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Ostriches: Giant Birds



Written by Kira Freed

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Focus Question

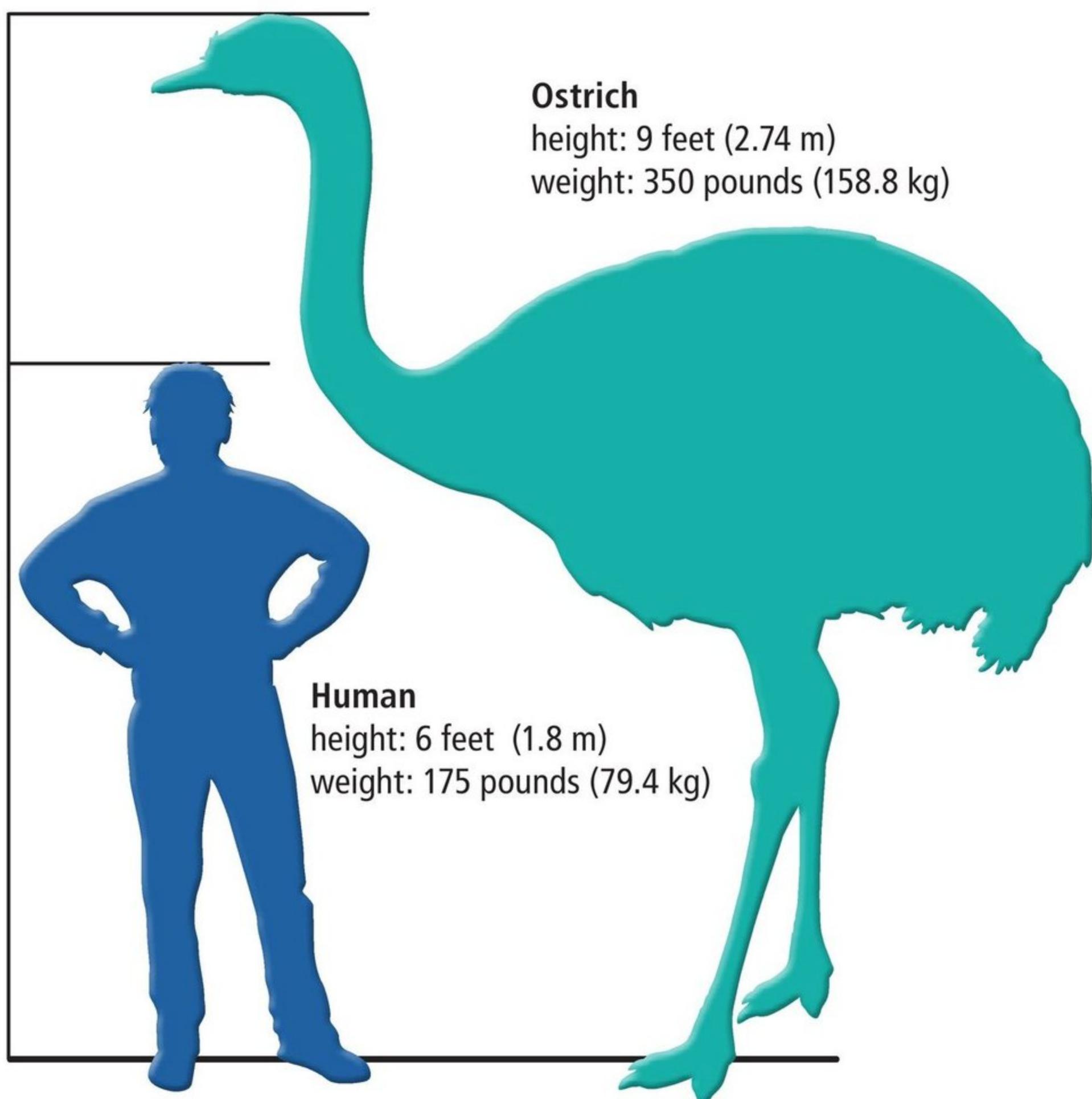
Why are ostriches well suited to live in
the African savanna?



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How Big Is It?



