Birds: Ostrich

Range: Central and southern Africa
Habitat: savanna and desert

Born to run
The ostrich is the largest and heaviest living bird. It is a flightless bird that can never take to the skies, so instead it's built for running. Its long, thick, and powerful legs can cover great distances without much effort, and its feet have only two toes for greater speed.

Ostriches can sprint in short bursts up to 43 miles per hour (70 kilometers per hour), and they can maintain a steady speed of 31 miles per hour (50 kilometers per hour). Just one of an ostrich's strides can be 10 to 16 feet (3 to 5 meters) long—that's longer than many rooms! When danger threatens, ostriches can escape pretty easily by running away. They can also defend themselves: they have a 4-inch (10-centimeter) claw on each foot, and their kick is powerful enough to kill a lion.

What are the wings for?
If they can't fly, why do they have wings? For one thing, ostriches hold their wings out to help them balance when they run, especially if they suddenly change direction. Their main use, though, is for displays and courtship, along with the tail feathers. To show dominance, an ostrich holds its head up high and lifts its wings and tail feathers; to show submission, the head, wings, and tail droop down.
During courtship, the black-and-white male uses his dramatic coloring to attract the light brown female. He sinks slowly to the ground, almost like he's bowing, and begins to wave and shake the feathers of first one wing and then the other while moving his tail up and down. He then gets up and moves toward the female, holding his wings out and stamping as he goes to impress her. If she approves, she will mate with him.

**Birds of a feather**

Unlike many birds, ostrich feathers are loose, soft, and smooth. They don't hook together the way feathers of other birds do, giving ostriches that "shaggy" look. The feathers can also get soaked in the rain, because ostriches do not have the special gland many birds have to waterproof their feathers while preening.

**A big bird herd**

Ostriches like to live in groups, which helps with defense. With their long necks and keen vision, they can see long distances, so in a group at least one of them is likely to see danger coming. Ostriches sometimes gather in large groups of 100 or more, but most groups are smaller, usually about 10 birds, or just a male and female pair. The groups have a pecking order, with a dominant male that establishes and defends a territory, a dominant female called the "main hen," and several other females. Lone males may also come and go during breeding season.

**Nesting duty**

The dominant or "alpha" hen mates with the territorial male, and they share the tasks of incubating the eggs and caring for the chicks. The other females may mate with that male or other wandering males, then lay their eggs in the same nest as the main hen's eggs.

The main hen puts her eggs in the center of the nest to make sure they have the best chance of hatching, but many of the
See them
Wild Animal Park: See our ostrich flock from the Journey into Africa or Photo Caravan tour.

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other eggs may also be incubated. Usually the main hen takes incubation duty during the day, then the male takes over and incubates during the night. A few days after the chicks hatch, they leave the nest—which is really just a scrape in the ground—to travel with their parents. The adults shelter them under their wings to protect them from sun and rain, and they defend the chicks against predators.

Do they put their heads in the sand?
Actually, that’s a myth: ostriches do not bury their heads in the sand! When an ostrich senses danger and cannot run away, it flops to the ground and remains still, with its head and neck flat on the ground in front of it. Because the head and neck are lightly colored, they blend in with the color of the soil. From a distance, it just looks like the ostrich has buried its head in the sand, because only the body is visible.

Stones with dinner
Ostriches are omnivores, and they eat whatever is available in their habitat and at different times of the year. They mostly eat plants, especially roots, leaves, and seeds, but they also munch on insects like locusts and small animals like lizards. When an ostrich eats, food is collected in the crop at the top of the throat until there is a large enough lump to slide down the neck.

Ostriches eat things that other animals can’t digest. They have tough intestines that are 46 feet (14 meters) long—if you stretched them out—in order to absorb as many nutrients as possible. These big birds also swallow sand, pebbles, and small stones that help grind up food in the gizzard. Ostriches do not need to drink water, since they get what they need from the plants they eat, although they will drink if they come to a water hole. They also have a special way of raising their body temperature on hot days to reduce water loss.

The ostriches at the San Diego Zoo’s Wild Animal Park are fed a special bird pellet diet containing vitamins and minerals, along with browse and vegetables like carrots and broccoli.

http://www.sandiegozoo.org/animalbytes/t-ostrich.html
Ostriches are curious and inquisitive, especially about anything bright or shiny—like a camera lens!