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maybe better than Sesame's Big Bird

Western Oklahoma's Big Birds

BY MARGIE SNOWDEN NORTH



Hundreds of years ago, great flocks of ostriches roamed over the plains and deserts of Africa and Western Asia. Arabs hunted them for sport, and Africans took their eggs for food or killed them for their showy plumes. As a result, the ostrich disappeared from Asia and from much of Africa.

Several months ago, the world's largest living bird finally made it to Western Oklahoma. They came via an enclosed stock trailer and at the invitation of Glenda and Elvoy King, who had been contemplating such a venture for some time. "We had always thought it would be fun to do something with animals," Glenda says. So they went on safaris. They visited Dale Coody's ostrich farm near Lawton. They read about ostrich-growing in the CADDO RURAL ELECTRIC NEWSLETTER. "Elvoy read that article and said, 'This is what I want to do!'"

It was with Mr. Coody's assistance that the Kings located their birds in Grand Junction, Colorado. The cost was \$7,700.00 for one adult male, three adult females, and two chicks. "We probably could have gotten them cheaper, but we were in a hurry," was Glenda's explanation. Six-week-old chicks generally sell for about \$400.00, an adult female for twelve to fifteen hundred, and male birds for around a thousand. If that seems a bit steep, a visit to your nearest Western wear store will reveal price ranges for ostrich-skin boots from four to eight hundred dollars a pair. And how do the Kings feel about ostrich-skin boots? "I have a pair made from the skin of the legs!" Elvoy confides. "Other animals are raised for slaughter. Why not the ostrich?"

The Kings' fledgling ostrich farm is located at a point between Erick and Sweetwater (Beckham County) and is one of perhaps a half-dozen in Oklahoma and some thirty nationwide. Ideally situated, it is almost within a stone's throw of the Northfork of Red River. Are the birds allowed bathing privileges there?

"So far, we're leery of letting them out of the pen," Glenda says. "They can outrun a horse. There's really no way to catch them if they decide to get away." Then what would be their procedure if one should escape? "If one is running from you," Elvoy explains, "you know he's alarmed. I would try not to disturb it until it settled down. A regular barbed-wire fence won't hold an ostrich; the bird runs right through the fence."

The size of these unusual birds is as imposing as their track (and take that literally) record. They stand approximately eight feet tall and weigh in at over three hundred pounds. The Kings' largest one is close to four hundred. Those long, two-toed legs can carry them in fifteen-foot steps at speeds up to

forty miles an hour and are useful as weapons. Were they leery of the birds at first? "We respect them," Elvoy says. "But we've never been afraid." So far, they have seen only one of their birds kick. The family dog had become a nuisance, and the not-so-gentle hint he received as a result quickly made a believer of him.

It is the opinion of some of the more unfeeling among us that an ostrich wouldn't likely pose a substantial threat in a beauty contest. Glenda firmly maintains that an ostrich's personality more than compensates for its appearance. An unimpassioned observer sees a gangling character with a head much like that of a camel (possibly the reason ostriches are sometimes called camel birds, but more likely the nickname originated when the discovery was made that the birds can go for long periods of time without water. Also noteworthy is the scientific term for ostriches, *Struthio camelus*, which would seem to indicate a relationship with camels somewhere down the line.) The neck is like a giraffe's--very long and slender--with few feathers. The wings might have been an afterthought; they are extremely small and used only for balance.

To Glenda, the birds are adorable, and she has affectionately named each one. The two chicks are called Liz and Lisa. The male is J. R. (naturally), and the females are Gwendolyn, Gertrude, and Olive Oyl. In all sincerity (and perhaps with some indignance), Glenda declares, "We really need to do something to improve the ostrich image. You go into toy stores and see all sorts of stuffed animals: dogs, cats, bears. We need some stuffed ostriches!" (Are you listening Playmates, Mattel, Johnson & Johnson?)

Ostriches living in Africa subsist on plants, lizards, and turtles. More civilized birds must be satisfied with cracked corn, rabbit pellets, and produce of literally any description. "The only thing we've found that they don't eat well," says Glenda, "is sweet potatoes. Those are saved for the very last. They will eat plums, lettuce, peaches, onions, lemons, you-name-it." The Kings go into Erick daily to pick up unsalable produce the food stores gladly give away. Cost for feeding amounts to about fifty cents per bird per day, though during laying season when more protein is advisable they feed Trout Chow, which raises feeding costs substantially.

