



Ostrich

Volstruis

Struthio camelus

The Ostrich is widely distributed in open, short-grass plains and arid savannas throughout Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982). The present patterns of distribution in southern Africa are confused by the growing ranching industry and the spread of 'Oudtshoorn' Ostriches (commercial hybrids between Syrian, North African, West African and southern African Ostriches) into areas and habitats unlikely to have been used by wild birds. For example, the presence of Ostriches in the mountain fynbos of the southwestern Cape Province is likely to be relatively recent; its historical occurrence in this habitat was probably in low numbers, although it was apparently once common in more open coastal lowland fynbos (Brooke 1989c). Areas in which undoubtedly 'wild' Ostriches occur in South Africa are now restricted to the northwestern Cape Province, e.g. Kleinsee (2917CA) (Jarvis 1991); Kalahari Gemsbok Park in the northern Cape

Province; western and northwestern Transvaal; and the Kruger National Park (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). All other South African records are probably of domesticated birds or escapes.

In Namibia, wild birds occur along the coastal regions from the Diamond Areas in the south to the Skeleton Coast in the north (avoiding only the sand sea of the Namib Desert), in the Kaokoveld, Etosha Pan, southern Owambo, Kavango, Bushmanland and Hereroland; the total population size is unknown, but numbers in the ten thousands. Most Ostriches on commercial farms are free-ranging wild stock within areas in which it originally occurred; domestic ostriches are mostly confined to intensive management systems in fenced camps (C.J. Brown *in litt.*).

Wild populations still roam over most of Botswana where the total population is estimated at 60 000 birds, of

which 85% live outside protected areas (Bonifica 1992). In Zimbabwe, where there have been changes in distribution (Irwin 1981) and where there is a growing industry, the situation is not clear, but wild birds probably occur only in the west, adjacent to Botswana (A.J. Tree *in litt.*).

In Swaziland, wild ostriches are believed to have been hunted to extinction in the 19th century; birds of ranching stock were introduced from South Africa in the 1960s, some at localities where they did not occur naturally (Parker 1994).

Habitat: Originally, the Ostrich occurred throughout Africa, except evergreen forests and moist savannas; the current distribution in southern Africa is confined mainly to arid savannas and to areas where they are ranched.

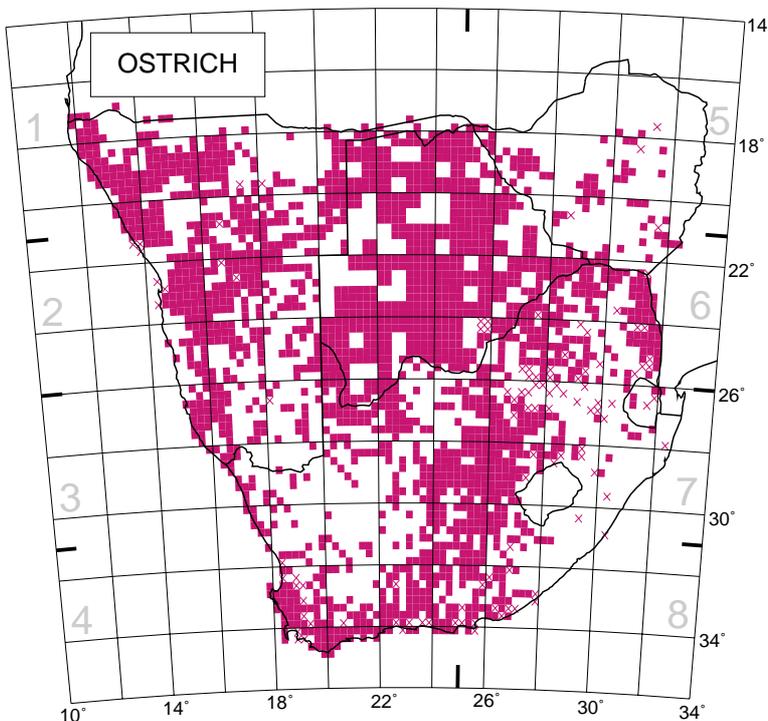
Movements: Seasonal variations in reporting rates are unreliable and therefore not shown, but the species is considered to be nomadic at times (Maclean 1993b). Although movements are restricted by veterinary fences in Botswana, there is evidence for increased flocking and movements during severe local droughts in the Kalahari (M. Herremans *in litt.*).

Breeding: Breeding occurs throughout the year, with a spring–summer peak. In years of good rainfall in the arid parts of Namibia, Ostriches are almost irruptive, with up to four cohorts of young occurring simultaneously in family groups of over 100 birds (C.J. Brown *in litt.*). Domesticated Ostriches tend to have a relatively extended breeding season.

Historical distribution and conservation: Of all African birds, the Ostrich has probably had the largest impact on human cultures, from the Stone Age to the 20th century (Brooke 1995b). Ostrich eggs are used as food, and the eggshells for waterbottles, ornaments, beads, bracelets and necklaces. Ostrich skin makes fine leather. The recorded use of feathers for adornment goes back 5000 years and peaked in western Europe in the late 19th century, collapsing after the First World War. The demand for feathers led to the establishment of commercial Ostrich farming, centred on Oudtshoorn (3322CA) in the Little Karoo; ‘show farms’ survived the middle decades of the 20th century as tourist attractions. At the end of the 20th century, Ostrich farming is driven by an insatiable demand for its low-cholesterol meat. Ostrich ranching is a rapidly expanding industry in southern Africa (Gatimu 1996); the negative effects of Ostrich grazing on range lands give cause for concern (Dean *et al.* 1994; Milton *et al.* 1994).

The main threat to the southern African subspecies *S. c. australis* appears to be the loss of genetic integrity through the translocation of ‘Oudtshoorn’ Ostriches into areas in which genotypes of wild birds still occur (Freitag & Robinson 1993).

In Botswana, the largest wild population in the region appears to have been stable during the 1980s (Bonifica 1992). Although the majority occurs outside protected areas, and is more tolerant of people and livestock than other large wildlife (Bonifica 1992), reporting rates were higher on protected land. It may be under pressure from hunting and collection of eggs, and it competes for grazing with sheep and goats (Dean *et al.* 1994; Milton *et al.* 1994), particularly during droughts (M. Herremans *in litt.*).



Recorded in 2093 grid cells, 46.1%
 Total number of records: 16 057
 Mean reporting rate for range: 18.7%

