

# Ostriches

## Introduction

Interest in ostriches, at various times in the past decade, could lead to the belief that ostrich meat might be a feature of supermarket meat counters along with chicken and turkey. The world wide reality is very different.

For the first few years after the introduction of ostriches to Ireland, the price of breeding stock was unrealistically high, a trio costing several thousand euro. The fledgling industry was disjointed.

Processing facilities were not licensed during the breeding highpoint and no ostriches are being processed - as of mid 2006. There is no ostrich industry. There is no medium term prospect for the financial success of an ostrich enterprise to rely on efficiency as is the case in the poultry sector.

## The Market

South Africa has the world's largest industry with approximately 400 producers. This is not surprising since the continent of Africa is a natural habitat for ostriches. The business in Ireland has been principally driven by a small number of breeding stock holders with very small quantities of meat product coming on the market. That market declined very significantly after the initial robust commercial promotion.

There is no ready market. Each potential producer must source a market, otherwise financial failure is inevitable. Ostrich is known as the healthy red meat alternative and this is where its marketing potential lies. It is a low fat, low calorie, low cholesterol alternative to traditional red meat, is high in protein and highly palatable. Farmers markets and good restaurants may offer a local outlet for this 'exotic' meat. The meat is known as volaise.

## Getting Started

Evaluate the farm resources. Decide if the operation is going to be a "whole cycle" operation i.e. breeding stock, egg incubation, rearing and marketing of table birds or a single enterprise. If beginning afresh it has advantages to buy in young partly grown stock and get practical experience of managing the birds while relatively small, for some time before having to handle mature stock that can essentially be described as wild animals. If buying in very young birds at a few days old it is necessary to have a brooding area for them; that is an insulated area, where supplementary heat is provided until the birds have sufficient feather growth to maintain their body temperature.



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This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website  
[www.teagasc.ie](http://www.teagasc.ie)

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Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources

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## Breeding Stock

Birds will be micro-chipped. Read the chip and then see the farm production record and other details for the stock being purchased. Egg production is reported to be unpredictable with figures from 20 to 100 being quoted. The 100 should be regarded with some scepticism until evidence is available. Likewise, hatchability of eggs shows wide variation.

Ultimately, your starting and finishing points will depend on your market. Ostriches produce three saleable products:

- **Meat**
- **Leather**
- **Feathers**

(Decorated empty egg shells are also in some demand).

## Bird Description

There are three kinds: Black, Blue and Rednecks. Ostriches are the world's largest birds. They are not birds of flight. Their strong muscular legs facilitate movement at up to 40 miles per hour. They have small brains and their protection in the wild is mainly through their excellent eyesight, hearing and speed of foot. They kick forward with their single sharp claw and this is dangerous to stock people. Adult height is 2.2 metres and male weight is in the region of 135kg at 16 months.

## Production Method

Ostrich farming is one of the most open, free range farming systems wherever it is practiced. Ostriches are easily capable of withstanding the Irish climate. They have long lives and a female may be productive for over 30 years. On average, a breeding trio of ostriches require at minimum, a half hectare and since they need exercise they should have a run of at least 36 metres. The ostrich paddocks should be well fenced to a height of 1.7m. Ostriches are a grazing bird with a staple diet of grass or lucerne supplemented with poultry-type feeds. The breeding season begins in March and can last into September.

Feed may account for 60% of production costs.

## Land

0.5 ha for a breeding trio for exercise and grazing. 2 hectares at least are required for 25 young birds between 8-14 months old. These birds can roam freely in natural conditions and while restriction is absolutely essential, their origin cannot be ignored when allocating land area.

## Buildings

Shelter is needed from rain as feathers contain little or no natural oils. After the brooding stage shelter is provided so that the birds can choose to stay in from the rain and wind and to keep food dry in inclement weather.

## Hygiene

Good hygiene practices are essential at all levels for efficient ostrich production. As quality and traceability become increasingly important for supermarkets and consumers, it is wise for ostrich producers to implement good management practices from day one. Ostriches can suffer from bacteriological, viral, parasitic and nutritional disorders.

An Irish Ostrich Association was in place for a few years. The British Ostrich Association is advertising and could be a source of stock contacts for start-up. Tread cautiously. Independent research on ostriches in a western European context is not available. Published performance data is from vested interests.