



HOW TO START A SUCCESSFUL OSTRICH FARM WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK

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Chapter 1 – What you need to Start an Ostrich Farm

Welcome to our first chapter, What you need to Start an Ostrich Farm, which looks at Resources, and answers the question: what do I need to start an ostrich farm ?

Starting an ostrich farm is an adventurous step for anybody. Hopefully with a little thought we can examine some aspects that you need to consider, before embarking upon your own ostrich project.

Land

You need to consider how you are going to use the land you have. Depending on what starting option you decide, you need to make decisions as to how much land you wish to dedicate to

- breeding
- chick rearing
- chick housing
- raising birds to slaughter age
- incubation facilities

you may wish to consider other building space for your offices, farm shop or living/rest area for workers.

A trio, one male and two female, is the normal grouping for ostriches, but you may equally consider pairs (one male and one female), quads (one male and three females) or colonies (two or more males to two or more hens).

A pair gives you the ability to track the individual performance of each of your breeders. A trio gives you the ability to track the male and maybe the females, as sometimes the eggs from two females are noticeably different. However, if you want productivity, experienced farmers tell us that colonies work best.

The advantage of a colony is that the birds have more birds to choose from, in seeking a partner.

The space that you need for a breeding trio is approximately 30 metres (32 yards) by 50 metres (55 yards) – a total of 1500 square metres. Over the years I have seen this size reduced to almost half, without any serious consequences. Personally, I prefer larger parks with plenty of running space – hence the tendency to make the park oblong rather than square.

For chicks, they really need little space during their first four weeks of age. Let us say 2 metres (2 yards) by 10 metres (11 yards) for a group of 20 chicks, however they grow remarkably quickly.

Chicks will need increasingly large areas as they grow. At 12 months they are adult ostriches, and 50 x 12 month old ostriches will need say an area of 1000 sq. metres - 20 metres (22 yards) x 50 metres (55 yards).

In South Africa, the growing space is much larger. Typically 100 chicks are grown out on 6000 to 9000 square metres,

All the bird areas should have shade in some form or other. It may only be shade-cloth or use the natural resource of trees within the pens, but some form of shade is essential. Birds need to get out of the sun if they wish to. When it rains however, you will find that they sit down on the spot and don't seek shelter.

In the event that you decide to have your own incubation facilities you need to consider the room dimensions you require and this will depend upon the incubator and hatcher you buy. You need one room for the incubator, one for the hatcher, and a cleaning area to wash your eggs with an optional storage area for storing eggs before setting them in the incubator.

Labour

Adult birds should be fed twice a day, once in the morning, once in the late afternoon. Chicks should be attended at least 5 times a day, the incubator checked daily with setting eggs once a week and hatching twice a day. All this takes human labour.

Another labour intensive task is the cleaning of the chick pen to prevent them eating their own dirt (dependent upon stocking density, surface and age of chicks). Similarly setting eggs in the incubator and cleaning the hatcher are time consuming activities.

Besides the farming tasks on hand, the majority of farming is supervision. Prevention is better than cure, and solving problematic areas before they occur can save time and expense. Constant supervision will help, but generally the breeders are best left to themselves except for feeding and egg collection.

It is possible to move a bird with one person, but with two or more it is so much easier and less stressful.

You need to consider – do I have the time ? or do I have the finances to pay a farm labourer or labourers ?

Water

Your birds will need access to water 24 hours a day. You need to consider that when you design your pens, you may need to consider the cost of supplying water. If you are in a cold climate, you may need to consider the cost of installing water heaters to maintain a constant water temperature of 20 degrees centigrade for all groups of birds and not simply free from ice.

Ostriches like to scoop and as a result of the feed in their beaks, the water trough gets dirty quickly and therefore needs cleaning regularly.

Birds need constant access to water as this will effect their consumption of dry feed. Water too cold or too hot will effect their water consumption and often result in reduced feed intake.

Permissions

You will need to consult your national ostrich organisation or your local agricultural board for advice on what permissions are mandatory for starting an ostrich farm in your own country. Some countries such as Germany require that you complete a course on ostrich husbandry. In the UK, you require a Dangerous Wild Animals' Licence. Fortunately other countries are not as strict and view ostrich farming just the same as any other farming activity.

Here are some points that you may need to clarify

- licence for the ownership of birds
- licence for the transportation of ostriches
- the construction of a death ditch to place birds that die
- veterinary inspections
- biosecurity measures such as a vehicle entrance dip where the wheels of vehicles entering your property need to go through disinfectant.

Write down your questions and doubts, and speak to somebody has gone through the process of setting up an ostrich farm in your area. They will be an invaluable source of help to you.

Finance

You will obviously need capital to set up your enterprise. You will also probably have some idea as to how much you can afford to dedicate to this. My advice is half it! Don't borrow money either! It is only when you start selling your marketable products will you have some form of clear perception as to whether it is profitable for you.

