

A cassowary land bridge is being built over the Bruce Highway at Smiths Gap on the range between El Arish and Tully, as part of a highway upgrade to install an overtaking lane. Smiths Gap is the bottleneck of the Walter Hill Range wildlife corridor which connects Australia's densest cassowary population, at Mission Beach, with the core World Heritage Area rainforests west of the Bruce Highway. The new overtaking lane and land bridge will make it safer for both drivers and wildlife. Cassowaries are an endangered species, with vehicle strike the leading recorded cause of cassowary deaths.

What's a land bridge?

- Land bridges are built above roads, as wildlife overpasses that connect habitat either side of the road.
- They are landscaped with soil and native plants to make them attractive to wildlife.
- Fencing helps to channel wildlife towards the bridge and away from the road.
- Wildlife bridges operate successfully elsewhere in Australia and internationally, overcoming the problem of roads cutting through major wildlife corridors.

Why in this location?

- Smith's Gap has long been identified by governments, scientists and the Cassowary Recovery Team as one of the most important areas in Far North Queensland to restore wildlife corridors. Corridors enable gene flow and healthy wildlife populations.
- A southbound overtaking lane is being added to the Bruce Highway at Smiths Gap, making it even harder for cassowaries to move through this cassowary corridor.
- Within Smiths Gap, the bridge could only be built where there were large blocks of State Government land (in this case national parks) on both sides of the road.

How many cassowaries are there at Smiths Gap?

- There are significant cassowary habitats and populations either side of the highway. But the highway, other infrastructure and cuttings are a barrier to cassowary movement.
- Cassowary conditions continue to improve in the Smiths Gap area, with many organisations and landholders working together to increase and connect habitat through tree-planting, weed management and conservation agreements.

How will cassowaries know the land bridge is there?

- New fencing on either side of the highway will encourage cassowaries to use either the land bridge or a wildlife crossing under Maria Creek bridge to the north.
- Cassowaries are naturally curious animals. They've already been seen at both ends of the land bridge site, watching the construction activities.
- Queensland Parks and Wildlife staff are making sure the native vegetation in the national park on both sides of the bridge is in prime condition for cassowary access.

What about the railway line?

- The land bridge doesn't go over the railway line on the highway's western side.
- There have been no recorded cassowary deaths from being hit by a train, and cassowaries have been seen crossing the rail line safely.
- There are a couple of trains each day, compared to the thousands of vehicles on the highway in a 100kph zone.

What about crossing under Maria Creek bridge?

- Multiple crossing points are needed in national wildlife corridors where there are major barriers such as a national highway.
- Main Roads and Queensland Rail are already improving connectivity under Maria Creek bridge to the north. Main Roads' fencing funnels cassowaries to both the land bridge and Maria Creek. However, crossing under Maria Creek bridge isn't always possible in our wet seasons.

How will we know if cassowaries use the land bridge?

- Motion-sensing cameras will be permanently installed on the land bridge to record cassowary and other wildlife movements.
- The Cassowary Recovery Team will receive annual cassowary crossing data and will publicise the results.

Why is government investing in the land bridge?

- The Australian and Queensland governments recognise that Smiths Gap is the bottleneck in a nationally significant wildlife corridor. The \$30.7M project – a southbound overtaking lane and fauna crossing – is fully funded by the Australian Government under the Bruce Highway Overtaking Lane Program and constructed by Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads.
- The national guideline for significant works in cassowary corridors requires corridors to be strengthened through actions like land bridges.
- Department of Transport and Main Roads legislation and policy requires appropriate fauna management.

What's the timeframe?

- The land bridge will be completed by early 2024. Appropriate vegetation will be planted on the bridge in time for the wet season.

More information

- <https://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/projects/bruce-highway-ingham-innisfail-smiths-gap-construct-southbound-overtaking-lane-and-fauna-overpass>
- <https://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/Community-and-environment/Environmental-management/Land/Fauna-management>
- [Walter Hill Range story map](#) (See the Smiths Gap page)

This factsheet was prepared by the Cassowary Recovery Team. The team consists of 30 community, industry and government organisations working together to recover the endangered southern cassowary in the Wet Tropics and Cape York.

