

Flightless Birds – featuring 2 offerings from Tony Statham (Cassowaries) and Carol Mitchell (Emus) PLUS a recent Australia Post issue

Cassowaries - The Genus Casuariidae

Tony Statham

The Cassowaries, not to be confused with the Curassows, are very large, flightless, three-toed, terrestrial birds with long necks and long legs. Their nearest relatives are the Emus with both families being among the oldest found exclusively in Australasia. The two families are considered to have had a common ancestor with characteristics allied to the Ostrich, Rheas and other Ratites.

There are only three species of Cassowary extant although many sub-species (often from domesticated stock) have been considered. The Southern Cassowary found in New Guinea and Northern Queensland is the largest measuring up to 170 cm (about six feet) and weighing as much as 58kg, only second in this ranking below the Ostriches of Africa. The Northern and Dwarf Cassowaries are confined to New Guinea and a couple of off-shore islands.



Southern Cassowary - also known as the Double-Wattled Cassowary

As shown on the first three stamps illustrated left, the bare skin parts on the head and neck are highly coloured in various shades of red, orange, blue, purple, yellow and white and feature wattles (skin flaps) as well as a prominent casque or helmet which protrudes from the top of the head. These characteristics are common in both the Southern and Northern Cassowaries but are absent or less defined in the Dwarf species.



There has been much debate about the function of the casque but it appears it is used to assist the birds' passage through dense undergrowth (protecting the head) and also to forage in leaf litter when searching for food.

The plumage is very hard and coarse and believed to be another adaptation to protect the birds from thorns, sharp leaves and humidity in their rain forest habitat.

Cassowaries are very difficult to observe in the wild and tend to be solitary except in the breeding season; like Emus, the male takes charge of the eggs and chicks. Their ability to kick out with razor sharp claws

makes them a dangerous adversary if threatened although they are usually shy.

They have had a long association with mankind both in tribal myths and legends but also as a source of food and for ornaments. All three species are mainly frugivorous but will also eat fungi, small vertebrates, snails and some insects. While none are globally threatened, loss of natural habitat is a major threat as the birds require extensive rain forest to provide a high diversity of fruiting plants.



Dwarf Cassowary (above)



Northern Cassowary (right)

Cassowaries prefer extensive expanses of rain forest especially if relatively free from human disturbance and tend to avoid competition by means of altitudinal segregation.

The commonest species, the Southern Cassowary, usually lives at medium altitudes favouring dense tropical forest whereas the Northern species tends to inhabit riverine and coastal swamp forest; the Dwarf Cassowary by contrast favours montane forest at higher altitudes up to 3000 metres above sea level.



Dwarf Cassowary



Southern Cassowary (aka Double-wattled)

There are less than thirty stamps depicting Cassowaries and most of these show the Southern, the most familiar species.

Inevitably, about a dozen are shown on stamps from African countries but the Cassowaries domicile of Papua New Guinea accounts for another dozen. As shown above, two of these also share space with relatives in the form of Kiwis, while a few



Southern Cassowary chicks

depict the rather plainly coloured chicks of the Southern. I am grateful as always for the source of much of this material from the Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 1.

Tony Statham

Flightless Bird Issue from Australia

The first stamp illustrated in Tony's article was part of a 'Flightless Birds' 3 value set issued on 7th May 2019 by Australia Post. The stamp and product design was by Sharon Rodziewicz, and featured 2 other stamps: a 1\$ Emu (featured in the next article) and 2.30\$ Little Penguin. Other philatelic material available in the offering are: a stamp



pack (below); A self adhesive booklet featuring 5x 2.30\$ Little Penguin; 3x Maxi cards; 3x Postcards and a First Day Cover.



Flightless Birds (2)

GOING DUTCH

From drifting over vast oceans, soaring on warm thermals, dipping to feed on unsuspecting small fry, we go from the sublime to the ridiculous; from the graceful, floating Cahow to the bizarre, earth-bound 'Fast-footed New Hollander'.



Dromaius novaehollandiae – the Emu.

