

OSTRICH

RANGE:

Africa

HABITAT:

Sandy grasslands. They avoid forests, keeping to the open regions where they can observe the distant landscape.

SIZE:

Male is 7-8 feet tall. Weight to 350 lbs. Female is smaller.

LIFE EXPECTANCY:

Wild: 25 years

Captivity: 20-30+ years

REPRODUCTION:

Pair formation takes place within large flocks. The male usually mates with one head hen and 2-3 auxiliary hens. The male selects the nest territory and scrapes a shallow cavity in the earth with his powerful legs going like pistons.

Each female lays up to 8 eggs in a communal nest. The dominant female drives the others away from the nest as soon as they have finished laying. The 3 pound buff-colored eggs can hold 2 dozen chicken eggs.

The females, some of which help with incubation and some of which do not, can recognize their own eggs. The incubating females make sure that their own eggs are well placed in the middle of the nest and will move the eggs of non-incubating females to the outside. These peripheral eggs help to protect the inner ones by being available for the occasional egg thief.

The male, black with pink legs, is camouflaged for incubating the eggs at night. The grey-brown female incubates them by day. When the female approaches the nest to take her turn, the brooding male stretches out his neck and clacks his beak to let her know it is safe—that no predators are about.

If a predator such as a jackal or hyena should break into the eggs, the ostrich pair will abandon the remaining eggs, find another nest site and lay a new clutch of eggs.

Males and females check and turn the eggs when they take over brooding from their mate. The eggs must be protected from the heat of the midday sun which reaches 140 degrees F. In about six weeks the eggs hatch. A few days before hatching, the parents hear contact calls from the chicks within the eggs. It takes about 36 hours for a chick to peck its way out. The chicken-sized chick has a brown spotted camouflage plumage. Adult color appears in 3-4 years. The parents and first hatched chicks must wait a week before all the eggs have hatched. Newly hatched chicks have a large internal store of food to get them through this week. The male looks after the first hatched while the female broods the last unhatched eggs. If the last eggs take more than a week to hatch, the parents will leave them behind in order to lead the brood to food to ensure their survival. Soon after hatching the chicks swallow the first small stones for grinding food in their gizzard. The chicks grow a foot a month and can care for themselves when they reach 5 feet.

When two males with females and chicks meet, it is common for the males to fight until one male retreats, followed by his mate, leaving all the chicks to the victor (a survival adaptation?) If the female is killed by a predator such as a cheetah, the male will rear the young.

theZOO
LOUISVILLE



Order:	Struthioniformes
Family:	Struthionidae
Genus:	Struthio
Species:	camelus

OSTRICH



DIET:

Wild: Seeds, grasses, small mammals, reptiles and insects.

Zoo: Escarole and ratite diet

BEHAVIOR:

Ostriches run swiftly, up to 42 mph at 15 foot strides and can jump 5 feet high. They do not hide their head in the sand at times of danger. This myth may have come from their habit of sitting on the ground when resting, with their head laid out flat in front of them.

POINTS OF INTEREST:

The ostrich is the largest living bird in the world, the only bird with a bladder, and the only 2-toed bird. One toe is smaller than the other. It may be evolving into a hoof for running. Ostriches have excellent eyesight and hearing. Like other large flightless birds they lack oil glands, stiff-veined feathers, and the keeled sternum that flying birds possess. Their small wings are useless for flight. They have a penetrating grunting roar.

Ostriches are known for eating strange things. It is important to keep pocket knives, balloons, nails and coins out of their reach.

Male ostriches in the Namibian desert dig a trench around the nest site with their bills to prevent flooding of the nest in the short rainy season. The eggs are laid just before the rainy season so food will be available when the chicks hatch.

Oryx antelope occasionally supplement their plant diet with ostrich eggs and Egyptian vultures have learned to break ostrich eggs open by dropping stones on them.

STATUS:

Numbers are fairly stable. Ostriches are farmed for their meat, wing tip and tail feathers and their skin. Farming likely prevented the extinction of these birds in the wild.