Human

height: 6 feet (1.8 m)
weight: 175 pounds (79.4 kg)

Ostrich

height: 9 feet (2.74 m)
weight: 350 pounds (158.8 kg)

The Original Big Bird

It's huge, it's powerful, and it means business! It's an ostrich—the world's largest living bird—and it's a far cry from the delicate songbirds that come to mind when most people think of birds. Ostriches are marathon runners and heavyweight kickboxers rolled into one. Don't ruffle their feathers or you'll be in a heap of trouble!

No Ordinary Bird

Ostriches are the giants of the bird world. Adult males can grow as tall as 9 feet (2.7 m) with their neck extended and weigh up to 350 pounds (160 kg). Females are slightly smaller but still enormous. Adult males and females are easy to tell apart by their coloring. The males are a striking black and white, while females and **juveniles** are grayish-brown. Some ostriches have pink necks and thighs.



Male and female ostriches take turns watching their chicks until they are full grown.



An ostrich's main toe, which enables it to run fast, has a sharp claw that measures 4 inches (10 cm) long.

Ostriches are different from most birds in that they cannot fly. However, they're the fastest birds on foot. They can run 30 miles per hour (48.2 kph) over a long distance and can sprint up to 45 miles per hour (72.4 kph). In spite of their large size, ostriches are agile and can turn on a dime using their wings for balance. As the only two-toed birds in the world, ostriches are **adapted** for running. They run on each foot's longer toe and use the other toe for balance.

What Makes an Ostrich a Bird?



All birds

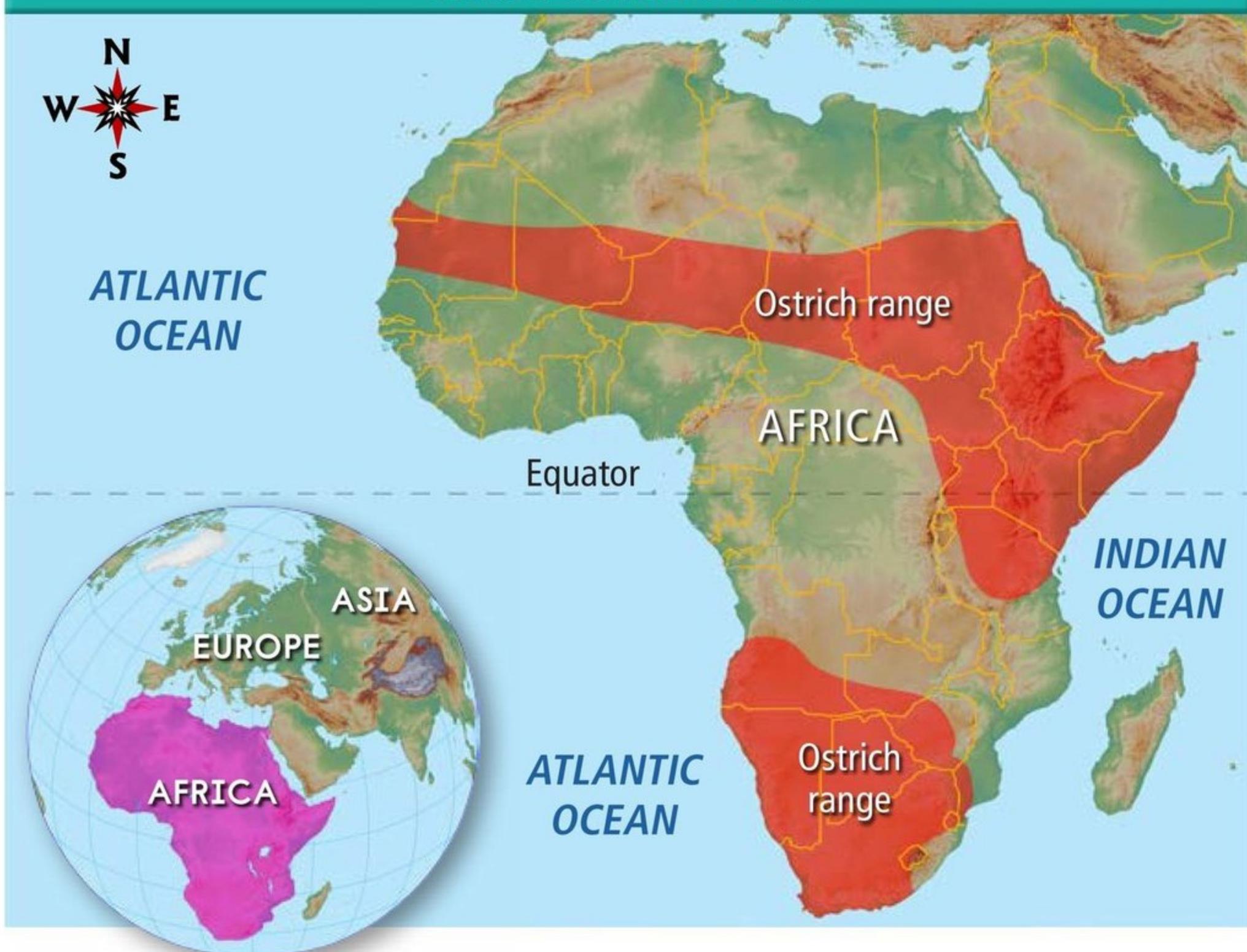
- have a backbone
- have feathers
- have wings
- have a bill
- lay eggs
- are warm-blooded

