

Ostrich Farming in South Africa.

BY CHARLES W. CAREY.



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"THE WILLOWS" OSTRICH FARM, MIDDELBURG, CAPE COLONY.

[Photograph.

PERHAPS no other English Colony is exciting so much interest at the present time as South Africa. For months past the pages of newspapers and periodicals have been filled with news from the north, where our admirable band of volunteers have succeeded in repulsing the redoubtable Lobengula, King of the Matabele race.

Let me give you some sort of an idea of the surrounding country in which we are situated. It is a country unlike any other on the globe. The general character is flat and sandy, relieved only by long, low, rocky sierras. These mountain ranges are the salvation of the landscape. Their craggy outlines are carved into a thousand abrupt and striking forms, their heads are constantly haunted by low-lying clouds of vapour, which the contending sun and wind draw together and disperse. Their sides are hollowed into ravines, or "kloofs," and painted by the clear distance into a perfect argosy of changing hues. The apparently parched and sandy flats are covered by different varieties of dwarf bush, which are nibbled by the sheep.

A dry and arid prospect, and it is hard to conceive every inch of it is loaded below with vegetable life ready to shoot after the first rains of spring into a wealth of verdant grasses. Here and there dotted about on these flats can be seen the white farm-buildings nestling among the trees—an oasis

in the desert, in fact. These green spots can be seen for miles and miles away, with the whitewashed buildings glittering in the sun. Foliage is only to be seen around the homesteads and occasionally at an isolated fountain. The veldt all round is cheerless and naked, without so much as a rag of vegetation to cover it, and the eye hungers for a tree; the bones or stones stick painfully out, a sight for the geologist, not the artist.

You arrive at the homestead, a square, red-brick building, with a sigh of relief, and glad to be out of the blinding glare and sandy plain. On every homestead the same familiar sights meet the eye. On the one side of the house stand the kraals; on the other, the shed and waggon-house. In front stands the dam, adjoining the vegetable-garden and lands, with farther away the camp. Behind the house are the chaff-house, tramp-floor, and butcher's shop, where the niggers are rationed. In the camp run the large stock, cattle, ostriches, and horses; and on the flats and mountains the sheep and goats. In this article I shall confine my remarks to ostriches.

To our friends at home, the ostrich is the centre of interest in South African farming, and it is the ostrich alone that excites everyone's curiosity and makes them take an interest in the life. So let me here give you some idea of the birds, with their ways and manner of conducting themselves when domesticated.

A well-fenced and secure inclosure is a

luxury in the Colony, and is only to be met with on the wealthier farms, the owners of which can afford to keep them in repair, and to place in them stock of the more expensive kinds. Every ostrich farmer has his camp, which varies in size considerably, from 3,000 to 8,000 acres, and in it he keeps his 300 or 500 birds, as well as a few cattle and horses. A camp is always selected as being the best piece of grazing ground on the farm, and capable of holding more stock in proportion than any other part of the farm. Here the birds remain year in and year out, and are only collected and brought together, on the average, once every four months.

out inflicting pain on the bird, and at the same time leaving enough to keep out the cold.

An ostrich, like most other animals, in its wild state is terribly afraid of man or of any unfamiliar sight, and flees at the appearance of anything new to its ken. When domesticated it becomes docile, and after a time assumes a position of authority and becomes master of the situation. From June up to September, or, in fact, till Christmas, thousands of chicks are reared every year, and thousands meet with death every year from some form of accident. Chicks up to twelve months old die from various maladies, but



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A TROOP OF OSTRICHES.

[Photograph.

These occasions are, let us say, in June, to pluck the prime feathers. By these we mean the long whites, numbering from eighteen to twenty in each wing, eight or nine fancy feathers, and a few long blacks, all taken at the same time. Four months later the stumps of these feathers are drawn out, and two months later again—that is, six months after the primes—the short blacks and tail feathers are taken. Of these it is impossible to give any accurate number. As a rule, you pluck as many as possible with-

seldom after they are full grown are they the victims of any sickness, death usually resulting from a broken leg, killed fighting, or from scarcity of food in times of drought.

The nest of an ostrich is a very crude affair, consisting simply of a round hollow carved out in the sandy ground. Sometimes the female bird may be seen scratching in the ground preparatory to laying her first egg; but this is not often the case, the hollow generally being made by the continuous sitting of the birds on the one



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OSTRICH ON NEST.

[Photograph.

spot. One pair of birds will lay from ten to twenty eggs; but, as is often the case, three or four birds will lay in the one nest, thus making the number of eggs up to seventy or eighty. These, of course, have to be weeded out, as a bird cannot comfortably cover more than sixteen eggs, the remainder being thrown on one side and left to decay.

