

Livestock Handling: Ostrich and Emu

Type of Stock

Ostrich

Ostriches are normally sociable birds who like human company and are naturally curious creatures. Female ostriches are nearly always amiable, however, there are exceptions to the rule and knowledge of individual bird temperament is useful. Care must be taken during the breeding cycle which generally runs from August to March. The male birds are territorial and colour up red on their beaks and legs which shows they are mature and ready to breed. Aggression can be recognised when they stand to their full height with wings spread and the tail is upright. Some also hiss like a snake. You can be seriously injured or killed by being kicked or ripped by the large claw on their toe.

Ostriches normally kick forward. If you get stranded without any escape or protection close by, there are two things you can do if attacked:

1. Lie flat on your stomach on the ground and protect your head; or
2. **Only attempt this if you are confident in the handling of these birds:**

Stay close to the bird and grab the neck and hang onto the fold of skin at the rear of the head similar to the way you would pick up a kitten. This effectively cuts off the air supply to the bird and in a very short time it will sit or fall down. This can be enough to stop the bird from carrying on any further attack.

Like most stock, ostriches are easier to handle when they are settled. Warm sunny days are best when moving them to new pens or pasture. Ostriches can be affected by cold or wet days and are then difficult to shift.

Emu

Emus, like ostriches, are generally quite docile and curious birds. Birds that are used to people and are moved periodically in and out of pens cause very few or no problems. Male birds are usually quiet with a pecking order amongst the females in a mob situation. Emus can strike out with their feet both backwards and forwards. Care should be exercised when catching and handling adult birds. They can also be hooded to calm them down.

Fencing Requirements

Boundary fences for both emus and ostriches need to be a minimum of 2 metres high and preferably made of deer netting.

Internal fencing can be made of netting and as high as required for the age and type of bird, e.g. 2 metres for breeder pens and 1 metre for chick runs.

Suitability of Yards

Always look for possible improvements to your existing yards and bird handling systems. If you are not sure of your existing yards and bird handling systems, you may require additional information before starting work.

Principles of Ostrich Yard Design

Site

Yards should be situated on an area of firm free-draining ground with a surface material that allows people and birds to move freely in all weathers. Metal or concrete surfaces are preferable.

Shape

Square or oblong areas seem to be proving successful for yarding.

Rails

Timber rails at the top of the fencing around yards help to keep birds that get a bit excited in. Some birds tend to be a little “flighty” after being transported then set free.

Gates

Gates for pens ideally should be as high as your yard fences and extend right to the ground. Also, gates are more practical if they can be swung to open both in and out. This allows an easy escape route for handlers if necessary. Latches should shut firmly and easily.

Pens in General

If there is a need to capture a bird, a pen should be of a size that allows the bird or person to move easily during the time to crook the bird, if necessary, and put a hood on it.

Stock Handling Methods

Capture for Treatment

If you have no means of capture by penning, there are several methods that can be used. With docile birds, scatter a little grain then wait for the bird to look for more. Have a hood that is open at both ends pulled over one hand, grab the beak, then with your free hand pull the hood over the bird’s head to cover the eyes. It is important then to hold the bird until it settles so that it doesn’t try to run. Once it has settled it will stand quietly. A crush can then be used to hold the bird while it is being treated.

Hooding can also be achieved from a short distance with the hood placed over a hooding device at the end of a pole. Once hooded, again, hold the bird until it settles down.

One of the more difficult and stressful ways to capture a large bird is to use a crook. This requires a minimum of two people to action. One person to crook the bird around the neck and have a hood ready. The other person must move quickly to grab the tail close to the rump and hold the bird while the first person hoods the bird and removes the crook. Once crooked, you must force the head down so as not to allow it to stand tall to kick out. Care must be taken when crooking the bird so as not to inadvertently damage its neck.

Drafting from Paddocks and Pens

This can be done quite easily when the birds are settled by using a little bit of grain near the gate. If you are drafting larger birds, care must be taken to keep an eye on any bird that is near you. Birds will generally move in the direction you wish them to go.

Health Effects from Handling Birds

Ostrich and emu are not known for being a significant cause of infection in man. In common with all birds, they carry organisms and lice leading to the following infectious diseases:

- Salmonellosis (gastrointestinal system)
- Psittacosis (respiratory system)
- Campylobacter (gastrointestinal system).

Simple hygiene precautions are recommended, i.e:

- Avoid contact with bird droppings and urine
- Wash hands with soap and water after handling the birds
- Handle birds outside or in a well ventilated space.

Have You Assessed The Critical Factors For Livestock Handling On The Critical Factors Chart?

- Type of stock.
- Suitability of yards.
- Stock handling methods.

References

Further information is contained in:

- Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992
- *Critical Factors Chart*, available from OSH
- *Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Ostrich and Emu*
- *Guidelines for the Provision of Safety, Health and Accommodation in Agriculture*, available from OSH
- *Farm Health and Safety Manual*, available from Federated Farmers