Ostriches also have unusual feathers. Most birds have stiff feathers with a strong spine down the middle. In contrast, ostriches have soft, fluffy feathers. The feathers protect these giants from sunlight during the day and keep them warm at night.

Most birds have a gland that spreads oil over their feathers when they clean themselves. The oil makes their feathers waterproof. Because ostriches don't have this gland, they can get soaked to the skin when it rains.

These birds have enormous eyes—the largest of any land animal. Each of their eyes measures almost 2 inches (5 cm) across. Their brain is about the same size as one of their eyes, which is quite small for such a huge animal. Ostrich veterinarian Dr. Carole Price says, “Ostriches are as dumb as a box of rocks. They run or fight—they don’t think.” They are, however, curious about everything and have to check it out, whether it’s a wrinkle in a person’s T-shirt or sparkly jewelry. One of these big birds earned the nickname “The \$10,000 Ostrich” after plucking and swallowing one of its owner’s diamond earrings.

Where Ostriches Live

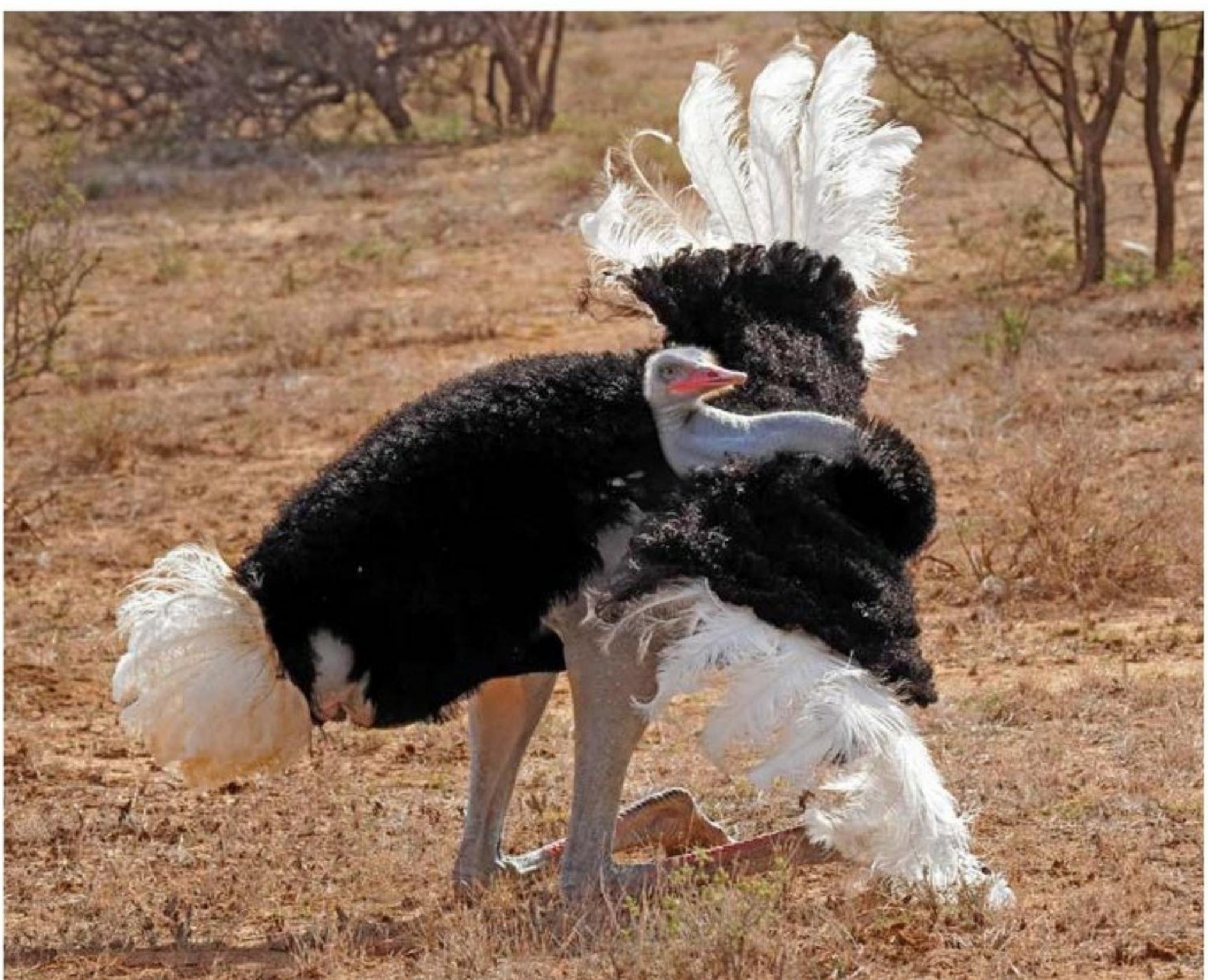


Bird Herd

Ostriches live in African deserts and **savannas**. The areas where they live are dry, with extreme heat during the day and cold temperatures at night.

Ostriches live in herds that usually have fewer than twelve birds, though a group of one hundred or more may occasionally gather near a watering hole. Hanging out in a herd, ostriches use teamwork to stay safe. Their good vision and long necks help them spot danger from far away.

A rooster—the **dominant** male—is in charge of the herd. He makes a roaring “boo-boo-BOO-hoo” call to warn the flock about nearby danger. He also sounds off to **intimidate** other males and impress the females, or hens. The dominant male goes through an elaborate courtship dance to attract the main hen. He bows, shakes one wing at a time, and moves his tail up and down. Then he holds out his wings and approaches the female while stamping his feet.



