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Ostrich handler helps newborns develop

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Tim Steinmetz, the Program Coordinator of Ratites at the California Academy of Sciences, also known as the, "ostrich mom," releases some of the ostrich chicks into their outdoor pen on Friday, Aug. 31, 2012 in San Francisco, Calif. Photo: Russell Yip, The Chronicle / SF



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Tim Steinmetz, the Program Coordinator of Ratites at the California Academy of Sciences, also known as the, "ostrich mom," directs education department employee and ostrich volunteer Christine Wilkinson on where to put crickets for the ostriches on Friday, Aug. 31, 2012 in San Francisco, Calif.



Tim Steinmetz, the Program Coordinator of Ratites at the California Academy of Sciences, also known as the, "ostrich mom," helps keep 9-day old ostrich chicks moving in the outdoor pen on Friday, Aug. 31, 2012 in San Francisco, Calif. Steinmetz says his team's job is to keep them eating and drinking.



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With a tail of ostrich feathers hanging from the back of his khakis, Tim Steinmetz makes a run for it.

Hot on his heels, a dozen week-old ostriches scurry after Steinmetz, the California Academy of Sciences biologist they believe is Mama.

That's because when the ostriches hatched in an industrial incubator in the academy's basement in San Francisco, the first thing they saw was him.

When they kicked their way out of their cantaloupe-size eggs, Steinmetz was the first to hold and weigh them, and then carry them in a bucket to a new earthquake exhibit at the academy, where he teaches the ratites (flightless birds) how to eat, drink, exercise and keep warm.

"These are the first ostriches to be raised in a museum setting," he said.

The academy buys fertile ostrich eggs from breeders in Solvang (Santa Barbara County) and Victorville (San Bernardino County) and raises them to 8 weeks in an indoor and companion outdoor exercise exhibit. For visitors, the birds demonstrate the fact that because earthquakes split apart the supercontinent Pangaea, ratites from a single ancestor can now be found in Africa, South America and Australia.

Once the birds have matured, the academy sends them to zoos, humane farms and breeders. Then Steinmetz starts over with a new batch of hatchlings.

Steinmetz's job is to keep the newborns moving, so they build muscles and bone density and keep up their appetite. So that means taking laps with the flock. Over and over and over.

Popular display

Once Steinmetz reaches the end of the pen, his pursuers peck at his pants and circle around his feet. He taps on a dog food bowl to help them find the chopped greens: red clover, dandelion, kale, collards and romaine.

It's an exercise that doesn't get old.

"They have very tiny brains," Steinmetz said. "Every time they reach the end of the pen, they react like they just discovered the food for the first time."

Ever since the babies went on display in May, they have been so popular that Steinmetz had triple the usual number of volunteers.

His helpers jog outside the outdoor ostrich playpen, recording on a clipboard how many minutes each baby spends sleeping, standing, playing, eating and browsing.

Veterinarians make weekly checks. When a few of the ostriches had toes that were curling in, they designed special corrective sandals.

Steinmetz and the veterinarians are recording their observations and plan to write a research paper about their experiment once the ostrich exhibit shuts down this fall.

Steinmetz, who has worked in avian departments at the Houston and San Diego zoos, has experience with kiwis, emus and cassowaries, but this is his first job handling ostriches. He's fascinated, and full of feathered facts:

Ostriches can run at racehorse speeds, up to 40 mph. And they can keep that pace for up to 30 minutes. (Scientists have figured this out by putting ostriches on specially designed treadmills.)

They use their wings as rudders to make quick turns. Their brains are smaller than their eyeballs, but that doesn't mean they don't have skills. If they can't outrun their predators, ostriches have been known to play possum.

Born to run

What Steinmetz finds most remarkable about his charges is how their personalities change once they start running. Newborns can take their first run within a day of hatching. But once they start to really tear it up, their curiosity and energy levels spike.

"It's what they were born to do. They love it," he said.

And with that, he set off for another jog, the flock close behind, on its way to yet another magical buffet.