

# Ostrich

(*Struthio camelus*)

**Kingdom:** *Animalia*

**Phylum:** *Chordata*

**Class:** *Aves*

**Order:** *Struthioniformes*

**Family:** *Struthionidae*



## Born to run

The ostrich is the largest and heaviest living bird. It is a flightless bird that can never take to the skies, so instead it's built for running. Its long, thick, and powerful legs can cover great distances without much effort, and its feet have only two toes for greater speed.

Ostriches can sprint in short bursts up to 43 miles per hour, and they can maintain a steady speed of 31 miles per hour. Just one of an ostrich's strides can be 10 to 16 feet long—that's longer than many rooms! When danger threatens, ostriches can escape pretty easily by running away. They can also defend themselves: they have a 4-inch claw on each foot, and their kick is powerful enough to kill a lion.

## What are the wings for?

If they can't fly, why do they have wings? For one thing, ostriches hold their wings out to help them balance when they run, especially if they suddenly change direction. Their main use, though, is for displays and courtship, along with the tail feathers. To show dominance, an ostrich holds its head up high and lifts its wings and tail feathers; to show submission, the head, wings, and tail droop down.

## Birds of a feather

Unlike many birds, ostrich feathers are loose, soft, and smooth. They don't hook together the way feathers of other birds do, giving ostriches that "shaggy" look. The feathers can also get soaked in the rain, because ostriches do not have the special gland many birds have to waterproof their feathers while preening.

## **A big bird herd**

Ostriches like to live in groups, which helps with defense. With their long necks and keen vision, they can see long distances, so in a group at least one of them is likely to see danger coming. Ostriches sometimes gather in large groups of 100 or more, but most groups are smaller, usually about 10 birds, or just a male and female pair. The groups have a pecking order, with a dominant male that establishes and defends a territory, a dominant female called the "main hen," and several other females. Lone males may also come and go during breeding season.

## **Do they put their heads in the sand?**

Actually, that's a myth: ostriches do not bury their heads in the sand! When an ostrich senses danger and cannot run away, it flops to the ground and remains still, with its head and neck flat on the ground in front of it. Because the head and neck are lightly colored, they blend in with the color of the soil. From a distance, it just looks like the ostrich has buried its head in the sand, because only the body is visible.