We have seen many times the following pattern. New farmers spend a lot of money in trying to get the best "nicest" facilities and NO PLAN. I have seen chick facilities like mini-hotels! And totally impractical. And then when it comes to the important stage of actually marketing their produce, they have run out of funds as production has not been what was expected.

My recommendation is keep things simple. Use what you have at hand – adapt the fencing you already have and use buildings that are already constructed.

Where I do consider it necessary to spend is on your incubator. A good incubator will give you good results, a bad one will not.

Record, record, record. You need to be able to answer the following questions PER PEN

- how many eggs did my breeders lay ?
- how much did it cost to feed my breeders per year ?
- how many chicks actually hatched ?
- how many chicks reached slaughter age ?
- how much does it cost to feed a chick to slaughter age ?

and from these replies calculate

- how much does it cost to produce an egg ?
- how much does it cost to produce a one day chick ?
- how much does it cost to produce a slaughter bird at a given weight ?

Compare the costs to your revenues

- what are sales from selling egg shells ?
- from selling feathers ?
- from skins ?
- from meat ?

By doing these calculations PER PEN, you will hopefully be able to identify those that make the most and also just as important, identify those that make the least. If a trio is not profitable, cull. Cut your losses.

Hopefully I have given some useful pointers on things to think about – you need to have the resources of land, labour, water, permissions and finance to start an ostrich farm.

In the next chapter, we consider the farming options for starting an ostrich farm.

Chapter 2 – Farming Options

In chapter 2 of our Information Guide on “How to Start a Successful Ostrich Farm without Breaking the Bank”, we look at Farming Options.

There are various ostrich farming options you may wish to consider.

Full Cycle

This tends to be the norm. You have breeders, they lay eggs, you do the incubating and hatching, and then you grow out the chicks to slaughter age. The best part of this is that you are in control and responsible for each stage. You have nobody to blame but yourself if things go wrong.

You may also find that your geographical location is such that there are no local incubation facilities to use, so you have no option but to do this yourself.

On the other hand if your farming enterprise is large, you may need others to grow out all your chicks. Your resource of land may be limited, or you prefer to do this to limit risks.

The financial layout for this sort of enterprise is the largest as you are doing all the stages.

Generally speaking, as the ostrich industry matures, there is more specialisation as each farmer tends to concentrate on what he does best.

Breeders

Some farmers only have breeders and sell their eggs. This is their income.

Incubation Facility

You may decide to have an incubation facility only. That is farmers pay you for the service of hatching their eggs or purchasing eggs to sell on as day old chicks.

A good incubation system is very expensive and therefore requires significant capital investment.

Before embarking upon setting up an incubation facility you need to assess if there is demand from farmers in your area to incubate or if there is a supply of eggs you can buy.

Typically a farmer would pay something as a down payment for you to set the eggs and an additional payment for a hatched chick that you return to the farmer.

Recording is of the greatest importance to ensure that the correct owners receive their own chicks.

Growing Out Facility

The least expensive option. You buy chicks at a certain age and you feed the birds to slaughter age. This option could be particularly attractive to a first-timer especially if there is a contract involved for the repurchase of the slaughter bird.

But now beware ! So many of these buy back schemes have failed in the past through the inability of the person offering such contracts to market the produce at a sufficient price to give him any adequate returns. In other words these buy back promises are not fulfilled and in some cases were used as a sales gimmick to make a chick sale. The farmer is then left with birds and has to market them himself.

Don't be afraid to ask for references from sellers – after all you are talking here about your future income. You have been warned !

Regional Groups

I am in favour of regional groups as farmers can become self-supporting. Working in volume helps in all aspects.

I have one example from a group of pig farmers in Austria who have gone into ostrich farming. The farmers all have breeders and all supply the eggs to one person. Each farmer gets one lot of chicks on a weekly rotation basis. This means that farmer one gets all the chicks hatched in week one, farmer two all chicks hatched in week two etc. This system is truly collaboration so that no single chick is left stranded on its own and it is just as easy to manage 5 chicks as it is 20 chicks.

What's more the farmers all use the same feed which all helps to produce a consistent product. Buying in bulk enables these farmers to get better prices.

The World-Wide Ostrich Industry

It has been our experience that the ostrich industry has been extremely volatile in certain geographical areas. Those areas new to ostrich farming generally experience high live bird prices only to then later crash when the true value of a slaughter bird is realised. This pattern has been seen to a larger extent ALL OVER THE WORLD.

Our Recommendation

Our advice is to start off buying day old chicks and raise them to slaughter age. Less capital is needed and you can test the market to see what returns you actually receive from selling the birds, before launching full scale into the activity. You can also keep back some of the chicks for future breeders, if you wish.

We also recommend that you buy the chicks from a local source who offers post sales support. You may need to consult somebody locally as problems occur, and therefore to have somebody nearby who can help, is worth any extra premium you pay for the chicks.

Note that if you still prefer to start with breeders, nobody is going to sell you their best breeders.

In this chapter of our Information Guide on Starting an Ostrich Farm, we have looked at the various options available in starting an ostrich activity – the full cycle, breeders only, incubation facility and a grow out facility, and have also stated what we recommend.

