

THE OSTRICH

Struthio camelus



The Ostrich is a large flightless bird native to Africa (and formerly the Middle East). It is the only living species of its family, *Struthionidae*, and its genus, *Struthio*. Ostriches share the order *Struthioniformes* with other *ratites*: Emus, Kiwis, Cassowaries, Rheas and the extinct Moas of New Zealand and the extinct Elephant Bird of Madagascar. It is distinctive in its appearance, with a long neck and legs and the ability to run at speeds of about 65km/h (40 mph), the top land speed of any bird. The Ostrich is the largest living species of living bird and lays the largest egg of any extant bird species.

The diet of the Ostrich mainly consists of seeds and other plant matter, but insects are also consumed. It lives in nomadic groups which contain between five and 50 birds. When threatened, the Ostrich will either hide itself by lying flat against the ground, or will run away. If cornered, it can cause injury and death with a kick from its powerful legs. Mating patterns differ by geographical region, but territorial males fight for a harem of two to seven females.

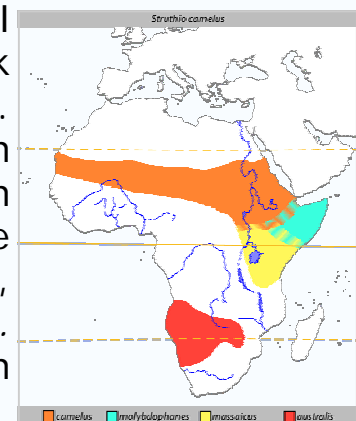


VARIOUS RATITES
1. Kiwi 2. Rhea 3. Cassowary
4. Ostrich 5. Moa.

Photo compilation: "Richard001"

The Ostrich is farmed around the world, particularly for its feathers, which are decorative and are also used for feather dusters. Its skin is used for leather and its meat marketed commercially.

The Ostrich was originally described by Linnaeus in his eighteenth century work, *Systema Naturae* under its current binomial name. Its scientific name is derived from the Greek words for "camel sparrow" referring to its long neck. There are four races, these being: the North African Ostrich (*S.c. camelus*) of northern Africa, the Southern Ostrich (*S.c. australis*) the most southern race, the Masai Ostrich (*S.c. massaicus*) of southern Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania and the Somali Ostrich (*S.c. molybdophanes*) of Ethiopia, Somalia and northern Kenya.



The strong legs of the Ostrich lack feathers. The bird has just two toes on each foot, with the nail of the inner one resembling a hoof. The outer toe



lacks a nail. This is an adaptation unique to Ostriches that appears to aid in running. The wings are not used for flight, but are still large, with a wingspan of around two metres (over six feet), despite the absence of long flight feathers.

The wings are used in mating displays, and they can also provide shade for chicks. The feathers, which are soft and fluffy, serve as insulation, and are quite different from the flat smooth outer feathers of flying birds (the feather barbs lack the tiny hooks which lock them together in other birds). The ostrich's sternum is flat, lacking the keel to which wing muscles attach in flying birds. The beak is flat and broad, with a rounded tip. Like all ratites, the Ostrich has no crop, and it also lacks a gallbladder.

At sexual maturity (two to four years old), male Ostriches can be between 1.8 and 2.7m (6 to 9 ft) in height, while female Ostriches range from 1.7 to 2m (5.5 to 6.5 ft). During the first year of life, chicks grow about 25cm (10") per month. At one year of age, Ostriches weigh around 45kg (100 lb). An Ostrich can live up to 75 years.

Ostriches live in nomadic groups that often travel together with other grazing animals, such as zebra or antelope. They mainly feed on seeds and other plant matter; occasionally they also eat insects such as locusts. Lacking teeth, they swallow pebbles that help as *gastroliths* (stomach or gizzard stones) to grind the swallowed foodstuff in the gizzard. An adult ostrich typically carries about 1kg of stones in its stomach. Ostriches are known to eat almost anything (dietary indiscretion), particularly in captivity where opportunity is increased. Ostriches can go without water for a long time, living off the moisture in the ingested plants. However, they enjoy water and frequently take baths.

With their acute eyesight and hearing, they can sense predators such as lions from far away. When being pursued by a predator, Ostriches have been known to reach speeds in excess of 65km per hour (40 mph), and can maintain a steady speed of 50km/h (30 mph), which makes the ostrich the world's fastest two-legged animal. When lying down and hiding from predators, the birds lay their head and neck flat on the ground, making them appear as a mound of earth from a distance. This even works for the males, as they hold their wings and tail low so that the heat haze of the hot, dry air that often occurs in their habitat aids in making them appear as a nondescript dark lump. When threatened, Ostriches run away, but they can cause serious injury and death with kicks from their powerful legs, which can only kick forward.

The females lay their fertilized eggs in a communal nest which is a just a

simple scrape, 30 to 60cm (12-24") deep, in the ground. This is made by the male. Ostrich eggs are the largest of all eggs, though they are actually the smallest eggs relative to the size of the bird. The nest may contain 15 to



AN OSTRICH EGG
Photo: "Raul654"

60 eggs, which are, on average, 15cm (6") long, 13cm (5") wide, and weigh 1.4kg (3lb). They are a glossy cream in colour, with thick shells marked by small pits. The eggs are incubated by the females by day and by the male at night. This uses the coloration of the two sexes to escape detection of the nest, as the drab female blends in with the sand, while the black male is nearly undetectable in the night. The incubation period is 35 to 45 days. Typically, the male will defend the hatchlings, and teach them how, and on what, to feed.

They have been hunted and farmed for their feathers, which at various times in history have been very popular for ornamentation in fashionable clothing (such as hats during the 19th century). Their skins are also valued to make leather goods. The market for feathers collapsed after the First World War, but commercial farming for feathers and later for skins, became widespread during the 1970s. It is claimed that ostriches produce the strongest commercially available leather. Ostrich meat tastes similar to lean beef and is low in fat and cholesterol, as well as high in calcium, protein and iron. Uncooked, it is a dark red or cherry-red colour, a little darker than beef.



The Ostrich feather is durable, soft and flexible, which accounts for the success of the Ostrich feather duster over the last 100 years. Because the feather does not zipper together it is prone to developing a static charge which actually attracts and holds dust which can then be shaken out or washed off. Because of its similar makeup to human hair, care of the ostrich feather requires only an occasional shampoo and towel or air dry.

Ostriches are large enough for a small person to ride them, typically while holding on to the wings for grip. However, there is little possibility of the practice becoming more widespread, due to the irascible temperament and the difficulties encountered in saddling the birds. Once, there was even a fad for hitching them to light sulky for racing by children.



Reference: *Wikipedia*