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Quick facts

Video Byte: Ostrich**Photo Bytes****Class:** *Aves* (Birds)**Order:** Struthioniformes**Family:** Struthionidae**Genus:** *Struthio***Species:** *camelus***Subspecies:**

- *camelus* (North African)
- *molybdophanes* (Somali)
- *massaicus* (Masai)
- *australis* (South African)

Height: male—6.9 to 9 feet (2.1 to 2.7 meters); female—5.7 to 6.2 feet (1.7 to 1.9 meters)

Weight: male—220 to 287 pounds (100 to 130 kilograms); female—198 to 242 pounds (90 to 110 kilograms)

Life span: 30 to 40 years

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.

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Size of egg: averages 6 x 5 inches (15 x 13 centimeters) in size and weighs about 3 pounds (1,500 grams)

Incubation: 42 to 46 days

Number of young at hatch: up to 25 from different females in a common nest

Age of maturity: 3 to 4 years

Conservation status: lower risk



Lower risk

Fun facts

- An ostrich's eye is almost 2 inches (5 centimeters) across, the largest eye of any land animal.
- When family groups of ostriches meet, they may challenge each other with short chases, then the winning adult pair takes all the chicks with them. Some of these "ostrich nurseries" can end up with 300 chicks and only a couple of adults to look after them all!
- One ostrich egg is equivalent to the weight of about 24 chicken eggs!
- Ostriches are attracted to small, shiny objects and peck curiously at them.

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

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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

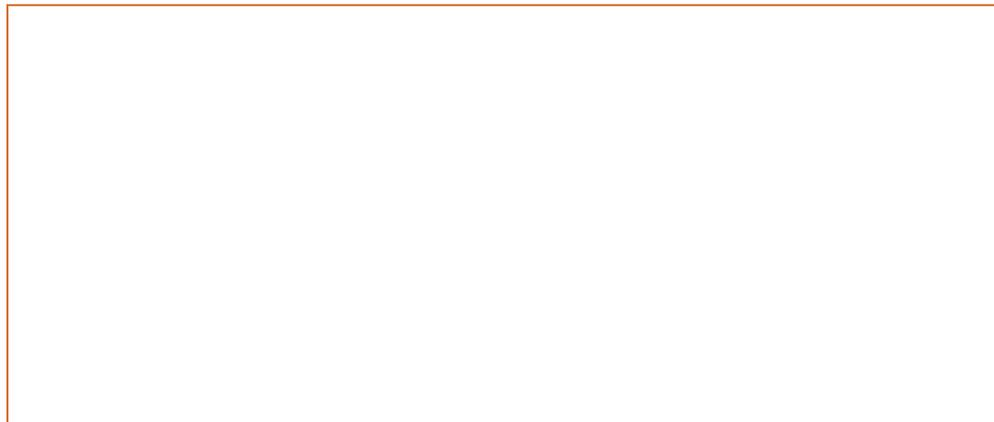
lightly colored, they blend in with the color of the soil. From a distance, it just looks like the ostrich has buried its head in the sand, because only the body is visible.

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.



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Photo Bytes

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Ostriches are curious and inquisitive, especially about anything bright or shiny—like a camera lens!

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