In the next chapter we take a look at nutrition and how to feed the birds.

Chapter 3 – How and What to Feed your Birds

In chapter 3 of our Information Guide on “How to Start a Successful Ostrich Farm without Breaking the Bank” we look at how to feed your birds.

Feed costs account for at least 70% of all expenses of an ostrich enterprise, and therefore a basic understanding of nutrition is essential. Unfortunately it is, I would say, the least understood topic for both new and existing farmers alike.

Economics

Firstly I would like to recap on the economics side. It is not the cost of your feed that is important - it is the difference between the revenue of your slaughter bird in comparison to the cost of producing that slaughter bird that is the important factor. Calculating the cost of the egg, the chick, the slaughter bird are all important indicators, as are the higher revenue obtained from higher output (number of eggs, no. of chicks, kgs. of meat, larger skin). So many people fall into the trap of looking into the feed costs without considering the production abilities of the different options and the implications that a better feed gives you so much more and helps to reduce losses such as infertility, hatching problems and chick mortality.

Having got that point out of the way, let's look at an ostrich feed.

Ostrich Feed

A good ostrich feed should have

- Forage to provide quality fibre eg. alfalfa
- Grain for energy eg. maize or corn
- Protein Ingredient for protein eg. dehulled soya
- minor and major minerals
- vitamins
- other natural additives such as Amino Acids, Yeast

For fibre for example, alfalfa comes in various protein levels. It is recommended that you can get alfalfa as fed of at least 18%. A higher quality alfalfa has so many better characteristics such as improved digestibility, higher vitamin and mineral content, to that say of one of lesser quality.

Equally for maize, a farmer should strive to obtain 8% protein, as opposed to the lower quality of 6%.

Soya normally comes as 44% or 47% where the 44% contains soya hulls. Again we are looking for soya as a protein source, and the 47% is recommended.

It is the vitamin and mineral packs that contain the punch of the feed. Here it is not only the values of such components but the form in which they are provided in combination with one another, so that the ostrich can use “the punch” to its full effect. Calcium

provided in one form may be indigestible to an ostrich, and therefore the balance with phosphorus will be out, which could lead to severe problems.

Normally the vitamins, minerals and other natural additives are supplied to ostrich farmers in the form of a premix.

It is through attention to nutrition combined with good feed management, good farm management, and genetic selection, that your slaughter birds can reach meat yields in excess of 30 kgs per bird as opposed to 25-30 kg which is today seen as the norm in places like Australia and South Africa.

Armed with the basics of nutrition, you will be steps ahead of your competitors in bird performance.

Different Rations

Different rations are required through the different stages of bird growth as the necessities of the bird changes depending upon the purpose for which the ration is made.

Typically there is a Starter ration for chicks from 1 day to 8 weeks, a Grower ration from 8 weeks to 12 months, a Breeder ration for a breeder in the mating season, and an off season ration used for breeders outside the breeding season and for birds between 1 and 2 years old.

Hopefully this chapter has led you through the importance of using a good feed, why one should be used and to look beyond cost of feed. The important factor is unit cost of production - your results.

If you decide to experiment with two trial groups using different feeds, limit the trials to only two feeds to avoid complications.

As there is no right answer to the correct feed, I hesitate to give you a feed formula. Check with your feed company that the feed contains the components above, and that the feed is used for a specific species (ostrich only) and purpose.

One tip I can give you is that the alfalfa content should not be more than 35% of the total ration.

Also ensure that bone meal is not one of the ingredients.

In the next chapter, we look at incubation basics.

Chapter 4 – How to Incubate Ostrich Eggs

In this chapter, we look at incubation basics.

Under optimum conditions, a fertile ostrich egg needs to incubate for 42 days to produce a chick.

Egg Collection

You need to get into the breeder pen and collect the egg. Be careful as the male is protective of his territory, and sometimes it is best to use somebody else as a decoy to attract his attention, whilst you go in and collect the egg. Pen design of breeder pens should therefore allow a person to enter and exit easily from the pen, yet maintain the birds within their pen.

For recording purposes, write the pen no. and date on the egg at collection.

Recording the Egg

Make a record of each egg collected. Details to record are the pen in which it was laid, the date, and give the egg a unique egg no.

Cleaning the Egg

The ostrich egg itself has a hard outer surface with pores. Dirt can enter through these pores, so it is first necessary to clean the egg. This can be done with a toothbrush and luke warm water with detergent. The bristles of the tooth brush are gentle and is adequate for removing dirt from the egg.

After washing and drying the egg with paper towels, write the egg no. on the side of the egg in pencil.

Lay the egg horizontal on something which prevents the egg from rolling, such as a large plastic dish or plate.

In 24 hours, look at the egg again with a torch in a dark area and you will see an air gap at one end of the egg. Place the egg with this air gap at the top, but in an inclined position.

Write the egg no. at the other end of the egg. The reason for this is that when the egg hatches, the shell breaks and you may not be able to identify the egg no.. However if you have written the egg on the bottom, this remains in tact and you can easily identify which egg has hatched.