Forty-four days is the recognised time to allow for hatching. When a nest is hatched out the family are taken out of the camp, and brought to the homestead to be tamed, where they come in continual contact with the farm hands, and are housed at night out of the reach of wild animals. During the summer months they will do well, but in winter, when food becomes scarcer, must be fed morning and evening on barley or rape.

It is during the breeding season that the male becomes so savage, and his note of defiance—"brooming," as the Dutch call it—is heard night and day. The bird inflates his neck in a cobra-like fashion and gives utterance to three deep roars. The first two are short, but the third very prolonged. Lion-hunters all agree in asserting that the roar of the king of beasts and the most foolish of birds resemble one another almost exactly. When the birds are properly savage they become a great source of amusement—or, as some think, of danger. Certainly, to be overtaken all on a sudden without time for preparation by a cheeky bird is one of the greatest ills flesh is heir to, and might result disastrously to the uninitiated; but old hands are always all there on an emergency.

Undoubtedly the best weapon—barring a

wire-fence—is a good stout stick or blunt pitchfork. As a rule, if a bird means to have your life or die in the attempt, he charges from about thirty yards, when you receive him at the bayonet's point. He rushes at you with flashing eye, looking the very embodiment of fury. Drawing himself up to a height of ten feet or more, with wings outstretched and hissing like a cobra, he makes four or five strikes. You retreat a pace or two, so as to avoid the fork piercing through his neck, and hold him off at arm's length till he learns that his efforts are useless.

Drawing the fork sharply away, you strike him a blow on the neck, rendering him insensible and taking away his breath. This quiets him for a while, till he recovers from his bewilderment and makes a fresh charge, when the fork is again presented.

I have seen a bird so savage as to charge seven times in fifteen minutes, twice receiving the prongs of the fork through his neck. On horseback one is even more obnoxious to an ostrich than on foot, but, so long as the horse is not afraid and will stand up to the bird, there is no fear of an accident. As he charges take care to have your horse well in hand, and as the bird makes his first strike, catch him by the neck and hold on for all you're worth, till the bird becomes exhausted from want of breath and falls.

The female bird is seldom vicious. When she has a nest or brood of young chicks one must be prepared, but her manner of charging and whole demeanour is a very mild affair compared to the male's.

Perhaps it may suggest itself to some of my readers: what would result supposing three or four birds tackled you at once? It is a very rare occurrence for more than one bird to charge at a time. Should three or four male birds all imagine at one particular moment that you are the meat of each one of them separately, they first of all tackle one another, the conqueror fighting you.

Collecting birds for plucking is always a great day on the farm. Orders are given overnight to the Kaffirs and Hottentots to catch every available riding-horse and have them saddled up and ready next morning at

sunrise. This is done, and every "boy" on the farm who can find a horse is mounted, and a regular cavalcade enters the camp, under the superintendence of "De Boss van de Plaats"—the master of the farm. They split up into parties of two each, and start off in different directions to drive up the birds from the remote spots to which they have wandered. Warfare, of course, is freely indulged in. It is immaterial to an ostrich if there be one or fifty against him, he fights just as merrily.

There exists a traveller's tale at home that, as soon as an ostrich catches sight of a human being, he turns tail and bolts in an opposite direction to hide his head in the sand. Another fallacy, equally devoid of foundation, is the belief that the female leaves her eggs in the sand to be hatched out in the sun. This is not so. The male and female sit alternately for forty - four days: the male at night, the female during the daytime. As an

article of food an ostrich egg is, to my taste, the most nauseous of dishes, and far more suitable as an effective weapon in Chinese and political warfare than to grace a breakfast table.

From all one had heard previous to becoming oneself an owner of ostriches, the actual plucking of the birds is very uninteresting and disappointing. The birds are all huddled together in a kraal—when every bird becomes as meek as a lamb—and are caught one by one; a bag or stocking is placed over the head and neck, while two experienced niggers clip the feathers. During

winter the birds must be attended to and carefully watched, as sometimes the weather is very inclement for weeks together—the thermometer often registering ten degrees of frost—and birds are apt to fall off in condition. If a bird once begins to sink in condition, the greatest difficulty is experienced in getting him right again, and often no amount of extra feeding will pull him through.



PROCESS OF CLIPPING, WITH BAG ON HEAD OF OSTRICH, WING UPLIFTED, AND OWNER IN THE ACT OF CLIPPING THE "PRIMARY ROW."

From a Photo. by H. E. Fripp, Beaufort West, Cape of Good Hope.