds, they want to help them – without realising the consequences. Feeding attracts cassowaries into danger – suburbia is no place for a big, flightless bird. Quite a few are killed by dogs, and not all drivers are careful about cassowaries, so roads are often fatal.

### Is there enough rainforest for cassowaries?

That's a tough question and the answer is, we don't really know. In fact, it's surprising how little we do know about their biology, distribution, and habitat. It's an endangered animal – there could be as few as 1500 in Australia – and insufficient habitat is one reason. When the chicks grow up, is there enough territory for them? Again, we don't know, but the birds are certainly in trouble and need our help before it is too late.

### Could they be relocated to less built-up locations?

Relocating is difficult. When Cyclone Larry came through the area (in 2006), it destroyed a lot of food sources, which increased the number of hungry birds coming into urban areas. That upped the danger, both to people and to the birds, so Parks and Wildlife decided to relocate some birds. Even with an animal sedated, it still took three grown men to manage it. And unless you completely survey an area to check the resources and what other cassowaries are living there, it's hard to know if relocation will be successful. You don't want more birds in an area than it can support.

Part of the problem is connectivity. You don't want to isolate populations. They need a water source, enough fruiting trees, safety from feral dogs. Lowland rainforest is prime habitat but 80 percent has been cleared and there's a big highway between lowland and upland rainforest. We don't know how many cassowaries are in the upland habitat and even if the ones on the hills are doing OK, 1500 overall is still not many. In places where urban development meets rainforest, what we need to do is revegetate and reconnect as much as possible.

### While you were making the documentary, what did you notice about how people respond to cassowaries?

It's a complete spectrum. Residents in the area adore them, and they're high on the list of 'must sees' for tourists. People



Relocation has been used as a short-term response to situations such as the devastation wrought by Cyclone Larry, but it is unlikely to be a long-term solution.



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*Cassowaries are ratites, part of a group of winged but flightless birds which includes emus, ostriches and rheas as well as the kiwi and extinct moa of New Zealand. Partly due to their size, they are significant dispersers of rainforest seeds.*

are fascinated that dad incubates the eggs and looks after the chicks for nine months. Superdad. There's lots of local affection.

However, as I travelled around Australia – for example, to Melbourne to edit the documentary – I was stunned by the number of people who have never heard of cassowaries. Lots of people don't realise they are endangered.

Often, when making a nature documentary, you work with scientists doing research in the area. At the time we were filming, there were no scientists doing fieldwork on cassowaries. It was difficult.

### Did you ever feel as though you were 'walking with dinosaurs'?

As far as fossil links, nothing has been traced, but rainforests aren't great places for preserving fossils. However, there seems to be little doubt now that birds evolved from dinosaurs. There's been some research into the booming calls of cassowaries and how that might relate to some of the duck-billed dinosaur species which have similar casques. Cassowaries have been likened to velociraptors because of the spikes on their feet. And they have that amazing stare that goes right through you. You don't want to get into fantasyland too much, but – there must be a link.

### How did you get along with the cassowaries you were filming?

We filmed a lot of birds, but the central story follows one father and his chicks. We spent a lot of time with them and became part of their environment. They would ignore us and



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*Male cassowaries incubate the eggs, then spend up to a further nine months protecting and caring for their young. After all this effort, is there enough rainforest for young cassowaries in search of new territory? We don't really know.*

we could capture their behaviour. Once, when David the cameraman was filming two chicks, the third came around to examine him. When the film site was ridden with mosquitoes, the chick would pick mozzies off David's leg.

However, they are wild. They cannot be handled. We were careful not to get between the father and his chicks – he was incredibly protective when they were small. He would let the chicks approach us, but we knew when to back off. We had to be respectful.

Even though the fathers are so gentle with their chicks, I've seen cassowary interactions that looked incredibly violent. I watched a male approach a female during mating season. She was ferocious – charged him and gave him the hiding of his life. Then, after a while, he was back again.

**How can we help cassowaries?**

If you live in cassowary territory, don't let your dog roam free. If you don't have a dog, consider leaving your property unfenced – it makes it easier for cassowaries to move around. Revegetate cleared properties. Plant local natives.

If you don't live in a cassowary area, you can still support them. Join a group like C4 (Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation, [www.cassowaryconservation.asn.au](http://www.cassowaryconservation.asn.au)). Write to the state and federal environment ministers to voice your concern.

One of the biggest problems is that people aren't paying enough attention. We need PhD students and scientists out doing fieldwork. Research is not being funded. We need to make the effort to protect these birds, and if we're going to save an endangered species, we need to know a lot more about it so we can do it properly.



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*While making the documentary, the film crew were careful and respectful with the wild animals. However, that did not stop young cassowaries from indulging in a bit of curiosity.*

Passionate wildlife advocate **BIANCA KEELEY** grew up in Australia and has worked both in Australia and internationally in journalism and film/TV. She runs her own Australia-based production company, BK Films ([www.bk-films.com](http://www.bk-films.com)) and is the producer and director of *Cassowaries*.

*Cassowaries* (BK Films, 2008, 52 minutes, narrated by William McInnes) is available on DVD at ABC shops and centres and leading DVD retailers. See p3 for WAM's special *Cassowaries* DVD offer.

