

Game ranching in Kenya

Part two

The purpose of my visit to South Africa was to gather enough information on ostriches and ostrich farming to be able to initiate an ostrich farm on the ranch in Kenya. I stayed in the district of Oudtshoorn (Little Karoo) and interviewed different ostrich farmers.



Oudtshoorn : Ostrich Capital of South Africa

I was basically interested in finding out how, and to what extent, the ostrich industry could be profitable. With the idea of exploring the different aspects of the ostrich industry, I visited a feather factory, a slaughter and tannery house, an ostrich experimental farm, museums and libraries.

Interestingly, most of the farmers I questioned were reluctant to give away much information on their practise because of their fear of foreign competition. Anyway, I gathered enough information on breeding, feeding, diseases, plucking, slaughtering and marketing to make my stay worthwhile.



Meerkats in the Little Karoo, South Africa

I also discovered that ostrich riding was a very popular tourist attraction in the ostrich farms of Oudsthoorn. The ostrich is not used as a means of transport even though ostriches can be ridden as well as horses and hockeys train to play polo on ostrich backs !



an ostrich race

I actually took an ostrich-riding lesson and these are some of the notes I took after my painful experience :

- The ostrich is caught by the neck with a hooked stick and a hood is put over its head. At least two people are needed to hold the ostrich still.
- Then stand to one side, out of the reach of the ostrich front kick. Hold the lower part of the neck and throw one leg over the back. You do not need any saddle, any bridle or stirrups to ride an ostrich.
- The wings are the safest part to hold onto. Grab the bones of the wings but NOT the feathers, as if they are ripe, they are ready to come off their sockets !
- Sit at the very end of the back slope. It is safer to sit at the very back because you are most likely to fall behind the ostrich legs, out of their reach.
- Tuck your legs under the wings and along the ostrich sides.
- To stop the ostrich, take hold of the upper part of the neck with one hand and pull downwards towards you. Once the ostrich cannot see its way, it immediately stops. Do NOT twist the neck as you pull it because you can kill an ostrich this way !
- To put the ostrich in reverse, keep on pulling the neck until the ostrich steps backwards.
- At last, if you have a chance to go forward and if you want to turn, open the wing to the side you are aiming for and give extra weight (not too much) by slightly bending your back to the chosen direction.
- To get down, simply let yourself slide down the back and land on the ground on your two feet.



Because of its peanut-sized brain, the ostrich, even though it can be tamed to a certain extent, cannot possibly be trained to be ridden. One has to choose an easy-going ostrich to ride in order to prevent accidents such as heart attacks or broken legs. At a speed of 30 kmph, the fall from an ostrich back can be painful, so practice riding in a paddock where the ostrich cannot run full speed.

To be honest, I spent more time listening to the instructions than actually riding the ostrich ...I was thrown off its back a few seconds after the hood had been lifted off its head and I was not too keen on having a second try !

Naturally, there are many **African folktales** about this flightless bird. These stories and legends are not only entertaining but are also meant to teach a lesson, of a moral value or of survival. A great number of these are based on talking animals with human characteristics and faults such as greed, jealousy and foolishness. One case in point is the story of **How the Ostrich Got His Long Neck**.

Mr Ostrich was a sober-minded, serious husband who was always willing to assist his wife in her family duties.



a female ostrich shifting the position of the eggs

One evening, as their large clutch of eggs were ready to hatch, he kindly told his wife that he would sit on the nest at night since his black feathers could not be seen in the darkness while she should relax and enjoy herself until daybreak.

Of course, his wife was more than thankful to be relieved of her tiresome duty and quickly set off, her feathers all fluffed up from excitement.

The site of the nest had been carefully chosen to allow the sitting ostrich to see all around her without stretching her neck. In those days, the ostrich had a short neck like a guinea-fowl and the couple knew full well that in long grass their enemies could attack them before they realised their danger.

On that particular night, it was full moon. Its silvery light shed strange shadows on the dry, dusty earth. The male ostrich was getting dozy and his head was beginning to nod from weariness when a hissing laugh - his wife's - echoed in the air. Straining his short neck to its utmost limit, he saw her playing a wild game of hide-and-seek with a handsome young ostrich in hot pursuit !



A young male trying to seduce a female

Mr Ostrich half rose from the nest but he could not leave the eggs unattended. His flirting wife and her disgraceful behaviour made him very annoyed. Of course, he tried to keep an eye on her as she dodged and raced between the moon-lit termite mounds. He strained his neck further and further to catch sight of her. Her foolish giggles went on and on.

At last, the long, tedious night came to an end. Mrs Ostrich appeared out of the grey distance to take over her duties. By then, Mr Ostrich was determined to punish his wife for her undignified behaviour. But as he rose from the nest, he felt a strangeness in the muscles of his neck. He realised with a shock that, as a result of all the straining that he had done during that long night, his neck had stretched and stretched and stretched beyond return.

And that is why the ostrich has a long neck - a lasting and painful memory of a flighty wife.



To be continued ...