Storing the Egg

Every 24 hours move the eggs position, so the egg still has the air gap faced upwards but in the other direction. For example if the top was inclined in the direction north east, then place the egg inclined in the direction north west. Similarly, if the inclined position is north west, then change back to the direction north east. Always with the air gap at the top.

Studies have shown that for optimum incubation, eggs should not be stored for more than 10 days.

The temperature of the storage room should neither be too cold nor too hot, say 15 to 20 C (59 to 68 F).

The Incubator

The general concept of incubation is to have a clean room for the incubator, to incubate the egg until 38 or 39 days, and then move the egg to a hatcher, which can be classified as a dirty area as the hatching is messy. Keep the clean area, spotlessly clean, and keep the hatcher are as clean as possible.

Work flow should be that nobody goes from a dirty area – hatcher – to the clean area – incubator, and both areas should be completely separate for optimum performance.

All birds typically use 15% during the incubation process. You need to purchase an incubator that can give you optimum performance to achieve this, and whilst I recommend say savings on other areas of your farming activity, the incubator is a capital expense which you need to take seriously. Buy the best you can afford, within reason.

For a good incubator you need to consider

- a) constant temperature
- b) humidity control
- c) air flow

Temperature

We incubated at a constant temperature of 36.5 C (97.7 F).

The important thing here is that the temperature is constant. I remember reading that you can incubate between 35 C and 37 C, and in one case, ostrich eggs were successfully incubated at 34.5 C but hatching time took 57 days !

Consult with your incubator provider for correct incubation temperatures for ostrich.

Humidity Control

Given that you want to lose 15% over 42 days (some use the equation 13% over 38 days), after one week's incubation, you can check the rate of weight loss. Simply compare the weight of the egg when you set the egg in the incubator to the weight of the egg 7 days later.

If the egg has not lost enough weight, then you need to decrease humidity to facilitate extra interchange of airflow into the egg. If for example the eggs would lose 14% over the 42 days if the eggs continue to lose weight at the same rate, then decrease humidity by 3% for each 1% of weight loss. This is why it is essential to have an incubator which shows what you want the humidity level to be (desired) against what the incubator is actually recording (actual).

To assist the incubator, it may be a good idea to have a dehumidifier in the incubation room. This will help the incubator enormously. For a cheaper option to a dehumidifier, look at an air conditioning machine which has a "dry option".

Of course the contrary works too. If the egg is losing weight at 16% over the 42 day period, the egg is losing too much weight. Increase humidity by 3% for each 1% of weight loss.

Air Flow

An egg is like a lung. It needs oxygen and expels carbon dioxide. Air flow into the incubation room needs to be clean air, that is not contaminated. Do not for example construct your incoming air flow against the pen where young chicks may be running and producing dirt.

The incubator also needs to expel the used air. Do not place a tube directly from the incubator air flow exit outlet to outside, because this produces a chimney effect. Instead leave a gap of say 12 cm (6 inches) between the tube taking the used air out and the air flow exit of the incubator.

Recommendations

For incubators, we recommend NATUREFORM. Check out their website at <http://www.natureform.com> for your regional representative. They have a professional team of technicians, are available for post sales support and their machines are excellent. They are probably the most expensive but you get what you pay for.

Candling

After 14 days in the incubator, you need to check for fertility. Take the egg and shine a light source around the egg. If the egg has no shaded area then it is infertile. If the egg has a shaded area, then the egg is fertile. With a little practice you easily get the hang of this. Remove the infertile eggs from the incubator, drill a small hole at one end and remove the contents from the egg. Wash and disinfect the egg and you have an eggshell for sale.

Hatching

The hatcher is normally 1 C cooler than the incubator. When hatching the chicks produce internal heat. Also no dehumidifier is required in the hatcher room.

Let nature take its time. When you place the egg from the incubator to the hatcher, check each egg, once in the morning and once at night. Do not be tempted to break open the egg for the chick, unless you have noticed movement inside the egg for three days running and no crack. It is so easy to be tempted to help the chick, but don't unless absolutely necessary.

Sometimes you may get "wet chicks" with big bellies. This means that the egg has not lost enough weight during the incubation process. These can be problem chicks, but over time they lose the belly and some survive.

Dry chicks are usually much healthier, hatching earlier than the 42 days, and are certainly less problematic than the wet chicks.

When a chick is born, spray the umbilical cord lightly with iodine to disinfect the area. Record that the chick has hatched, and give the chick some identification such as a microchip, inserted in the pipping muscle at the back of the neck, or some form of tag in the neck, and/or wing.

In this chapter we looked at some incubation basics. Obviously with practice, you will learn a lot more than this. Also do not get down hearted if it all sounds too complicated. It isn't really.

Disclaimer

Whilst the information provided is the best to our knowledge, we cannot be held responsible for any losses incurred as a result of this information. Please check with your incubator provider for more detailed advice.

In the next chapter, we look at how to raise chicks.

