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Ostrich Feather Industry

In report

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GOVERNMENT HOUSE,
Bombay,
BRITISH AFRICA

Recd 22 DEC 13

November 25th 1913.

EAST AFRICA PROTECTORATE.

No. 921

Sir,

*No. 60
25463
NS 4/1*

In reply to your despatch No. 864 of the 13th ultimo, I have the honour to transmit herewith copy of a letter from the Director of Agriculture on the subject of the Ostrich feather industry in this Protectorate.

Mr. MacDonald
Nov. 14th 13

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your humble, obedient servant,

H. Conica, Deputy

GOVERNOR.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
LEWIS HARCOURT, P.C., M.P.,
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE SOLOMONS,
DOWNING STREET, LONDON, S.W.

INCLOSURE

In Despatch No. 22 of 25/11/1913

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No. 22/11/13.

Department of Agriculture,

NAIROBI

November 10th. 1913.

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The Hon. Chief Secretary,
NAIROBI.

Sir,

In reply to your cover No. 4327 of the 6th. instant, I have the honour to give the following information:-

- (a) The number of domesticated birds in the East Africa Protectorate, approximately 2,000
- (b) The estimated number of wild birds from which feathers are taken.
- (c) The value of feathers exported, Ks. 12,296 (2819-13-4.)

The following extract from my Annual Report 1912-1913 is noted for general information on the present conditions of the ostrich industry of East Africa:-

Some four years ago the attention of a number of our settlers was directed to ostrich farming. Young chicks were caught as they hatched out in the wildbirds nests and many eggs were collected and incubated but want of experience on the part of the majority of those

"who took up this highly specialised branch of farming, together with serious losses by wild animals, and continual thefts of feathers by the natives, caused many after a time to give up the industry, and to-day ostrich farming in the Protectorate, with one or two exceptions, is only pursued by farmers who had experience with ostriches in South Africa. Notwithstanding certain drawbacks these experienced farmers are making a success of ostrich farming and are well pleased with their prospects, and it was, therefore, felt that an effort should be made to develop the industry and an ostrich expert should be asked to visit the Protectorate to report and advise. Professor Duerdon of the Rhodes College, South Africa, was appointed for this purpose, and in January last he visited all the ostrich farms and advised farmers on the spot. His visit has done much to encourage the industry. The following extracts are taken from a lecture on ostrich farming in British East Africa by Professor Duerdon which embodies the information desired by the High Commissioner of the Union of South Africa.

"Among the many branches of farming already taken up by the settler, - rubber, coffee, sisal, wattle, flax, fruit, cattle, sheep - ostrich farming promises to occupy an important position once the conditions for its success are fully realized. At the present time it is much in its infancy. Wild ostriches, however, occur practically everywhere, and are frequently seen in groups of from two to a dozen as one travels along the

"the railway. The shooting of the wild bird is now
 prohibited and the number appears to be increasing.
 "though one may well be surprised how any chick can
 "possibly be reared under wild conditions with the
 "many carnivora ever on the prowl. The ostriches
 "now domesticated have been practically all derived
 "as chicks from the nests of the wild bird. These
 "nests are by no means infrequent, and often they
 "contain large numbers of eggs, as many as sixty or
 "seventy, exactly a week or several weeks lying
 "in the same nest, the bird then sitting being able
 "to cover at most only a score. The farmer locates the
 "nest and keeps a careful watch on it as the time for
 "hatching approaches, for hyenas and jackals are likewise
 "on the watch, and destroy the chickens as they appear,
 "or may even roll the eggs about and break them before
 "hatching occurs. A settler may in this way secure from
 "two or three hundred wild chicks in a season, one
 "farmer having already handled over nine hundred. The chicks
 "must be secured while very young, certainly within the first
 "month, otherwise their domestication is very difficult, and
 "if caught by being "run down" most of them collapse and
 "at once die from exhaustion, when the chicks are properly
 "reared the adult bird is just as tame and manageable as
 "its southern representative, though few of the natives
 "have yet had experience in their handling which the
 "more experienced native of the South has obtained.

"The problem which the ostrich farmer in British East Africa has to face is whether it will pay him to build up a strain of ostriches from the material available, seeing that no importation of the highly developed bird is allowed from South Africa; in other words, can he independently build up one or more strains which will enable him to make it his highly remunerative industry which it has become in the South. It must be remembered that the high-class Southern bird has been produced during the past fifty years from originally wild birds as a result of selective breeding, by blending into the feather all the good points present in the originally wild strains; and since good breeding has been done in the South, any question of competition with the Southern bird is far remote and will be so indefinitely as to be wholly negligible from a feather and point of view.

The birds captured from the wild in most areas are reared with all the care and attention which could be given in the South. Several ostrich farmers from the South being already established in the Protectorate, the climate, soil and natural conditions generally seem on the whole just as favorable as in the South. Most farms have already established patches of lucerne and rape, and around the borders of Lake Naivasha considerable lucerne development is in progress, naturally irrigated from the Lake. As the plumage of the bird matures it is found that the feathers by no means represent a single strain of uniform type. Such diversity is met with as regards the various

various points of the feather, such as breadth, lustre, sharpness and strength, and most of the farmers exercise a rigid selection, only keeping such birds as are promising. It is however, found to be unprofitable to cull severely before the birds are approaching maturity, the squabs and first-after-chicks by no means giving a certain indication as to the adult possibilities of the bird. The proportion of birds worth keeping is fairly high, especially under the cheap conditions under which they can be farmed, the yield being good and grain plentiful. On each farm are usually found two or three birds of outstanding merit, well worth adopting as breeders, even though not up to the standard of the South today.

