



The ostrich: a wonder of God's creation

J. H. John Peet



An inquisitive ostrich on a farm in Oudtshoorn, South Africa © 2007 Dirk Freder, www.istockphoto.com.

Recently I was looking again at God's 'creation talk' in Job 38-41 and was fascinated by his comments on the ostrich, so I did some searching for more detail.

The male and female ostrich have an obvious difference in their colours: the male is predominantly black whereas the females (and the young) are greyish-brown. A popular myth is that they bury their heads in the sand! They don't – they can't! If they did so, they would be unable to breathe. They appear to be burying their head in the sand because they deliberately swallow sand and pebbles to help grind up their food.

Ostriches eat mostly plants, but also insects, fruits, seeds, nuts, and some small animals (like lizards). They do not need to drink as they can make their own water internally; the rest they get from the vegetation.

Their wings are clearly not designed for flying. The feathers and the wing structure are different from those of flying birds. Rather, they provide insulation against the temperature extremes and have an important role in the courtship ceremony. In addition, these wings are for protection of their chicks. Fascinatingly, they have claws on each wing like the extinct

Archaeopteryx and the modern Hoatzin, for example.

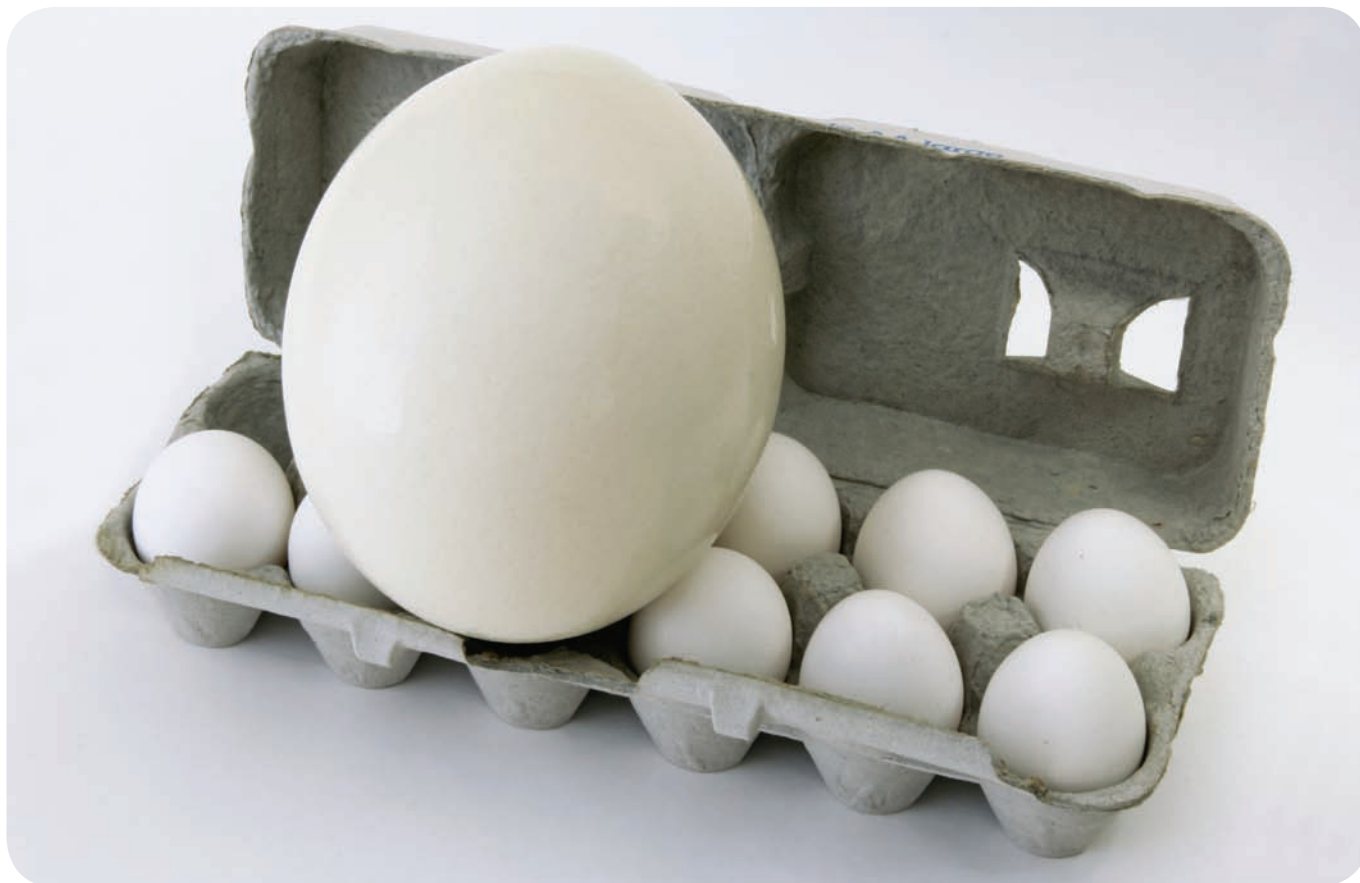
The bird stands on two toes, with the bigger one resembling a hoof. This is a structure unique to ostriches and appears to aid it in running. They can reach speeds of 40 miles per hour. In fact, when threatened, ostriches run away, but they can also seriously injure with kicks from their powerful legs!