Chapter 5 – How To Raise Ostrich Chicks

In this chapter, we look at how to raise young chicks.

Ok, the chick has hatched, and it is one day old. It is probable that the chick may try to stand, wobble, walk a few steps, and then sit down, or indeed remain seated.

The next steps all depend upon your climate.

The essence is that chicks need warmth. If you live in a warm climate you can take the chick from the hatch directly outdoors under shade clothe, and bring them indoors at night time. However if it isn't warm, then the chick needs to be kept warm indoors until they are a lot stronger.

Ideally the chicks need to be kept in groups of say 20. They like company but they also should not be overcrowded.

A heat lamp as a source of heat should be placed above the chicks. If the chick feels cold, then the chick can place himself under the lamp. Equally important, if the chick feels hot, then the chick should be able to move away from the lamp. Close observation should help you decide if it is too hot or too cold for the chicks. All chicks huddled tightly under the lamp indicates they are cold, whereas all the chicks walking well away from the lamp would indicate they are too hot.

We do not recommend ground floor heating as this causes chicks to sit down and be more lethargic. An active chick that walks around picks here and there, and then sits under the heat source at night time is what you want.

Chicks also can make a trilling sound. This generally is an indication that they are not happy.

You need some sort of surface that permits the chick to keep dry, a mat that will allow the urine and dirt to pass through so the belly of the chick keeps warm. A wet belly will cause a chill, which can lead to death. Yet you also need a light flow of air so that the ammonia of the urine does not overpower them. I have seen pig matting been used.

First and foremost, keep your chicks warm and dry, and then you should be well away to keeping them alive.

Place feed in the indoor pen too, so if they are hungry, they can eat. You want your chicks to eat so they grow faster.

With regards supplying the chicks with water at night-time, there are two schools of thought on this. One believes in that water should be restricted, so they urine less and are therefore kept drier and the risk of falling into the water is also eliminated, whilst the other school of thought believes that chicks should have access to water at all times. Water consumption is directly related to feed consumption and by restricting water you would therefore be restricting feed intake, and therefore growth. You decide !

Over the period of two weeks, raise the height of the heat lamp so the intensity of the heat is less. At the end of the two weeks, remove the heat lamp all together, except for exceptional circumstances. In colder climates you may need heat lamps for a longer period.

During the day time, let them out into a small pen so they can exercise to get fresh air and sun. Obviously if it is raining, bring the chicks inside.

In the duck industry, duckling mortality as an industry standard is 8%. If you have 8% chick mortality in ostriches, you are doing exceptionally well. If you have chick mortality of under 20% you are doing well, and the industry average is anything around 40% and upwards.

In the first days of a chicks life, I am a great believer that its survival is dependent upon what nutrients have been passed on to it by their parents, which depends on the feeding program of the breeders. A poorly fed hen will produce a weak chick, whilst a hen on a proper breeder ration should provide a healthy chick.

When the chick is born it has a yolk sac. The chick absorbs this yolk sac over the following three days, and therefore may not eat much during its first week days. Some ostrich farmers prefer not to give the chick any feed during these days, so that the chick is forced to use up its yolk sac first before starting on chick feed rations. I prefer to offer feed. If the chick is hungry it will eat, if not, it won't. Moreover all the chicks do not hatch at the same time. When one chick is at day 2, another may be at day 4.

One thing to watch out for are stress factors. Chicks easily get stressed from any loud action such as a tractor, building works, a dog barking. Try to limit the stress factors as much as possible.

Trying to sort out an adequate chick feed container can be problematic. We used plastic dog bowls. Chicks will run into them, walk on them, tip them over. It is best to have something that they cannot tip over. For adult ostriches I have seen for example bowls placed in rubber tyres. Another solution for growing chicks could be a plastic pipe cut in half, held against the wall. If this is complicated for chick feed, it is just as complicated for water. Remembering that the very young chicks need to be kept dry, your water source also needs to be securely placed.

TIP: To increase feed consumption, do not fill your plastic bowl with feed. Instead, only fill it half full. Chicks love to have a solid surface from which they can get their feed. They enjoy the sound, I am sure they do. In this way if you always have some feed just covering the hard service (or the plastic bowl) consumption will increase significantly. Many farmers just fill the bowl to the top and that's it. That is poor feed management. It is better to offer a little many times, than a large amount only once.

In this chapter we have looked at how to successfully raise ostrich chicks. In the next chapter we move on to how to keep your chicks alive and well - disease prevention.

Chapter 6 – Biosecurity Basics

In this chapter we look at disease prevention, the biosecurity of your farming unit.

It is much better to plan with a mentality of preventing a disaster from happening, than dealing with the aftermath of a disaster. With that in mind, consider carefully your biosecurity measures.

Anything being brought onto your farm is a potential risk, whether it is a vehicle, a person or livestock. The objective is to reduce the risk of contamination.

For vehicles, construct a vehicle dip, where the wheels of the incoming vehicle have to pass through an authorised disinfectant. Try to prevent further movement of the incoming vehicle, by designing parking near the opening gate.

