

# Facts & Figures About Canadian

# Ratite

## In General:

- A ratite is the family of flightless birds and includes ostriches, emus and rheas.
- The ostrich has been bred commercially for over 100 years
- Ostrich are native to South Africa
- Emus are native to Australia
- Rheas are native to South America



## You were asking about...Ratites

### Ostrich:

The ostrich is native to South Africa, where they have been bred commercially for over 100 years. Ostriches are reproductively mature between the ages of three and four. Several females, called hens, mate with one male, called a rooster. In the spring, each hen lays her eggs in the same shallow nest. For the next 6 weeks, the rooster incubates the eggs at night, while the dominant hen does the same during the day. Once the eggs are laid, it takes 42 days for them to hatch. The hens may start to lay as early as 2 years but are not considered mature until four to five years of age and at this age should be a consistent layer. Hens will lay an egg every other day until her clutch is depleted (10-15 eggs) and rest for a few days, and then start laying again. The laying season in Canada is between February/March and September/October.

Ostriches can live for up to 50 years old. However, ostriches that are wild live between 20 and 30 years old. Ostriches stand between two and 2.5 meters tall and weigh between 113 and 159 kilograms. Because of their strong and muscular legs, the ostrich can run up to 64 km per hour. The rooster is black with white wing tips and tail plumes. The hen has light brown and grey plumage and is slightly smaller than the male.

Ostrich are raised for their meat, eggs and oil. Ostrich meat, leather and feathers have a high commercial value. Ostrich eggshells are carved into ornaments, used for containers or made into jewellery. Ostrich oil can be used to treat such ailments as dry skin, dry hair and sunburns.

### Emus:

Emus are native to Australia and are valued for their meat and oil. The emu belongs to the ratite family, meaning they are flightless birds.

Emus have a life span of 30 years and may produce eggs for more than 16 of those years. Adult emus grow to a height of 485-183cm (five to six feet) and weigh 56-68kg (125 to 150 pounds) when mature. The female emu, called a hen, lays between 20 and 50 eggs per season. Laying normally begins when the hen is two to three years of age and the laying season is from October to April. The male emu usually is the one who sits on the eggs to keep them warm.

The eggs that are laid by emus vary in size or colour. Usually the eggs are dark green, weighing 600 grams and being 12 cm long. Farmers are now using artificial incubation that lasts for 50 to 60 days. This is used to help moderate the temperature at which the eggs are being incubated.

Emus are raised for many products in addition to their meat. The oil from these birds is used as a method to treat anti-inflammatory problems. The leather from the hide is supple and durable and is used for a variety of products. Emu feathers, shells and toenails are all used to make various crafts.

## Rhea:

Rhea are native to South America and are a part of the ratite family, making them a flightless bird. This bird looks similar to the ostrich, having similar feathered heads and necks. However, the rhea has three toes while the ostrich only has two. There are two different types of species of rhea, the white rhea and the common or gray rhea (gray or light brown with a white bottom).

When fully grown, the rhea weighs approximately 27 to 36 kg (60 to 80 pounds) and stands 152cm (five feet) tall. They become sexually mature between two and four years of age and a male can have up to five mates. The breeding season is early March through August and the female can lay up to 60 eggs per year. The eggs are usually yellow, with a waxy shell. The incubation period lasts between 32 and 42 days.

Rheas are produced for their meat, feathers, oil and their hides, which are turned into leather. White rheas currently are more expensive than gray ones, but the only difference is their feather color.

## Ratites: The Product

The ratite industry in Canada is relatively small. Meat supply is currently not filling demand, although it is not as well-known in Canada as in other parts of the world. There is one tannery in Canada for ratite skins, although several small tanneries will do custom processing. Oils are commonly used in the skin care industry, but are in some cases used in the natural health industry. Feathers, egg shells and toe nails are commonly used for crafts. Feathers can also be used for dusting.

## RATITE TRIVIA

- An ostrich hen can lay 40 -100 eggs per year, averaging about 60 eggs per year.
- An ostrich has two toes. All other birds have three or four toes.
- The ostrich is the largest living bird in the world
- Ostrich can run at speeds of up to 40mph
- An ostrich will live to be 50-75 years old
- An ostrich egg weighs 1600g and is equivalent to two dozen chicken eggs
- Emus have three toes
- The Emu hen is the dominant bird. The female chooses a mate and then defends the territory for their nest.
- Emus generally are docile and non-aggressive towards humans.
- One emu can produce almost four litres of pure oil.
- Emus have a life span of 30 years
- A rhea can produce up to six litres of oil; this is dependent on the size of the bird, its weight and what it is fed.
- The fat from rhea is rendered and redefined to a lotion and used by many people as a cosmetic or moisturizer
- A ratite can jump 5 feet high

## How are ratities raised?

Newly hatched chicks usually weigh about 0.9kg (two pounds) and are about 25cm (10 inches) tall. Young ratites must be sheltered in a warm place for their first weeks of life. Adolescent and adult birds are allowed to roam freely in fenced pastures or pens. Ratites need daily exercise to avoid leg and digestive problems. The closely woven wire fences must be high because ratites can leap over a five-foot fence. Ratites are fed on grain and hay or pasture.

## What do ratites eat?

Commercially produced feed comes in the form of a pellet or in ground form. Feed ingredients may include: corn, alfalfa meal, wheat, soy, barley, oats, fat, and grit, which aids in the digestion of feeds. Ratites may also be fed forage such as alfalfa hay, or silage. In addition to feed, ratites require a good supply of quality water. Adequate calcium in the diet is critically important to growing ratites to ensure strong, healthy legs.

## Ratite Dictionary

- **Ratite:** a family of large, flightless birds including Ostrich, Emu and Rhea
- **Chick:** a baby ratite
- **Hen:** a female ratite
- **Rooster:** a male ratite
- **Clutch:** egg stores inside of the ratite



## About Ratites – Additional website links

Canadian Ostrich Association  
Phone: (403) 285-1624

Ostrich Producers of Ontario  
Visit: [www.ostrichproducersofontario.com](http://www.ostrichproducersofontario.com)

Ontario Ratite Association  
Phone: (519) 662-4271

Saskatchewan Ostrich Association  
Email: [musclebird@sasktel.net](mailto:musclebird@sasktel.net)

Visit both a Canadian ostrich and emu/rhea farm on line at [www.virtualfarmtours.ca](http://www.virtualfarmtours.ca)



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