



## Guidance on the keeping of Ostrich and Emus

Dangerous Wild Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 2004





- 1. Species Names**

*Struthio camelus* - Ostrich  
*Dromaius novaehollandiae* – Emu

Both species belong to a group of birds known as Ratites.
- 2. Additional information**

Emu and ostrich are covered by the legislation. The rhea does not require licensing under the Dangerous Wild Animals Order.

The farming of emu or ostrich may also be subject to regulation by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Anyone requiring further information should contact their local DARD Divisional Veterinary Officer.
- 3. Housing overview**

These birds are normally housed in an outdoor paddock with a secure shelter in which birds may be temporarily housed, for management purposes or in severe weather.

Ostrich and emu are social birds, therefore the keeping of single birds is discouraged.

Adult male ostriches may reach over 2 metres (6 ft 7 in) in height and weigh up to 160kg (25 stone). Emus are smaller at approximately 1.9 metres (6ft 3 in) tall, weighing up to 55kg (8.5 stone).

- 4. Keeping experience** In order to protect the welfare of these birds, keepers, particularly those wishing to farm ostrich and emu, must be able to demonstrate a good knowledge of husbandry, handling and breeding (if applicable), of these birds. Catching and handling the birds in particular requires skill and experience, and should not be attempted by persons unfamiliar with the procedure.

There should normally be a second named person nominated and included on the licence who is competent to care for the birds should the owner be absent or incapacitated.

## Housing Recommendations

- 5. Construction** Ostriches and emus are large, long-necked terrestrial birds which cannot fly, and have strong, powerful legs adapted for running. Any enclosure must be resistant to this. Fences in outdoor enclosures must be strong enough to resist birds running at them, but elastic enough not to injure the birds if they collide.

Any concrete or synthetic floor surfaces should be non-slip, and pens should be grassed. The edges of pens, alongside the fence, should be gravelled, as birds, especially emus, will walk the fence and wear out the ground.

## 6. Fencing

For outdoor enclosures, fencing with either wire mesh or high tensile wire with droppers and tensioners is suitable. Fences should be at least 1.8metres high (5 ft 8 in). If wire mesh is used, the mesh size should be small enough to prevent the birds' head or legs becoming entangled. The fences should be highly visible to prevent accidental collision. Fencing for chicks should include a 30cm (1ft) "kicking board" along the bottom, to prevent chicks putting their legs through the mesh.

It is recommended that a means of escape be provided for keepers, particularly if aggressive males are kept. This can be achieved by leaving a 40 cm (1ft 4 in) gap at the bottom of the fence, through which the birds would be unable to escape, but a person could. This is not practical when chicks are also housed in the enclosure.

Fences should be checked regularly, particularly if tensioned wire is used, to ensure that they are kept secure and in good repair.

The use of barbed wire or hot (electric) wires is not appropriate for these birds.

## 7. Size

### **Recommended Stocking density (adult birds):**

#### **Ostrich**

**Breeding pair** – minimum pen size 15 x 40 metres (50 ft x 130 ft). Pen size of 25 x 80 metres (82 ft x 263 ft) recommended.

**Breeding trio** (2 females, 1 male) – 25 x 80 metres (82 ft x 263 ft), due to possibility of aggression between two female birds.

#### **Emu**

**Breeding pair** – minimum pen size 8 x 20 metres (26 ft x 66 ft). Pen size of 10 x 40 metres (33 ft x 131 ft) recommended.

**Breeding trio** (2 females, 1 male) – 25 x 80 metres (82 ft x 263 ft) due to possibility of aggression between two female birds.

**Colonies (both species):** Recommended maximum stocking rate for large colonies is 20 birds per 100 m<sup>2</sup> (1076 ft<sup>2</sup>).

All outdoor enclosures should have one long side to allow for natural running behaviour and acute angles in fencing should be avoided.

**Chicks** have different space and rearing requirements, and keepers should be able to demonstrate that young birds will be adequately cared for if breeding is intended. As a guide, stocking rates for young ostrich and emu should not exceed 5 tonnes of bird per 100m<sup>2</sup> (1076 ft<sup>2</sup>).

If more than one colony of birds is kept, a visual barrier between the groups is recommended.

**8. Temperature and Shelter**

Normal outdoor temperatures in Northern Ireland should be tolerable for emu and ostrich, however adequate shade and protection from the elements should be provided. Ostrich and emu lack a preen gland, and so are unable to waterproof their plumage, so it is vital that all birds have adequate protection from wet weather. The birds will be unable to use the outdoor enclosure if it is icy. Heating may be required in shelters if the outside temperature is extremely low.

Shelters are useful as a means for temporarily holding the birds. For adult birds, the holding pen should provide at least 6 m<sup>2</sup> (64 ft<sup>2</sup>) per adult ostrich or 4 m<sup>2</sup> (43 ft<sup>2</sup>) per adult emu. Interior height should be no less than 30 cm above the heads of the birds. If the birds are to be housed for longer periods, more space must be provided.

**9. Lighting**

Ostrich and emu require natural daytime lighting. If animals are to be kept indoors, suitable artificial lighting must be provided for at least 8 hours during daylight, and it must be adequate for the keeper to clean and work in the accommodation.

Artificially reared emu chicks require high lighting levels over food and water to enable them to find their food for the first few days after hatching.

**10. Ventilation**

If the birds or chicks are kept indoors, fresh air ventilation must be provided to prevent the build-up of noxious gases.

**11. Drainage** The drainage of the outdoor enclosure must be capable of rapidly removing all excess water. Drains should be designed to avoid injury to the birds, and sited so as not to impede their movement. Any open drains, other than those carrying surface water, should be outside the enclosure. Any faecal material must be disposed of in an environmentally sound manner.

