

Video Footage of Southern Cassowary Laying an Egg

Using surveillance cameras, keepers at Edinburgh Zoo have managed to capture rare footage of their female southern cassowary Sydney laying an egg. The cameras were placed in the birds' nesting site when they started to show promising breeding behaviour. Edinburgh Zoo was the first collection in the UK to successfully breed southern cassowaries in 1986.

Listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, successful breeding would be an important achievement for Edinburgh Zoo as it has been twenty-seven years since the Zoo had cassowary chicks. In 1986, Edinburgh Zoo was the first collection in the UK to successfully breed southern cassowaries.

This year is the first time ten-year-old Sydney has allowed her male companion Billy to share her enclosure since he arrived at the Zoo in 2005. The cassowaries started to show promising breeding signs after being placed together in April. Despite their terrifying reputation, Billy and Sydney showed their tender side and were often spotted eating from the same bunch of grapes. A nest site was constructed for the lovebirds and they both showed interest in the area before the first egg was laid last month.

There are currently 6 eggs in the nest, which are incubated, not by mum, but by potential father Billy. While keepers are uncertain if successful mating did occur and if the eggs are fertile, this is an enormous step forward in the breeding programme for this pair.

Any potential chicks will hatch around August and Billy will continue to take sole responsibility of them.

Breeding this species is particularly difficult due to their highly aggressive nature. Keepers are very rarely in the

enclosure at the same time as the birds and only then with large boards as protection, as cassowaries are renowned for their large, dagger-like claws and powerful high-kicks that can prove fatal.

Colin Oulton, Team Leader for Birds at Edinburgh Zoo, comments: "Cassowary eggs are amongst the largest of all bird eggs, measuring around 15cm long by 10cm wide. Usually egg fertility is checked through candling; however cassowary eggs are unable to be candled as the light cannot penetrate the thick green eggshell. Their incubation period is around 56 days, so we will just have to wait and see if any hatch out. As this is Billy's first clutch we want to assess his natural parenting skills, so plan to let him incubate naturally, rather than remove the eggs to an incubator."

Southern cassowaries are the third-largest bird, behind the ostrich and the emu and are easily recognised by their jet black plumage, azure blue neck and impressive horn-like helmet on the crown of their head. Also known as double-wattled cassowaries, they are distinguishable from the north cassowary and dwarf cassowary by the two wattles of bright red skin that hang down from the throat. They are native to New Guinea and Queensland, Australia with between 10,000 and 20,000 birds remaining in the wild. Habitat loss, hunting and predation by dogs are the biggest threats the species faces.