How do ostriches while away their day? "You would be surprised," Glenda claims. "Typically, they graze, lie down and rest--just the normal, everyday routine for any type livestock. But occasionally they will get the urge to play. They will spin in circles until they are too drunk to walk. Sometimes they will run from one end of the pen to

the other, picking their feet up high like a trotting horse, and spin and spin with their feathers all fluffed up so that all the white ones underneath are visible. They have a gracefulness that you can't imagine until you see it for yourself."

Being near the river and all that sand, no doubt the Kings' birds have taken advantage of that age-old pastime for which ostriches are noted. But-- "No," Glenda answers. "I don't know where the saying originated that ostriches stick their heads in the sand, but it's just not so. It's only a myth."

Except for the two chicks, the Western-Oklahoma ostriches are two years old and at the standard age for parenthood. They're by nature polygamous, and the ideal situation is a quartet: one male and three females. From these unions the possibilities are impressive. The hens are expected to lay from thirty to fifty eggs during a season that begins in March and continues into June or early July. High temperatures quickly curb productiveness.

The eggs weigh about three pounds and are a beautiful cream color with a faint surface design resembling that of an orange. They are almost translucent and resemble porcelain. As a result, they are easily transformed into decorations by those who are artistically inclined or made into bowls. Though the Kings don't plan to get heavily involved in that facet of the business, they will look into the possibility of selling the empty shells after hatching their chicks. And Glenda is presently doing some artistic experimenting with a few of them.

When one of the Kings' seven children asked with curiosity, "Dad, why do you want ostriches?," Elvoy returned glibly, "With so many in our family, it's the only way to have scrambled eggs." Indeed, one ostrich egg is reputed to afford a hearty meal for eight, according to one source of information.

Although the eggs are certainly edible and have occasionally graced the dinner table of the Kings' lovely, double-wide mobile home, eggs with quarter-inch shells aren't broken by whacking them on the side of a skillet. Such action could well result in a slightly damaged piece of cookware. Instead, the shell must be drilled or sawed into with care. In the King home, a saw and drill are now standard equipment for the kitchen.

But the majority of Glenda and Elvoy's eggs will be candled for fertility and placed into the 65-egg incubator they will be purchasing soon. After forty-five days, the cycle will be completed and babies weighing about three pounds will emerge, covered with spotted down that blends with the surroundings and protects those that are in the wilds from their enemies.

At six weeks, the chicks are ready to market. The biggest obstacle here is gaining the ability to "sex" the chicks, according to the Kings. They are a year old before the color comes that distinguishes male from female (males are black; females, gray). Some growers who have been in the business for years still are unable to determine whether they are looking at a male or female. "But," Elvoy says, "I'll just have to learn to distinguish them because you must be able to guarantee sexes to buyers."

They are looking forward with optimism to that first sale. They will perhaps advertise in newspapers, but word of mouth is usually all the advertisement needed. There are "brokers" (Glenda's terminology. Could they also be called "poulterers"?) who deal in ostriches just as there are those who deal in real estate. Once they get wind of a new outlet, they are sure to beat a path to the Kings' front door.

Do they expect to get rich? There are delighted laughs from both of them. "I hope so," Glenda responds. "But I've learned to be happy with what I've got and that way I'm not so often disappointed. If they pay for themselves, so much the better." Elvoy adds, "That wasn't why I got into it. I like a challenge; I'll try anything. I've always been fascinated with ostriches, and I think I wanted the learning experience more than anything."

And a final question. What in the world do ostrich eggs taste like? "Just like a chicken egg," Glenda says. "The only difference is in the appearance: the egg white remains clear even after it's cooked." In order to prove her point about the taste, she later sent some muffins over to my family and me (we happen to be neighbors). They were indeed delicious, and the texture was no different than muffins containing chicken eggs.

The Kings have kiddingly suggested to a restaurant owner they know that he might take advantage of some of the giant-sized eggs in his business. And who knows? It just might not be a laughing matter. If you wander into your favorite restaurant one day in the near future and the menu lists "fried egg for eight," it will probably indicate that the ostrich-egg cuisine has arrived in Oklahoma--and very possibly the Kings will have played a hand in that transition. ■

MARGIE SNOWDEN NORTH, a faithful WESTVIEW contributor, now becomes the Betty McDonald of the ostrich industry. From her typewriter on a farm near Erick, MASN has sent us many other engaging works such as this one.