

Animals
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'People are buying them like stocks and bonds'



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Ostrich Oaks ranch features birds that were 2 feet tall when brought to their Corralitos home.

Ostriches are a big investment

By GREG BEEBE
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CORRALITOS — The big birds come bumbling out of the barn at Ostrich Oaks ranch.

"Whoops, their necks got tangled," said Regina Rodriguez, who with her husband, Jeff, and three children have been raising the ostriches in the rolling foothills of Corralitos for three months.

The ostriches move with with long necks, short wings and spindly legs akimbo. A little confused, they bump into each other and then start hopping around in circles. At once, graceful and ugly.

"They're dancing," said Regina.

The birds aren't especially pretty, are a little dense upstairs and are somewhat short in the personality department.

But they are worth a lot of money, and the Rodriguezes are part of a growing industry that is raising the flightless birds for fun, and mostly profit. At least one other south county resident has also started raising ostriches, they said. Another north county man bought two for his home menagerie of unusual pets.

A proven breeding pair of ostriches — they come in twos — can be worth as much as \$75,000. The birds' smooth, leather-like hide is



Jeff and Regina Rodriguez check one of their large investments.

coveted for making boots and other goods and ostrich meat — it tastes like beef, not chicken — is hailed as even lower in fat, cholesterol and calories than poultry.

The Rodriguezes have six of the big birds on their ranch. Two belong to a friend, two to Jeff's parents and two to Jeff and Regina. None have names, except two: Pee and Poop, "because that's about all they do," said Jeff.

Few investments have returns as good as ostriches, said Jeff. The six birds they

purchased three months ago for \$5,000 are now worth about \$12,000, he said.

"These are profitable," said Jeff. "They can bring a 100- to 150-percent return in a year. ... People are buying them like stocks and bonds."

The birds were 2 feet tall when the Rodriguezes got them. After three months and a steady diet of ostrich pellets, corn and rocks — for digestion — the birds are already 6 feet tall, and growing.

"See that rock he just ate? It's the size of a golf ball. At night, when they're in the barn, I can hear their stomachs grinding and grinding," said Jeff.

At this age, the ostriches are friendly — they like to peck at the buttons and zippers on Regina's jacket — but when they are older and breeding they can be dangerous. (But then, after all, who isn't?)

An angry ostrich can jump four feet, coming down with a clawed leg thrust that can disembowel a lion in their native wilds of Africa.

They don't come when you call them but are curious beasts fond of following movement, said Regina. Ostriches can get as tall as 9 feet and as heavy as 350 pounds, and, though they can't fly, will travel as fast as 40 mph on the ground. The birds live as long as 80 years, provided they don't end up as dinner or footwear.

The market for raising ostriches is good right now, said Jeff, because it will take another five or 10 years for the stock to be large enough to start using the birds for hide and meat.

In the meantime, he's seeking investors, passing around a prospectus that pitches the monetary rewards of feathers instead of mutual funds and beaks instead of bonds.