

## ***Spotlight – Meet the world's largest bird***

In this week's spotlight we are featuring one of the most important birds in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It is none other than the humble flightless cassowary. For those of you who do not know anything about Cassowaries, this week you will learn about them. Cassowaries are large flightless birds most closely related to the emu. Emu is taller but cassowary is the heaviest of the two birds. Cassowaries are native to the tropical forests of New Guinea, Aru Islands, and northeastern Australia.

The 'Tok Pisin' name for cassowary is 'Muruk'. The term Cassowary seems to have originated from the Papuan language, *kasu* which means horned and *weri* meaning head, referring to its helmeted head. The juvenile cassowaries are pale brown, with dark brown stripes then pale brown. The adults have glossy black with bright blue and red necks.

In PNG there are three known species of cassowaries. The dwarf cassowary (*Casuarius bennetti*), the northern or single-wattled cassowary (*Casuarius unappendiculatus*), and the southern or double-wattled cassowary (*Casuarius casuarius*). These 3 species are also found in West Papua, Indonesia with one or two subspecies that are yet to be recognised. PNG shares the Island of New Guinea with its next door neighbour in the west and PNG in the East. Both countries share many species of animals and plants, both on land and in the seas across this Island with its satellite Islands such as New Britain, Manus, New Ireland in the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville.

Of the three cassowaries, the dwarf cassowary is the smallest and is 1 to 1.8 meters tall. It is the only one that does not have a **wattle** (a tiny string bag-like free fleshy extension of skin that hangs down from the throat) unlike the other two species. In place of a wattle, it has a round purple spot with bright pink spots on its cheeks. Its casque is black and triangular in shape, and is flattened at the back (see figure 2). It can leave large three toed footprints on the forest floor or where soil is muddy and wet. Its faecal mounds are like vomit full of fruit stones or lumps of fleshy fruit wastes. It is regarded as one of the most important fruit and seed dispersers in any forest.

The dwarf cassowary inhabits high mountainous areas from lower montane forest at 1,300m asl to mid montane forests at 3,600m. It is endemic to New Guinea and PNG shares this species with West Papua – Indonesia (NG), and is distributed along the central New Guinea cordillera; stretching from Alotau in Milnebay Province on mainland PNG across to Manokwari, at the Birds head peninsula in West Papua. It is also present on the Huon Peninsula, and on the Island of New Britain.

In the wild, the dwarf cassowary feeds on fruits, nuts, seeds and insects mainly grubs, ants, cicadas, and others. Yes, they drink fresh water every day and also take a bath too in the streams. When kept in captivity from juvenile stages, its diet is modified. It feeds on starchy foods as cooked kaukau, potato and pumpkin; and all types of fruits as pawpaw, banana, water melon and so many other fruits. It also eats manufactured food items too, such as bread pieces, flour balls, and cooked rice.

All three species of Cassowaries' are very important to the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea. They are wild but can also be looked after as pet animals when they are in their juvenile stages. They can be hunted for food, their feathers, as gifts to relatives, exchanged as dowries/ bride price in marriages, luscious feathers can be weaved into head dresses as traditional regalia, weaved into strings to make string bags, claws can be furnished into necklaces, leg bones can be chiselled into daggers and knives for use in family homes. They can also be kept in enclosures in villages as a show of status; and for all its valuable traditional uses too.



**Figure 1:** Distribution of Dwarf Cassowary in New Guinea (Pratt, T & Beehler, B, 2015).



**Figure 2:** The Dwarf Cassowary kept in an enclosure at the Natural Science Resource Centre (NSRC), University of Papua New Guinea. Photo: Singadan, R. K (2022).

### References

- Brian J.Coates; P.S William. 2001. Birds of New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago. A Photographic Guide. Dove Publications, Queensland, Australia.
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