“

A popular myth is that they bury their heads in the sand!

They produce the largest bird eggs: three to five pounds in weight (equivalent to about two dozen chicken eggs)! One of their eggs takes an hour to soft boil! An ostrich hen can lay 40-100 eggs per year. The eggs are incubated by the females by day and by the male by night (this matches the colour differences in their feathers: the male, for example, is camouflaged at night and the hen in the day). An ostrich's first response to fear is to run away. This suggests that they do not stay to protect the eggs, but, in running, they attempt to distract a predator to follow them and so it gets lost and the eggs are unharmed.

The bird has not only fascinated man, but is useful to him. They were hunted and farmed for their feathers, which used to be very popular as ornaments in ladies' hats etc. Their skins were also valued to make a fine leather, apparently the strongest commercially available leather. Ostrich meat tastes similar to lean beef but is also low in fat



A carton of eggs, with one that exceeds expectations – an ostrich egg! © 2007 Rick Rhay, www.istockphoto.com.



A male and female ostrich, Botswana © 2007 Roman Kazmin, www.istockphoto.com.

and cholesterol, as well as high in calcium, protein and iron.

Historically, their eggs have been used for various purposes. Ostrich egg beads have been found and it is believed that they originate from the African Middle Stone Age. They were probably made by cracking ostrich eggs, boring holes into the pieces and then smoothing them. Ethnographic records show similar pieces of jewellery are often used for trading or other forms of social interaction (Knight 2004). An ostrich egg vessel was found in the Royal Cemetery in Ur (modern Iraq) and is displayed in the British Museum.

The ostrich's behaviour is also

mentioned in the Bible as part of God's discourse to Job (39:13-18). It is described as:

- **joyfully proud of its small wings;**
- **unmindful of the safety of its nest;**
- **treats its offspring harshly;**
- **lacking in wisdom;**
- **yet can put a horse to shame with its speed!**

Job had been challenging God's actions in his own life and God was asking him what right he had to do so. Could he control the heavens and the earth? Did he make and care for the animals? Of course not. He

did not understand nature so how could he expect to understand its Creator? Job humbled himself before God and repented of his arrogance.

In that discourse, God pointed to the ostrich. What does human wisdom say about its origin? Perhaps it is seen as a mutation, an accident of nature. But God says, 'I made it that way!' This should make us pause to think before we make judgments about the world around us. Let us humbly consider the world and be careful in our scientific conclusions. ■

Reference

Knight, W. (2004). *Ostrich beads indicate early symbolic thought*, 31st March. <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn4839>. Accessed on 18th May 2007.

Note added in proof: Since this article was written, a new piece of research has been done on the ostrich's running technique. When they turn, they are designed to do so with virtually no deceleration; sidesteps and crossovers also hardly affect the speed of motion. This is a unique property and aids their rapid motion.