**12. Cleanliness** Outdoor enclosures should be maintained in a clean state, with faeces, food debris and litter being removed on a daily basis. Indoor enclosures should ideally be built with materials that can be easily cleaned and disinfected.

Due to their inquisitive nature, these birds are particularly susceptible to the ingestion of foreign bodies, which can prove fatal. The enclosure should be checked for foreign bodies on a daily basis and anything which could cause harm should be removed.



**13. Social dynamics and behavioural considerations**

The species' defence against predators relies on keen vision and avoidance behaviour, which includes running away at high speeds. Ostriches can run at up to 70kph (40mph), and the birds can alter course suddenly.

In the wild, ostriches will forage for food over a daily radius of up to 20km (12 miles), so the provision of maximum space possible is recommended.

Ostrich and emu are naturally gregarious and do well in groups. Emu may also live alone or in pairs in the wild.

These birds are susceptible to stress, and ideally should not be housed next to public highways or near to predator species.

Special care must be given to chicks reared artificially. The absence of adult birds reduces the motivation for chicks to move around, and this can lead to medical problems if some form of activity is not encouraged.

**14. Protection of young**

In the breeding season, male birds may become more aggressive. Naturally reared chicks are protected by an adult for up to 18 months after hatching.

- 15. Prevention of escape** In addition to the fencing requirements, enclosures should be securely locked at all times. A double door with a space of approximately 2m<sup>2</sup> (18 ft<sup>2</sup>) separating the two gates should be erected allowing the keeper to enter without a risk of the birds escaping. Both gates should be padlocked.

If the enclosure is accessible by the public, for example, adjoining a public highway, steps should be taken to prevent the possibility of the public gaining access to, or being injured by, the birds. This may require the erection of a secondary fence (a stand-off barrier), or a solid wall on the accessible sides of the enclosure. Warning signs may also be required.

**16. Food, drink and bedding**

Adult ostrich and emu are generally herbivorous but will take small amounts of insects and small vertebrates. They must be provided with adequate quantities of appropriate food and water at least once every 24 hours. Pelleted diets are available for maintenance, rearing and breeding, and are recommended.

When birds are kept in groups, feed must be located to allow all birds to feed at the same time.

These birds should also be provided with a source of grit to aid digestion.

Fresh drinking water must be provided at all times.

Ostriches and emus require dry absorbent bedding material which is not attractive to eat. Young birds should not be provided with bedding.

**17. Visiting interval**

The birds must be monitored at appropriate intervals, normally at least twice every 24 hours.

**18. Exercise and enrichment**

The enclosure should be big enough for the animals to exercise. Dust bathing is enjoyed by the birds, and emu will bathe and swim in water if available.

- 19. Provision for capturing the birds** Unless the birds are very tame, it is recommended that the enclosure have a facility for catching up the birds. This is normally achieved via a race (chute) and capture pen with a non-slip floor and solid sides. Hoods and/or a shepherd's crook are useful tools as an aid to capturing ostrich.

A licence, issued by the Department of the Environment, for the keeping of these animals may specify restrictions on the movement of these animals and procedures to be followed.

- 20. Emergency planning** There should be a written contingency plan in place to be used in the event of an emergency, for example fire, flood, animal escape or injury to the keeper.

- 21. Notification Requirements** A licence, issued by the Department of the Environment, for the keeping of these animals may specify procedures to be followed in the event of an escape and on the provision of information to the Emergency Services (e.g. the Fire Service) on the dangerous wild animals being kept.

You are required to notify the Department of the Environment of any intentions to breed the animals.

## **22. Prevention and control of spread of infectious disease**

Provision should be made to allow separation of sick or injured birds from the group. This may be achieved using a holding pen, or fencing off an area of the paddock.

The keeper should provide details of their veterinary arrangements with a practice prepared to treat these birds. A schedule of veterinary care, including routine parasite control, is necessary and the keeping of records of veterinary attention is essential.

Arrangements should be in place for the emergency humane euthanasia and disposal of emu and ostrich. Keepers intending to farm these birds for meat must demonstrate that a provision for the humane slaughter of the birds has been made.

Potential diseases of significance to human public health include avian tuberculosis and chlamydia. Some provision for testing the birds for these diseases, and providing treatment if necessary, must be demonstrated.

## Explanatory Notes

These notes have been produced to provide people wishing to keep dangerous wild animals with guidance on the requirements they may have to meet. In determining whether or not a licence should be issued, the Department of the Environment will consider the information provided by the applicant when applying for a licence. The Department will also arrange for a suitably qualified person to carry out an inspection of the premises at which the animal or animals will be kept and the inspector's report will also be taken into consideration. It is at the Department's discretion to waive certain recommendations, or add additional ones, to the guidance provided in this document. There is a right to appeal within 21 days if a licence is refused or if the applicant contests conditions applied to a licence.

## Contact Information

*For further information on the Dangerous Wild Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, contact the Department of the Environment, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Biodiversity Unit on (028) 9056 9557*

### **For CITES enquiries:**

Wildlife Licensing and Registration  
Service  
Global Wildlife Division  
**Department for Environment,  
Food and Rural Affairs**  
Zone 1/17 Temple Quay House  
2 The Square, Temple Quay  
Bristol BS1 6EB

Tel 0117 372 8691

### **For rabies quarantine enquiries:**

Quarantine Section  
**Department for Environment,  
Food and Rural Affairs**  
Area 209  
1a Page Street  
London SW1P 4PQ

Tel 020 7904 6918



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