A male ostrich displays his feathers as part of his courtship dance.



Unlike the legs of humans and many other animals, an ostrich's legs bend forward, producing a powerful kick.

Kickboxing Champs

Ostriches have no trouble holding their own against **predators**. That's where the kickboxing comes in. Their kick is so strong that it can kill a full-grown lion with one blow. In the event that an ostrich can't fight or flee, it lies down and places its long neck on the ground. By staying still in that position, it makes itself less visible. This defense has given rise to the myth that ostriches bury their heads in the sand.



Ostriches don't need to drink water; they get enough from the plants they eat.

Eating like a Bird

Ostriches are **omnivores**. Their typical food is leaves, seeds, and roots. They also eat lizards, snakes, rodents, insects, and any other food they can find if they're hungry. Their diet varies throughout the year, and food is sometimes scarce. To make sure they get as many nutrients as possible from their food, their intestines have evolved to be extra long—46 feet (14 m)—that's almost twice the length of human intestines! These giant birds swallow pebbles and sand to help them grind up food in their **gizzard**, a special digestive organ.



The dominant male ostrich digs a shallow pit in the dirt for the main hen to lay her eggs.

Egg-stra Large

A female ostrich lays six or more eggs in a shallow depression in the sand. All females in the herd place their eggs in the main hen's nest. The main hen sits on them during the day, and the dominant male takes night duty. The eggs hatch after about forty days. Few animals mess with adult ostriches, but their eggs can be stolen by predators such as vultures, jackals, and hyenas, which may also take young ostriches.