At the present time one of the greatest drawbacks to ostrich farming in the Protectorate is the presence of many large carnivora, especially leopards and lions. On this account it is found impossible in most instances to allow birds to remain on the open veld at night, and the regular kraaling results in a certain depreciation of the feather as it approaches ripeness besides being troublesome. The kraals or bomas are usually built of posts close together and so high as to be leopard proof. A good plan now adopted in some districts is to have more than one line of defence against lions and leopards. On the outside of a large enclosure are the huts of the natives, next a strobe of cattle kraals, and in the middle the division for the ostriches. In this way the native herds have the advantage of receiving first the visit of a marauding lion or leopard and naturally keep on the alert.

In the more thickly settled districts however, the trouble from carnivora is not so serious, and the birds

birds are allowed to roost out at night and are rarely collected. No doubt this will soon become the general practice as the country comes to be more thickly populated, the land better fenced, and the carnivora reduced in numbers or under better control. The good fencing water available may well be the envy of the Southern Farmer, seeing their cost in East Africa is only as he pays in shellings.

In certain districts some trouble is experienced from the plucking of feathers by the natives, who have already shown themselves as adept at taking a good plume. This, however, occurs only among natives in touch with tribes who use the feathers as part of their head-dress, and the settler has a ready means of prevention at hand if he wishes to adopt it.

The ostrich farmed in British East Africa is that known as the East African ostrich, *Struthio maderasianus*, ranging over British and German East Africa. It differs in certain respects from the Southern ostrich, *Struthio australis*, though not sufficient to warrant specific separation. The average size is slightly beyond the average Southern bird though many of the latter are quite as large. More usually the head of the Eastern birds bear a naked horny patch on the top, though this is by no means the rule. The eggs are slightly larger than the average size from the Southern bird, but like them are pitted, in which character they both differ from the true Northern ostrich, *Struthio camelus*, where the eggs are perfectly smooth and enamel like at the surface.

Analysing in detail the many feather "points" as found in a large collection of Eastern plumes, and contrasting

them

"them with the corresponding points in the best Southern
 "plumes we find that the former compare remarkably well.
 "Thus there are to be found in East Africa plumes which
 "are practically as long, broad, deeply, lustrous and dense as the
 "the best South African plume, with the important difference,
 "however, that in the South all the best feather points can now
 "be found combined in the single bird whereas in East Africa
 "they are distributed among many different strains so that no
 "feather has as yet nearly approached perfection according
 "to Southern standards. This is what the Southern ostrich
 "farmer, to his credit, has accomplished within the past
 "few years, the most rapid progress having been made within
 "the past ten years; he has by selective breeding taken all the
 "best feather points available in the original wild strains
 "and combined them into one strain.

"In this connection the question might reasonably
 "be asked whether the East African bird contains any point
 "which might with advantage be introduced into the Southern
 "bird. Is there any point such as increased size, suppleness,
 "lustre, density or texture, which excels anything as yet in
 "the South? Studying this question carefully, with numbers of
 "plumes from both countries for comparison it must be admitted
 "that the East has as yet but little it can contribute to the
 "South. Certain features are emphasized in the Eastern bird
 "which are not marked in all Southern strains, though
 "occurring in some. Thus the shaft is nearly always circular
 "and narrow in East Africa; great density is attained more
 "by closeness of the plumules than by length of the barboles;
 "and practically all the strains have an intense opaque
 "whiteness

whiteness as contrasted with a more transparent whiteness. Though darker in colour the females are on the whole of a better texture than those of the Southern birds, and undoubtedly many Eastern hens could with profit be used for introducing several points into Southern strains. There is no question but that the East African bird will greatly respond to the ameliorating conditions of domestic life, and that many of the features now exhibited by the wild feather will become much improved. Also when selective breeding is once established it will be possible to combine in single strains many of the desirable points now separated. From the raw material now in hand, the East African ostrich farmer has the opportunity of building up in the future strains peculiar to his country, which, though different from the Southern strains will yet have features just as desirable."

During the year enquiries have been made from Australia and other parts as to whether birds could be purchased in the Protectorate for export. At present there is a duty of £100 per head on birds taken out of the country which practically prohibits export trade.

It is maintained by a number of our settlers that if the duty is removed the owners of the few specially high class birds will be offered prices to tempt them to part with these birds, and that in the interests of ostrich farming these birds should be kept in the country as foundation stock.

On the other hand, these birds have all been taken as chicks from the nests of wild ostriches, and as we have thousands of wild birds roaming all over the country, little trouble need be experienced in collecting

eggs for incubation and obtaining young chicks straight from the nest. (There should, however, be no difficulty in selecting and retaining any high grade birds which might be exported. Further, we have not a monopoly of the industry, and while we are keeping our door closed money is going to North Africa where no restrictions prevent the purchase of equally good birds as we possess.

I am strongly in favour of the removal of the prohibitory clause in the Ordinance, and the fostering of an export trade in ostriches.

I have the honour to be,

Mr.

Your obedient servant,


Director of Agriculture.