For a person, provide appropriate footwear. It would be better if you had the farm boots rather than they use their own, but we also understand that there has to be a practical balance. In any case, the person with appropriate footwear should pass through a foot dip, containing a disinfectant.

Be especially careful about access to the incubation facility. Nobody but the incubating person should be allowed in the incubation facility. I have seen incubation facilities designed so that there is a glass panel for visitors. Their movement permits the customer to enter at one end, see the incubation facilities through a glass panel and out through the opposing end. Their entrance is separate from the people who work in the incubation facilities. That is good design, but one could also ask what are visitors doing being near the incubation facilities in the first place. Some farms are tourist centres, and therefore viewing the incubation facilities, especially the hatcher is a highlight, but here the farmer is trading off income through tourism for a potential risk to his whole operation.

Disposal of Dead Birds

My father is a farmer, and when I started out an ostrich farm, he quite wisely told me, "Alan, with live animals you get dead animals".

This is so true, that you have to be prepared. You may have to build a death ditch in which you place the dead birds, or pay for the disposal of the dead stock. I am sure each country will have its own system of handling dead animals, but whatever, you need to find out the requirements of this in your own geographical area.

In Israel, one farmer solved this through having a crocodile farm !

Ostrich Diseases

The two main ostrich diseases to be aware of are Avian Influenza and Newcastle Disease.

You need to contact your regional veterinary services for advice. I say this because medicaments change all the time, and you will need to adhere to the strict protocol of your regional animal health inspector.

Some countries have Newcastles Disease and others don't. This effects the status of exporting your ostrich products. For example, you may need to inoculate your birds at a certain age, and then a certain time may need to pass before you can slaughter them, AND have a secure tracking system in place that proves this.

Become a member of your national ostrich industry, and they should be able to provide you with information.

A Word of Warning

There has been a tendency for emerging ostrich production countries to produce suddenly a group of ostrich veterinary experts. I cannot help but feel that they prey on the lack on the knowledge of the new ostrich farmer. They tend to charge extortionate fees, and you find that you are no better off. Their diagnosis of the situation nearly always tends to be "stress factors". When we were farming we only used the local vet to sew an ostrich neck once it was open, and in fact we could have even done that ourselves.

Find a vet for your farm that charges you prices like any other farm animal, otherwise you are being exploited.

In the next chapter we take a look at how to go about selling your slaughter birds or produce.

Chapter 7 – How to Sell your Slaughter Birds or Produce

In part 7 of our Information Guide on “How to Start a Successful Ostrich Farm without Breaking the Bank”, we look at marketing – at how you can sell your slaughter birds. In fact I sometimes wonder if this should really be the first chapter. Marketing is important and you really need to assess if there is demand for your ostrich products, before even thinking of starting a farming activity.

Marketing

Starting an ostrich farm is easy. Making it a profitable enterprise requires an assessment of how you intend to market your ostrich products.

The best advice I can give is for you to visit other ostrich farmers in your area and find out how they sell their produce, at what prices and assess the demand.

You may wish to include processing and marketing as part of your overall development plan.

Live Birds

Some farmers may wish to breed for the live bird market. That is selling eggs, chicks, or breeders. Though this helps cash flow in the short term, and the returns can be high depending in which country you operate, you need to consider what happens when the live bird market is saturated – that is there is no more demand for live birds. You need to be prepared to investigate who is buying slaughter birds and the conditions of sale. This is the commercialisation stage.

You can post your bird sales at http://www.ostrichresources.com/trade_advertise.php free of charge.

Slaughter Facilities

In the event that you have no buyer for your slaughter birds, you may need to consider slaughtering the bird yourself and marketing your produce. You will need to know where are the nearest slaughter facilities and their costs for providing this service or if considering setting up on sufficient scale to construct your own facilities. In South Africa, often it is the farmers that own the facilities and they operate on an a quota basis. You buy a quota giving you the right to slaughter x birds.

Some slaughter facilities have adapted slaughter facilities for existing farm livestock by adding an extra room for the removal of the feathers. You need to know if the slaughter facility is European Union approved. If it is, this then opens the doors for you to market meat into the lucrative market of Europe, where demand for ostrich meat is highest.

Working in volume with other farmers in your area, perhaps forming a cooperative, should help you in reaching larger markets for your ostrich produce.

Marketing Meat Products

The problem with meat is that in the fresh state it is a perishable product. You need to sell it as soon as possible as typically ostrich meat will have a shelf-life of 21 days if vacuum packed.

Alternatively the meat can be frozen thereby giving you one year's shelf-life, or 18 months if blast frozen. Depending in which country you are, the demand for fresh is normally higher than for frozen meat.

Make a list of the ostrich processors in your area. Find out if they will buy your meat or who is buying meat. Sometimes there are traders who export meat, especially in markets such as Australia and New Zealand.

You need to investigate. Perhaps attend some local fairs or even international meat fairs. Anuga in Cologne is the largest meat fair in Europe, but others to consider may be SIAL in France and in China. Your aim is to connect with those that may be interested in your meat.

