ORNITHOLOGICAL NOTES

By Rob Nixon

From The Independent (London), May 17, 1999

The ostrich has been in denial for nearly 2,000 years, ever since the world's first natural historian, Pliny the Elder, saddled the creature with its reputation for head-burying. Thanks to Pliny, centuries of satirists have assumed that this bird behemoth is deeply repressed. Untrue. But the ostrich does remain bone-headed.

In IQ terms, your average sheep is a rocket scientist compared to any ostrich. When it rains, ostriches are prone to stare at the sky, sometimes forgetting to close their beaks. They've been known to drown that way. They also have a weakness for circular escape. Instead of fleeing in a straight line, they run round and round like those plaster-of-Paris ostriches on fairground carousels. When ostrich feathers came into vogue in the Victorian age, colonial bounty hunters appreciated their target's predilection for circular panic.

Great thinkers, from Aristotle to the 18th-century French biologist Georges-Louis Leclerc, pitted their wits against the ostrich and struggled to make sense of it. Some concluded that this flightless, songless, egg-laying leviathan was one of nature's freak-shows, a mutant mammalian bird. Certainly, ostriches have an air of unreality. They seem to belong, like unicorns, to the fantasia of the mind, unsettling our preconceptions of what makes a bird a bird.

Ostriches might improve their chances of lift-off if they switched to a lighter diet. An ostrich typically keeps 3lb of stones in its stomach. This is not the ornithological equivalent of eating raisin bran for breakfast. The stones function as bird teeth for grinding food into submission. They are surrogate molars, housed deep in the digestive tract.

The ostrich belongs to a gastronomic tradition that reaches back to the Roman Emperor Heliogabalus, who once served 600 ostrich brains at a banquet. These were presumably appetisers: the thinking bit of this bird fits snugly into a teaspoon.

Weighing in at close to 300lb, the ostrich has found an honoured place in many culinary cultures. Over time in South Africa, where I grew up, I probably consumed piecemeal the better part of an ostrich, often in dishes conjured from the bird's less delicate bits, like ostrich neck soup (one neck could feed a boarding house) and sliced ostrich stomach (with the stones removed). But Americans, who, these days, are the big bird's biggest boosters, haven't warmed to ostrich offal. Instead, Texans and Arizonans give their ostrich entrees a Parisian veneer. In Dallas recently, I got to savour ostrich tenderloin with a raspberry chambord demi-glace.

American ranchers are touting ostrich as "the fillet of the future". However, it is doubtful that ostrich a la carte will ever match ostrich a la mode in profitability. Today, ostrich plumes may have negligible worth, but at their Edwardian peak they became, pound for pound, more valuable than gold. To satisfy the tastes of natty dressers in Europe and America, and the demands of musical hall and cabaret, South Africa's ostrich population swelled and swelled, until by 1913 one million birds were being bred for their feathers.
Back then, feathers weren't simply feathers. At the world's largest feather market, in East London's Mincing Lane, a weekly bulletin listed the going prices for 60 varieties of ostrich plumes. The names look strangely colonial now, like an irrepressible irruption of the South African mania for racial classifying: Special Long Blacks, Long Good Blacks, Long Fair Blacks, Long Drabby Blacks, Medium Blacks, Short Blacks, Wiry Blacks, Super Whites, Good Whites, Narrow Whites, Third Class Whites, Broken Whites ... But that fine-meshed way of seeing ostriches died with the desire. The advent of flappers, suffragettes, and the hat-shredding Model-T Ford, all sounded the death-knell of voluminous feather fashions. As Coco Chanel asked witheringly of an ostrich plume-festooned hat: "How could a brain function normally under all that?"