The name of New Holland was first applied to Australia in 1644 by the Dutch seafarer Abel Tasman who showed his patriotism by reflecting his country's love of exploration to the new land. Mind you, he was not wholly altruistic as he named Ricky Ponting's little island for himself!! The Dutch were also the first Europeans to record the bird in 1696. The '*Dromaius*' is from a Greek word meaning 'racer' (Probably they had the sense to run as fast as they could away from predatory man!!)

Other Europeans settled on the east coast in the 1780s and British settlement in Sydney as a colony prompted the formal claim to New South Wales. Strangely, and probably uniquely, we Brits did not have to pillage and fight our way to overall possession as the Dutch did not settle in the land as they, as a nation, preferred South Africa, Dutch Guyana and the Dutch East and West Indies.

In a 1789 book '*The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*', (presumably some poor bloke had to draw the short straw of corralling the varmints sent as convicts to the colonies), its author, Arthur Phillips, described the bird under the name of the 'New Holland Cassowary'. However, a year later a renowned ornithologist, John Latham, corrected the misnomer of Cassowary to Emu.



**Australia
Definitive 1942
SG 208**

He had collaborated on the original book and his subsequent research work was based on a specimen from the Sydney basin. Latham was also responsible for providing both the first descriptions and the names of many Australian Bird species.

The Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*)

Carol Mitchell

The entymology of the name 'Emu' is uncertain but it is believed to have derived from the Arabic for 'large bird' and later used by Portuguese explorers to describe the related Cassowary. An associated theory is that it comes from actual Portuguese word '*ema*' which was used to denote a bird similar to an ostrich or crane.

Not surprisingly, given the sheer size of Australia, the native Aboriginal words vary according to where the tribes had their homelands; in the state of Victoria, it was known as '*barrimal*' in the Dja Dja Wurrung language, '*myoure*' in Gunai and '*courn*' in Jardwadjali. Two tribes which inhabited the Sydney area of New South Wales were the Eora and Darug who called them '*murawung*' and '*birabayin*' respectively.

The Emu is an integral element in the beliefs, culture and traditions of the Aboriginal peoples. A key creation myth relates that an Emu spirit which lived in heaven looked down to see the newborn earth. She felt that it was too beautiful to be only illuminated by starlight so she tossed one of her eggs into the sky

and pierced it with her beak. The golden yolk which cascaded across the sky became the earth's first sunrise.

The folklore of Arrernte tribe of Central Australia includes a sorcerer known as the Kurdaitcha man who is said to wear sandals of Emu feathers to mask his footprints. He needs to be careful as he is the avenger of the deceased in the ritual of killing the dead person's enemy.

The sandals are a thick pad of feathers matted with the arm blood of a young male of the tribe and bound together by human hair plucked from the living.



Cuba 1984 MS3032



Australia SG 1024

When not in use, these are regarded as so evil that they are hidden from the women and children of the tribe. (Hopefully buried far away from habitation as the pong could cause a myriad of deaths all by itself!!).

A Western Australian legend is somewhat less gory but still involves damage to a human – it holds that a man once annoyed a small bird which responded by hurling a boomerang at its attacker. This severed the arms of the man and transformed him into the flightless Emu.

In the southern hemisphere anyone lucky enough to have a 'dark sky' is able to see some of the galactic dust lanes in the Milky Way which are thought to resemble an Emu. A painting and a gigantic photograph of this feature have both won prestigious awards in Australia.

Whilst the Emu is always regarded as Australia's national bird, it has never been formally designated as such by the government but both the Emu and the Red Kangaroo feature on the Australian coat of arms (Liberia SG 784, below).



It is reputed that these two creatures were chosen because they are unable to walk backwards and so are symbolic of a young nation moving forwards which is reflected in the national anthem of 'Advance Australia Fair'.

Unsurprisingly, the Emu is depicted on a plethora of Australian stamps from 1913 to the present day although the oldest portrayal is from New South Wales as an official stamp of 1879 (NSW SG O40, below).



Flightless Birds (3)

The Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*)

Carol Mitchell

The poor bird has even suffered the indignity of being ridden by Mickey Mouse (Grenada SG1824, below).



