

JUNGLE EXPLORER

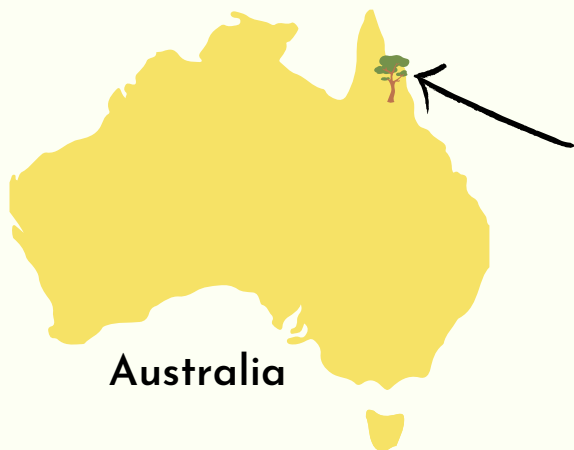


BY THE LITERACY COMPANY



Take the trip of a lifetime and step back 180 million years into the mists of time. Come with me to explore the world's oldest tropical rainforest. There will be spectacular river rafting, tremendous treetop walks and a fascinating ancient culture. Are you brave enough to join our jungle journey?

Let me introduce you to our guide, Kim. He's from the *Kuku Yalanji* people of the *Daintree* forest in *Queensland, Australia* (time for the map, I think).



Australia



His ancestors have lived here for thousands of years and, if you're lucky, he might tell you a Dreamtime story or show you how to make some of his fabulous art. Taking visitors around this special environment is Kim's job and he loves it.

At the visitor centre by the river, we get ready for the trip. We listen to a talk about how important ecotourism is and how our money helps to pay for conservation. We must learn all about the rainforest so we can respect and protect it. Our guide checks us over. Have we got our binoculars, insect spray and strong shoes? There's a row of floating wooden rafts bobbing gently by the shore. We step carefully down onto ours and let the magnificent Daintree river take us on a tour of one of the natural wonders of the world. Here we go...



We push off and immediately begin to glide down the river. There are four rafts in our group with two people on each one.



After a while, Kim stops paddling and asks us all to lie back carefully and relax. We close our eyes and listen to the sound of the rainforest. In the lush, green canopy above us, there's a cacophony of warbles, whistles and trills, chirps, squawks, shrieks and screeches from all the different species.



Suddenly, Kim points ahead and whispers to us to slowly sit up, keeping our hands and feet away from the edge. There are V-shaped ripples on the river. Coming straight towards us, a rough, greenish-grey snout is ploughing through the water followed by two beady eyes. The rest is hidden underwater, but the gently swaying tail at the end tells us it's a huge crocodile. We stay very still. The croc isn't really interested in us. He's just curious. We watch him nervously as, at the last moment, he steers to the bank and climbs out on his short but very strong legs. He stretches to his full 6 metres and yawns, showing us 68 deadly teeth! Kim says he's the biggest of around 70 saltwater crocodiles in the area.

Top 5 Saltwater Crocodile facts

1. Crocodiles are the biggest reptiles on the planet, the females are around 3 metres long and the males can be up to 6 metres!



2. They are extremely territorial and usually win in a fight. Luckily, they are used to visitors.



3. It is important never to swim or even stand near water where there are crocodiles as they are sneaky predators who love to eat crabs, fish and any birds that come too close. They are hard to see when they are camouflaged in the green and brown waters.

4. In the past, these beautiful creatures were hunted for their skins and for food and because people were afraid of them. The species almost did not survive.

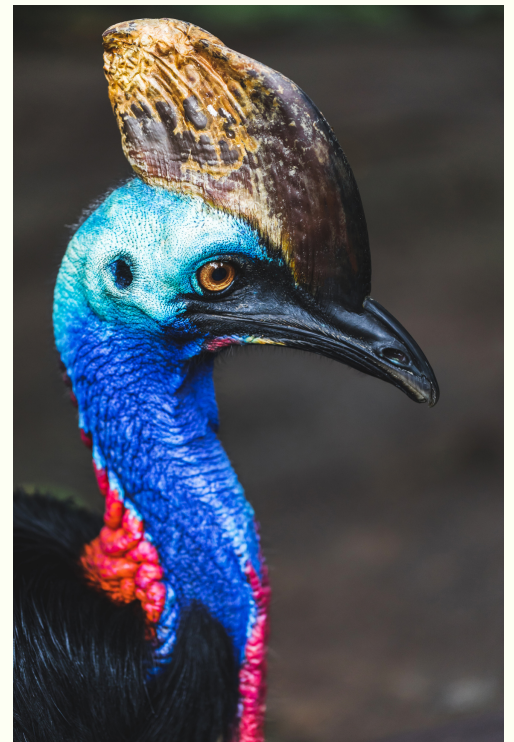
5. The crocodiles are now protected by the people who manage the Daintree rainforest.



We arrive at a little wooden jetty where we leave the rafts for a jungle walk. We are told to stick to the boardwalk path that snakes off into the distance. Kim leads us deep into the jungle's shadows where the trees' trunks are the biggest I've ever seen. They are covered in twisted brown vines with flowers popping up between. Clouds of bright butterflies appear, fluttering upwards in beams of sunlight. Kim explains that there are more than 230 different types of butterfly in the forest. He points out the famous, bright blue Ulysses resting on a leaf. We see another one so large it could almost be mistaken for a bird. With shimmering green and black wings, it is a birdwing butterfly, one of Australia's biggest.



We walk behind Kim who waves his hand to stop us. My friends' voices fade away as something comes crashing desperately through the understorey. It's an enormous bird. It pulls up short in surprise when it sees us. Like an overgrown turkey, the bird's bright blue head is topped with a bony, pointed helmet. We recognise it's a cassowary. Thankfully, it quickly turns and clatters back the way it came. We breathe a sigh of relief! A cornered cassowary can be dangerous and it can easily outrun any of us.

