



OSTRICHES

Feather thieves terrorise ostriches

The ostrich industry is still recovering from the devastation caused by an outbreak of the H5N2 avian influenza in 2011, but a new threat is already rearing its head.

Last month, over 50 ostriches on three farms near Oudtshoorn had their feathers stolen by poachers. Ostrich farmer Ebon le Roux said he woke up one morning to find that the feathers of about 20 of his ostriches had been stolen.

"I have never seen anything like this before," said Le Roux.

He added that stolen feathers were not the real damage suffered. "The feathers are worth around R500 per bird and can grow back, but the real loss is the hides."

Le Roux explained that because the feathers were plucked in a hasty and unprofessional manner, a lot of damage was done to the hides

ABOVE: During March, more than 50 ostriches on farms in the Oudtshoorn district fell prey to feather-stealing poachers.

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and as a result, the value would drop from about R2 000 per hide to R300.

"And it is not only the attacked ostriches that were injured. All of them were chased around and they trampled over each other. They were forced into fences around the camp and that caused injury to many of them. We are now upgrading security to prevent this from happening again," he said.

A similar attack occurred on the Western Cape agriculture department's Oudtshoorn Research Farm but during this incident, three ostriches were killed. The three birds were part of a group of breeding ostriches earmarked to be sold at an auction this week.

Dr Ilse Trautman, chief director of research and technology development services at the Western Cape agriculture department, said these ostriches could have been sold for R5 000 each because they were bred specifically to make improved genetic breeding material

available to the industry. Apart from the ostriches that died after being beaten with sticks during the attack, about 30 were plucked, said Trautman.

According to a local Oudtshoorn newspaper, police arrested a man in connection with the stolen feathers but another attack occurred after the arrest.

Hein Jonker of the Saag Jonker Group told *Farmer's Weekly* that about 20 ostriches were attacked on one of their farms close to Oudtshoorn. "It only happened once and we have not had any trouble since, but that is not to say we will not have similar problems in the future if the matter is not fully resolved now," said Jonker.

He said for the past six months the demand for feathers had been strong and farmers were earning between R500 to R1 000 per bird for feathers.

"To stop the illicit trade of feathers, farmers should only sell feathers to recognised and registered traders," Jonker concluded. – Denene Erasmus