

Doney Park doc: Ostriches 'good pets for this area'

By: Gamin Summers

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Flagstaff pediatrician David Spence knew for about 10 years he wanted to raise ratites, the class of bird which includes emus, rheas and ostriches. He was originally interested in ostriches, but cost for the birds in the early 1990s was as high as \$15,000 a pair, he says. He also considered raising emus, a popular pastime in that decade.

Then times changed. Several years ago the emu market soured, and owners who hoped to make money off of oil from the birds encountered a glut of the product in the world market. Owners soon found they couldn't afford to feed the large animals anymore. Some owners turned their emus loose into the wild. Prices for ostriches have since decreased dramatically, so Spence's dream has come true. In February, he acquired one male and two females for \$500. This month, he acquired another trio for \$150, though he says purchase price is the least expensive item on his list. He has had to erect strong fencing and must feed the birds pellet ration or pelletized alfalfa, costing about \$20 per week.

Spence admits he is still learning about his new hobby. He's had help from the people from whom he bought the ostriches as well as from George and Becky Titus of Timberline. The Tituses have

sold their many ostriches after 10 years of operating the Touch of Africa ranch, but they will still offer contract incubation of eggs with their state-of-the-art machine. Spence plans to take advantage of this service.

"My goal is to get the babies hatched from the eggs and raise them for meat and leather," says Spence. Ostrich leather is commonly used for boots, purses and belts. As a craftsman, he would like to try his hand at working the leather himself. Ostrich meat is a lean red meat considered to be a healthy alternative to beef.

The females have laid three eggs to date. One ostrich egg is equivalent to about two dozen chicken eggs, says Spence. The eggs may be eaten or used as craft items once the contents are blown out through a hole.

Spence has observed some mating behavior between the two males and four females, so he's hoping for fertilized eggs soon. When hormone levels rise, the males become red in the neck, bill and chin. In honor of these characteristics, he has named one of the males "Redneck."

Mating can be a dangerous sport as the birds jump up and down, and the males chase the females at speeds as high as 35 mph. The birds might injure themselves during mating by running into the fence or stepping into a hole, such as those created by prairie dogs. Spence is using a prairie dog control method he found in a Forest Service pamphlet, which involves putting used kitty litter down the holes to chase the animals away with the scent. He says time will tell if the method works.

Neighbors of the property off Townsend-Winona Road in Doney Park have been supportive of and interested in Spence's new hobby. Children come by to observe the new creatures, and he gives them feathers he's collected from the pens. The feathers make excellent dusters and hat ornaments, he says. He has fashioned a headdress of some of the largest feathers he's found.

Spence enjoys spending time with his 8-foot-tall pets, even though they show their affection for him with persistent pecking. He says they try to peck off his glasses when he's working on the fence, but the toothless pecks don't hurt. Ostriches are naturally curious and especially drawn to bright, shiny objects, but unless they are protecting eggs or their young, the birds are docile.

"I think they are going to be good pets for this area," he says. If you are interested in eggs or would like further information, contact David Spence at 380-5690.

FALL KINDERGARTEN REGISTRATION CONTINUES AT CROMER SCHOOL

Cromer School Principal Chris Fonoti wants to remind parents to register children early for kindergarten in the fall.

Parents should "register before summer and not wait until just before school opens, as the number of kindergarten teachers (and all-day kindergarten classes) depends on enrollment. The later students are enrolled, the more chaotic the process becomes," Fonoti said.

Registration is ongoing, 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday at the school. For more information, call 773-4150.

Gamin Summers is interested in your news of Doney Park, Timberline-Fernwood and surrounding areas. Phone 890-7628 or email dpnews@commspeed.net.

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