In the United Kingdom and USA there are farmers markets which give the opportunity of consumers to connect directly with the producer.

Before launching into ostrich farming, you need to have done some basic analysis of what am I going to do with my slaughter bird. Who will buy the meat ?

Some farmers have even set up meat stalls in food market halls.

When you are selling meat, the presentation of the meat is a most important factor. Not only in the meat itself but how it is packaged. There are still many uneducated consumers out there who do not know how to cook ostrich. Break this barrier with cooking instructions and recipes. One of the best presentations of ostrich meat packages I have seen was a processor who had a mini ostrich recipe book hanging from the package.

Some have contacted stores and asked permission to do tasting presentations so that consumers can taste the meat to see if they like it.

The quality of your meat will depend on many factors but the first factor is what you have fed your bird. A well balanced diet should produce a meat rich in color – a bright red. A poor diet will cause the meat to be an off red, almost purple, which will scare potential consumers away. A good meat will redden when exposed to air, a bad meat will cause the meat to go blackish. Be warned – all things being equal it will be a reflection on what you are feeding your bird.

Age of bird also effects tenderness - a young bird of 10 months is likely to produce more fillet muscles than an older bird of say 20 months.

You can also put a free advert at <http://www.ostrichmeatsupplies.com> to sell your meat.

Marketing Ostrich Skins

The ostrich skin market is very volatile. At times of the year nobody will want your skins, and at other times, there will be a queue of buyers wanting to take them. Don't worry, here you have a marketable product IF YOU DO THINGS CORRECTLY.

Skins need to be the correct shape and stored correctly to be of value. Do anything wrong then you will not have a marketable product. The days that anything related to ostrich skins has a value are long gone.

For information relating to the removal, storage, transportation and grading of ostrich skins, we have produced a special guide for this purpose at <http://www.ostrichskinsupplies.com/infoguide/order.html>.

Skins need to be stored for example between 4 and 10 C – and never freeze them.

Don't forget too that ostrich leg shins also have a small value, but must be centred so that the scaling is in the middle. Similarly the market demands big leg skins that go above the "knee" and go down to the toe.

In fact, selling ostrich skins in the salted state is probably your least worry. You may not get the greatest returns from selling skins, but here you have a saleable produce if you do things correctly. This I can assure you - we are ostrich skin traders.

Some cooperatives have fallen into the trap of thinking they will get better returns by tanning and trying to sell finished products. This market I know well. Don't be tempted to do so. You will end up spending a lot of money, and having headache after headache as you struggle with tanners, manufacturers and then trying to make sales. Get the easy money, stick with selling salted skins.

Marketing Ostrich Feathers

I believe there is a lot of untapped potential here for marketing ostrich feathers. It's also a very closed community where the secrets of cleaning and dyeing ostrich feathers are not divulged.

Ostrich feathers can be used for decorations of all types eg. floral decorations, interior design, wedding pieces, costume making, hats or converted into ostrich feather products such as boas and feather dusters.

Feathers have an anti-static quality, which make them ideal for the car painting industry to remove dust, but this is a market that few will reach.

There are also many different types of feathers. The most prized are the large white male feathers with a natural drooping, but there is demand for others as well such as the tail feathers. To see some different ostrich types, check out <http://www.ostrichfeathers.com> .

Perhaps it is not an income that you should count on in your initial cash projections, but one that you should think about for the future– where can I sell my feathers ?

Marketing Ostrich Egg Shells

At 14 days, you candle eggs to see if they are fertile or infertile. Infertile ones are removed. These can be emptied by drilling a small area at the base, the contents removed and the interior disinfected.

These empty clean white egg shells also have value. It is surprising how many people want them as purely decorative items in their houses.

Some people paint them and sell them as farm souvenirs.

There is also an “egg-crafting community”. People who carve eggs to make displays, lamps or simple containers.

Again, probably best not to count on this as income when you are starting, but again you have a marketable product.

Other ideas

I have seen some bizarre ideas for marketing other ostrich products. For example a chick that has died, can be sent to a taxidermist to produce a chick display. I have also seen an adult foot converted into an ashtray. These examples are true and just go to show you that there have been some innovative farmers around !

In this chapter, we have given you some points of consideration on how to market your produce – ostrich meat, skins, feathers and eggs. Your main concern is how to sell your meat. Solve this and you’re in business.

Well , we have covered some important aspects of marketing your ostrich produce, and hopefully generated some new ideas for you also on how to increase your income.

Complete Package

If you are in the European Union, or can slaughter birds at an EU slaughter plant, sometimes throughout the year we can buy both your ostrich meat and skins. We currently buy deboned ostrich legs (4 pieces per bird), and salted ostrich skins in their raw state. Simply write to us at info@ostrichresources.com for more information.

In the next chapter, we show you how to start your own action plan.

Chapter 8 – Produce Your Very Own Action Plan

In this chapter, we look at helping you make your own action plan.