At the time of European settlement, two different species of Emu existed but, as ever, man managed to make the dwarf species, which lived only on offshore islands, become extinct so it is only the mainland species which remains. Fortunately, the IUCN categorise this Emu as of Least Concern with some three quarters of a million Emus strutting around the outback feeding on whatever they can find in the way of seeds, fruit, flowers plus lots of insects and even small invertebrates. Then, for dessert, they have to swallow stones to grind the food in the gizzard.

The conformation of the Emu makes it one of the tallest, longest and heaviest of all birds. At 75 inches tall and 65 inches bill to tail it is only exceeded by the Ostrich which, with the Cassowary, is also heavier – the Emu actually weighs slightly more than the Emperor Penguin. The ‘fast-footed New Hollander’ does have more toes than the Ostrich, three as opposed to its African counterpart’s two (Kenya SG460, below) and the normal stride of a yard stretches into 9 feet at full pelt at around 30 m.p.h.



Those toes with their sharp claws are around six inches in length and can inflict severe damage when the Emu gets upset. In this specie, the female is definitely deadlier than the male. During courtship in December and January the females fight each other for access to a mate and, if the male already has a partner, that female will chase, kick and claw her rivals with some fights lasting up to five hours – serious

stuff!!

Large bird = large egg, between 1lb to 1½lbs and a clutch of five to fifteen green eggs some five inches long. These are laid in a shallow, vegetation-lined depression on the ground. Incubation lasts about eight weeks and the newly hatched chicks have distinctive stripes for camouflage which they lose after five to six months although they only develop full adult plumage when 15 months old. Mrs Emu strikes one for Women’s Lib (or perhaps she is just exhausted after all those unladylike battles) as the male nurtures both eggs and chicks.

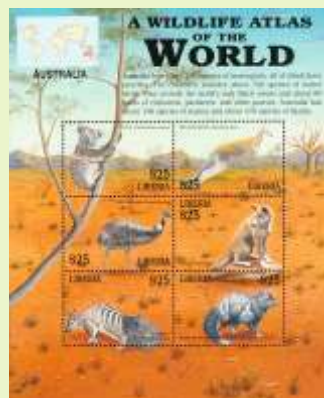


Australia 1994 SG 1371

At point of lay, the eggs are a pale green but they turn dark green during the incubation period although, if the egg does not hatch, it will go white from the sun’s bleaching effect. The unsuccessful eggs can be blown and Emu-egg carving, an art form practised by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, has been an important vehicle for recording histories of places and traditions. Many painted and carved examples are displayed in Australian museums, some from the early 19th century with elaborate silver holders – just like an eggcup.

Liberia
A Wildlife
Atlas of
the World

2001
SG 4387 -
4392



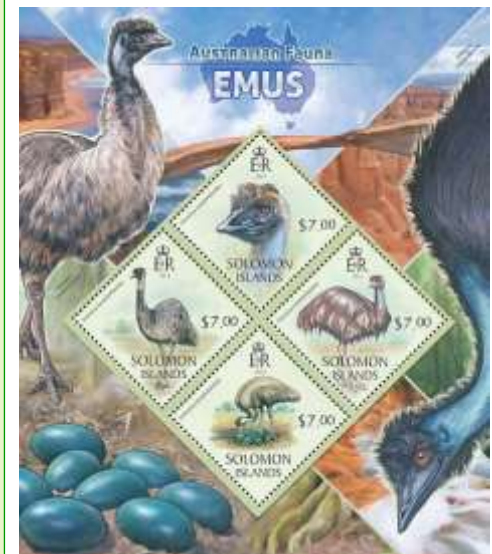
So, the next time you crack an egg and look at the rich colour of the yolk, think of the Lady Emu giving the world its sunrise and, perhaps, just perhaps, that is why we eat eggs at breakfast early in the morning.



UN (Vienna) Melbourne 2017 (above)
Sao Tome & Principe 2016 (below)



Solomon Islands 2013



My thanks to Tony, and Carol (for the articles) and Steven Ardron for the Australia Post details Ed