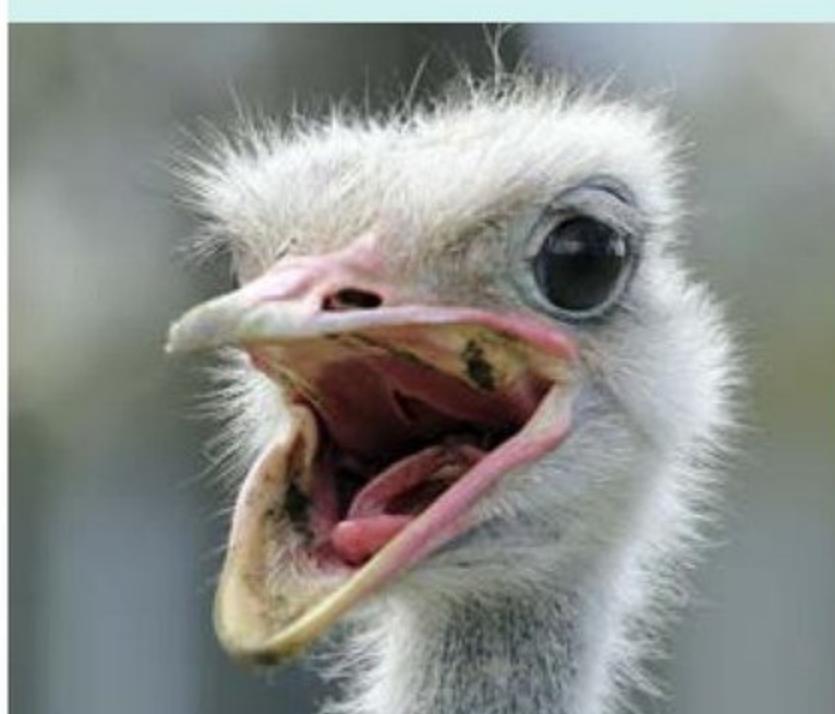
Ostrich chicks are the size of full-grown chickens when they hatch. Males and females work together to care for the chicks. The dominant male protects them by distracting predators and also teaches the chicks what to eat. They grow about 1 foot (30 cm) each month. By the age of six months, they're close to adult size. Ostriches can live to age fifty or older.

Raising Giants

Ostrich numbers dropped sharply in the 1700s and 1800s because they were hunted for their feathers, which were used in women's fashion long ago. They were also hunted for food and leather as well as for making feather dusters. When ostrich farming began in 1838, some wild herds recovered. Wild ostriches are not at risk of becoming **endangered**. Ostriches are now farmed around the world for meat, leather, feathers, and eggs.

Wowser!

- Ostriches lay the world's biggest eggs. It would take two dozen chicken eggs to equal the weight of one ostrich egg. An ostrich egg measures about 6 inches (15 cm) long and weighs about 3 pounds (1.5 kg).
- Ostriches are among *Tyrannosaurus rex*'s closest living relatives. A scientist found a *Tyrannosaurus rex* bone. He compared the



cells to those of twenty-one modern animals. They most closely matched ostriches and chickens.



A female ostrich chases away a rival.

Awesome Birds

Unlike most other birds, ostriches are not timid, delicate, or easily startled. These bold, sturdy creatures hold their ground when challenged. They're agile runners and masterful fighters with a host of fascinating adaptations. Simply put, ostriches are the biggest, baddest birds in the world.

Glossary

adapted (<i>adj.</i>)	changed to fit a new or specific situation or environment (p. 6)
dominant (<i>adj.</i>)	more important, effective, or powerful than others (p. 10)
endangered (<i>adj.</i>)	in danger of dying out completely (p. 14)
gizzard (<i>n.</i>)	an organ in birds that helps grind and break down food (p. 12)
intimidate (<i>v.</i>)	to frighten or overwhelm (p. 10)
juveniles (<i>n.</i>)	young people or other animals that have not reached maturity (p. 5)
omnivores (<i>n.</i>)	animals that eat both plants and animals (p. 12)
predators (<i>n.</i>)	animals that hunt and eat other animals to survive (p. 11)
savannas (<i>n.</i>)	flat grasslands with few trees (p. 9)

Words to Know

adapted
dominant
endangered
gizzard
intimidate

juveniles
omnivores
predators
savannas

Front and back cover: A flock of ostriches flee a predator in Tanzania.

Page 3: Ostriches use half as much energy as humans when they run.

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Giants of the Animal World
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