

OSTRICH FARMING IN SOUTH AFRICA

**One way or another,
the ostrich is a valuable bird**

by David Skillan



Why does an ostrich bury its head in the sand?

It doesn't. It just looks like it does.

This popular myth is dispelled—and numerous details about the lives of ostriches are revealed—at Highgate Ostrich Show Farm, one of South Africa's top ten tourist attractions. It's near the town of Oudtshoorn, in South Africa's Western Cape province, about 70 kilometres west of the well-known seaside town of Mossel Bay, midway along the famous Garden Route. Wild ostriches were first captured near Oudtshoorn in 1850.

Highgate claims to be the world's first and finest ostrich farm. Established almost 100 years ago, and today one of the largest of about 150 ostrich farms in this hot, arid desert district, it's run by the fourth generation of the Hooper family, whose ancestors emigrated to South Africa from Highgate, London. Many visitors to South Africa regard a visit to an ostrich farm as a must-see.

In just a couple of hours at Highgate, you'll learn a number of interesting facts about this huge bird—the world's largest. It can't fly, but it can run at 60 kilometres per hour. It's large and ungainly, but it has a brain the size of a pea. It can go for days without water. When fully grown, it weighs 100 to 160 kilograms and can live for forty years.

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About 90,000 ostriches are reared in the Oudtshoorn region each year, primarily for their feathers. Sixty percent of the feathers are exported to various parts of the world, for use in fashion accessories and dance costumes, while the remainder are used in South Africa to make feather dusters. A single egg, weighing a whopping one to one and a half kilograms, can produce scrambled egg for more than 20 people. The lean, protein-rich meat is popular in fine restaurants in developed parts of the world. It's also made into chewy but tasty biltong, better known as jerky in North America. The skin is processed into leather and used for making high-quality handbags, shoes, belts, and wallets.

Over the last 30 years, as the bird's fame has spread and its versatility has become apparent, western countries such as Australia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany have begun rearing these multipurpose, odd-looking birds. It's a tough, hardy creature that requires little care other than feeding.

The birds are sorted by age into flocks of 100 to 150. They spend the day feeding on alfalfa in large, open paddocks. Every nine months, about a kilogram of feathers is painlessly plucked from each bird.

Those with high-quality feathers are selected for breeding, and a male and a female are isolated together in a compound. The courting female frantically runs in various directions, playing hard to get, while the male violently ruffles his feathers and dashes back and forth, chasing the female and running in circles, in a frenzied dance that can last as long as 30 minutes. The female lays her first egg approximately fourteen days after mating, and thereafter every second day until she has a clutch of twelve to fifteen, or sometimes more. The parents incubate the eggs for 42 days, the male sitting on them at night and the female during the day. The chicks are fawn-coloured when they hatch. They mature at approximately two years of age.

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The male common ostrich, like most male birds, is more handsome than the female. He is distinguished by predominantly black and white feathers. The female is often scrawny and slightly smaller than the male, with brown and white feathers. Both have grey necks and legs. The wild Somali ostrich found in Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda has a red neck and legs.



In the wild, both the birds and the eggs are preyed upon by lions, hyenas, and other animals. An ostrich is equipped to fight such predators. It has a powerful forward kick and vicious toenails. You approach a wild ostrich at your peril. If you happen to be out for a stroll in the African bush or desert and are attacked by an ostrich, the well-trained Highgate guides advise that you grab a stout stick or a branch from the thorn tree and repeatedly thrust it at the bird's beady eyes. It should retreat . . . but don't bank on this. If it doesn't, climb a tree.

You can ride an ostrich, though at your own risk. You climb a wooden platform and mount with the help of a guide, then hang onto the ostrich's long, rubbery neck, and before you know it, off you go in speedy, mad circles. To stop, pull firmly on the neck. To turn left or right, apply pressure on the appropriate wing. Ostrich races are staged for visitors, with experienced farm workers for jockeys.

Ostriches have no teeth. They eat a lot of grit and gravel, which grinds up the food in their gizzards. They can be seen with their beaks close to the ground, searching for stones and even bones, which they swallow in one gulp. Basically vegetarians, they show little discrimination in their eating habits, and have been known to swallow pop bottles, wallets, spectacles, watches, keys, and anything that glints, including silver buttons or coins. In Namibia, where diamonds once lay liberally sprinkled on the desert sands and along the beaches, ostriches have even been found carrying diamonds in their bellies.

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