So far we have gone through looking at your resources, the starting options, some basic principles of incubation and nutrition, and the importance of looking at how you are going to market your ostrich produce.

Each country is different, so we are unable to answer questions as to what is it going to cost to feed my birds, or what are the returns from my slaughter bird. These are the sort of questions you need to find out for yourself in your own area, as different costs and pricing are used not only per country, but also within each region of each country.

At this point, we ask you to consider what you have learnt so far by constructing your very own Action Plan.

Make a list of your questions.

How much does a day old chick cost ?

Does that include delivery to my farm ?

Is there any compensation for any chick that dies in the first few days ?

Is there any post-sales support ?

Ask the seller about any regional groups, newsletters and national ostrich associations.

How much does it cost to feed that day old chick to slaughter age ?

Where can I buy the feed ?

Do they do different rations ?

(remember a ration should be designed for one species to produce one function)

What does the feed contain ?

Where can I slaughter my slaughter birds ?

How much does it cost ?

Does the cost include salting the skins and skin storage in a cold storage facility ?

How can I transport the birds to the slaughter house, and how much does it cost ?

Or will the processor come and collect the birds and slaughter them ?

What does my nearest ostrich farm do ?

How much does he get back for a slaughter bird?

How are revenues calculated from the slaughter bird ?

Is there any opportunity of selling my birds the same way ?

Regroup the questions to whom you are going to ask them

OSTRICH FARMER

How much does a day old chick cost ?

Does that include delivery to my farm ?

Is there any compensation for any chick that dies in the first few days ?

Is there any post-sales support ?

Ask the seller about any regional groups, newsletters and national ostrich associations.

How much does it cost to feed that day old chick to slaughter age ?

Where can I slaughter my slaughter birds ?

What does my nearest ostrich farm do ?

How much does it cost to slaughter ?
Does the cost include salting the skins and skin storage in a cold storage facility ?
How can I transport the birds to the slaughter house, and how much does it cost ?

FEED MILL

Where can I buy the feed ?
Do they do different rations ?
(remember a ration should be designed for one species to produce one function)
What does the feed contain ?

PROCESSOR

Is the processor willing to come and collect the birds and slaughter them ?
How much does he pay for a slaughter bird?
How are revenues calculated from the slaughter bird ?
Is there any opportunity of selling my birds to the processor ?

Look for Other Sources of Information

If you get the opportunity buy any magazine dedicated to ostrich farming. Unfortunately many ostrich magazines have come and gone. With the advent of internet, look up any ostrich groups to see if they are of interest to you. Join the local and/or national ostrich association. You can see a list of some of the national associations at <http://www.ostrichresources.com/information/associations.html> .

A Word of Warning

You will find that many people will give you conflicting advice. One farmer will tell you that African black birds are the best breeders to have as they lay most eggs, whilst a breeder with blue neck ostriches, will tell you that this birds are best because they have a bigger frame, and have more meat on them. The important thing here is records. Only if you start to record, can you identify if a breeding entity is a good producer or not. There are some very good black neck birds, and very poor black neck birds. There are also some very good blue neck ostriches, and some very poor blue neck ostriches. It is their performance that counts. Obviously a farmer who has one type of breed, will push his own breed in the hope of making a sale.

Solidify Your Plan on How you Want to Start

At this point, we now ask you to complete a questionnaire at http://www.ostrichresources.com/farming/buying_birds_questionnaire.php .

This is to assess how far down the line you have thought about setting up an ostrich activity, and the size of it.

You now have an action plan of what you must ask and to whom, and also some sort of idea of how you want your farm to be.

Objectives File

Now set aside one file and label it “Objectives”

Take a blank piece of paper and write **Setting Up Farm Objectives**. Quantify what you want to do eg. I want to buy 10 trios or 200 chicks monthly for 4 months. Take this information from the questionnaire you have completed. This is your idea of how you are planning your enterprise. Your objective.

Write a heading called **Production Objectives**. Now quantify your production expectations. If you want to start to farm with breeder birds, right for example 40 eggs per hen. If you are raising chicks, your production objective may be maximum mortality of 20%.

You should only need one piece of paper, and write down what you expect to achieve.

At 1st January the following year, take your objectives file and record your actual results. Compare to your expected and see if you have fulfilled your objective. Now with your experience behind you start a new sheet entitled “Objectives yyyy” where yyyy is the year no. eg. 2009. Repeat the process of what you want to achieve and your production objectives.

This is an excellent way for you to keep a check on your productivity results. Highlight those areas that need attention, and take action. If you have six production units (pens of breeders) and five of them are producing over 40 eggs per hen per year and the sixth is producing 20, then cull the sixth. Improve your performance. Remember you are farming to produce results.

A Final Word

Starting an ostrich enterprise can be very exciting. We hope we can share some of our enthusiasm with you. We have ostrich farming and product market experience, so hopefully we can guide you through the pros and cons of your chosen options.

Well, we hope you have enjoyed our Information Guide on “How to Start a Successful Ostrich Farm without Breaking the Bank”

We wish you every success in your ostrich enterprise.

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