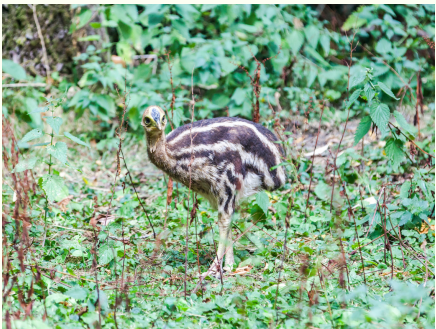


Top 5 Cassowary facts



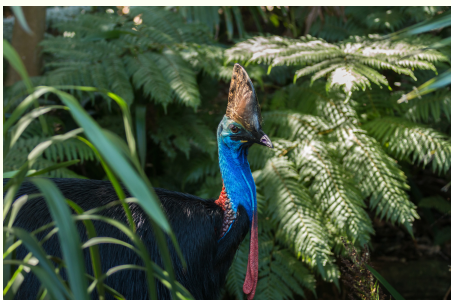
1. Cassowaries are an endangered species. One of their biggest threats is from cars as they wander onto the roads at night and are sometimes hit.

2. A fully-grown adult bird can be more than two metres tall.



3. When the chicks hatch, it is the male cassowary who looks after them. Sometimes he stays with them for over a year.

4. They like to live alone and will defend their patch by stretching their necks, flapping and making a rumbling noise to see off intruders. They have long, dagger-like claws which they can use in a fight.



5. These large birds enjoy eating a variety of fruit, acorns, insects and eggs when they can get them.



Kim leads us between towering ferns to the base of a tree. Strung between the very tops of the trees are rope walkways. Before we start our treetop walk, we look at the tree we're about to climb. The Daintree forest is home to many different kinds of plants and trees found nowhere else on the planet, some of them have been around so long they are known as 'green dinosaurs'.

In many parts of the world, they are disappearing fast as they are cut down to make furniture or the land is cleared for grazing cattle and growing crops. The one we're about to climb is a yellow mahogany over 30 metres high. It's an important habitat for a wonderful variety of tropical frogs, beetles, spiders, snakes and lizards.



We're on a beetle hunt! Up we go, breathless and hot, higher and higher with the treetops swaying above us. Looking closely, we zoom in on the trunk where there's a cluster of orchids. Sitting quietly in the flowers, is a brightly coloured longhorn beetle with enormous, waving antennae and a wing case of black and orange lace. We watch carefully as he opens his hard shell like the doors of a racing car and reveals a tightly folded second pair which he slowly unfurls. In no hurry at all, he takes to the air and flies off to a less crowded spot.

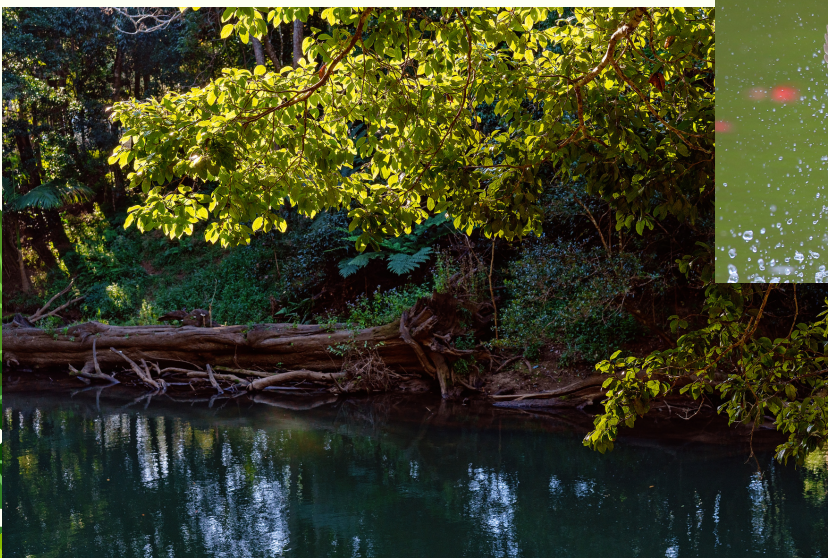
Finally, we've reached the viewing platform. It's steamy up here but we all squeeze in to catch a glimpse of some forest tree-dwellers. We peer through the branches but none of us can see a thing. Kim tells us to look harder and suddenly a little face appears. Its fur is brown but before we can blink, it's gone. Was it a striped possum or a rare tree kangaroo? Who knows? Maybe we'll be luckier on the riverbank. There's a family of duck-billed platypus living nearby and we all agree that it would be a dream to see one.

Top 5 Platypus facts

1. Duck-billed platypus are not only rare but also very shy and come out when it's getting dark so you are not likely to see one.
2. Platypus are mammals but they also lay eggs! Platypus and echidnas are the only animals that do this.
3. It's not correct to say 'duck-billed' because the platypus' nose is actually a leathery snout and not a hard beak like a bird.
4. This amazing creature is not only an excellent swimmer, with handy webbed feet, but also lives happily on land.
5. They get all their food from the water, in the rivers and streams where they live. To enjoy a tasty meal of insects, shellfish and worms they also need gravel to help them break the food into pieces.



The tour is over. We make our way back to the raft, sticking to the walkway (no-one wants to come across a snake or step on a spider now). We take a long look back into the magical green darkness as we push away, keeping our eyes peeled for the platypus or that sneaky crocodile's snout! A paradise kingfisher flits past as we move silently back down the river.



**We've left nothing but footprints
and have taken away a
pocketful of memories.**