

Game ranching in Kenya

Part one

It all started with a conference on **desertification** in Nairobi. One of the speakers was David H., a native of Kenya and a specialist in veterinary sciences and ranch management. He had just launched an experimental project of **game ranching in Kenya** to tackle the issue of desertification caused by imported cattle. At the end of the conference, my father exchanged a few words with him and casually added that his daughter would love to visit his farm during her summer holiday. David just answered that she would be welcome to visit ANY time. I took him at his word : I came to Kenya just a few months later, after graduating from high school in New York City. It was supposed to be a summer job ... it turned out to be an eighteen-month-stay that profoundly marked my life.

When I eventually called my father at the end of that summer to ask him if I could stay longer, he agreed on ONE condition : « *Find yourself a project to make your extended stay worthwhile.* »

I promised I would and I did : I studied ostriches, wrote a thesis on **ostrich farming** and presented it to the biology department of my college to get some credit for it. Since the game ranching project in Kenya was partly financed by Cornell University, my work was recognized as academic studies and I was eventually admitted as a sophomore.



male ostrich on the ranch

What is game ranching ?

In the 1970's it was a rather new concept of land use : to propose wildlife ranching as an alternative to cattle ranching in the low rainfall areas of Africa. Since then, the concept has been widely exploited throughout the African continent.

David's idea was rather simple : instead of destroying the environment and spending limited financial resources on supporting the non-adapted cattle and cattle-associated industries, he was to utilize the indigenous herbivores which were such a vast, valuable and renewable resource of the continent. « These animals live here despite us. We've not spent any money keeping them alive. » said David waving an arm at the distant hills, where giraffes and Grant gazelles roamed freely in a preserved environment.



Mother cheetah with cubs



Grant gazelle

David had estimated that his land's capacity was about 15,000 wild animals of 20 different species. Once these numbers had been reached, he would start shooting a proportion equal to the natural increase to preserve the natural balance between climate, soil, vegetation and animals. His ranch would eventually produce three to four times more meat than by raising cattle !



drought-stricken cattle in Kenya

According to David, desertification in low rainfall areas was mainly caused by mismanagement of the land and the overstocking and overgrazing of livestock. He did prove that his visionary project was commercially attractive as well as ecologically sound. The fact is that there are hundreds of such private game ranches now operating in Kenya and all over the world.

When I arrived on the ranch, the project was still in its experimental stage and was not the major commercial enterprise it has become over the past thirty years.



Giraffe in Swara plains

First, the ranch had to be fenced to keep the wild animals in, mainly giraffes, ostriches, gazelles, zebras, impalas, elands, buffaloes, oryxes, warthogs and of course, the usual predators : lions, cheetahs, hyenas and jackals. Actually, one of my first tasks was to number the poles along the homemade chain-link fence that ran more than 30 miles, enclosing 20,000 acres of rolling grassland dotted with umbrella-shaped acacias and thorn trees.

Thorn trees were to become part of one of my most frightening experiences on the ranch. One day, as I was cycling through the savanna in search of ostriches, I came across a male ostrich sitting on its nest. Feathers all puffed out, roaring and flapping its wings, it chased me away ready to attack me with its powerful kick and beak. My survival instinct urged me to jump into a thorn tree, hoping that the thorns would be enough to protect me. We stood there, face to face, for a long moment that felt like an eternity to me. Eventually, the male ostrich left me to go back to its nest that had been unattended for too long. That day, David showed me an impressive scar on his arm : he had been kicked by an ostrich once and had come to the conclusion that the best defence technique was to lie down in front of the ostrich to avoid its sharp nail !



ostrich male on the watch

I ate my first gazelle steak on the ranch, together with a group of journalists from the New York Times who had been invited to a very « special » barbecue. On that occasion, we all learnt about the benefits of game meat : it lacks saturated fats and cholesterol that make top-grade beef a health hazard for so many and a prime cause of heart disease. The rancher insisted on the fact that the gazelle had to be shot in the head and not in the heart to allow the animal to bleed completely. This was mainly the reason why gazelle meat sometimes tasted « gamey » : it had not been shot properly or it had been poorly refrigerated before cooking.

I had to wait one year - until my visit to an ostrich farm in South Africa - to eat my first ostrich-egg omelette and my first ostrich steak !

When you know that a male ostrich can weigh up to 150 kg, you can imagine how hard the ostrich eggshell is ... you obviously need a hammer in your kitchen to break the egg open !



Herd of young ostriches on the ranch



Egyptian vulture

Very few animals make use of tools to feed themselves. The Egyptian vulture is one of them. It throws stones onto an ostrich nest to have a chance to crack one of its eggs open. One day, I was rewarded with this amazing sight. The female ostrich was pecking seeds away from the eggs and an Egyptian vulture had soon spotted the unattended nest from above. It actually took the vulture fifty-five minutes and a total of one hundred and five throws of stones (I counted them!) to crack one single egg open. What a feast it was then when you know that one ostrich egg weighs 1.5 kilograms and can feed twenty people!



Here are some amazing facts about the ostrich :

- It is the fastest two-legged animal in the world ; it can run up to 40kph with peaks at 70kph.
- It is the largest living species of bird and lays the largest egg of any living bird.



an ostrich nest



- It never runs straight. It zigzags and runs in circles to discourage its predators : cheetahs, lions, leopards and hyenas.
- For camouflage reasons, the male with its black feathers sits on the eggs by night and the greyish-brown female by day.

- It has three stomachs.
- Contrary to popular belief, the ostrich does not bury its head in sand.
- Each male has a harem of two to seven females.

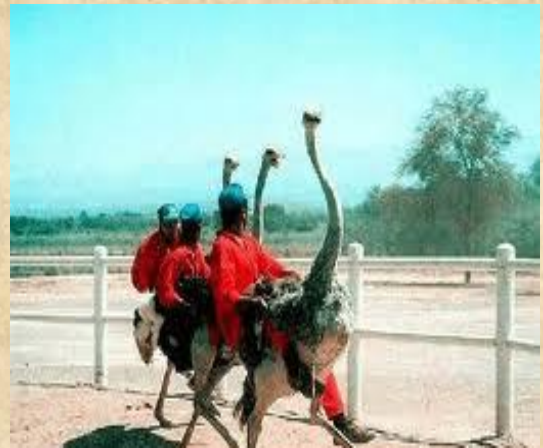


mating dance between a male and a female



- If cornered, it can attack with a kick from its powerful leg which can cause serious injury and death.
- It has two toes on each foot with a nail on the larger, inner toe resembling a hoof.
- When threatened, the ostrich will either hide itself by lying flat against the ground or will run away

- In some countries, people ride ostriches. Polo games on ostriches are very popular in South Africa
- The bushmen in the Kalahari use ostrich eggshells as water containers.
- The ostrich is farmed throughout the world particularly for its feathers. Its skin is used for leather products and its meat is sold commercially.



ostrich meat

- During their first year of life, chicks grow about 25 centimetres per month
- The ostrich lives up to 40-45 years.



ostrich chicks

To be continued ...