



Welcome to my world

A pair of week-old emu chicks check out their new surroundings at the VanLeishout ranch in Rupert (SIP photo by Ken Levy)

Emus catching on as alternative to cattle

By KEN LEVY
The South Idaho Press

The female sounds like a tom-tom drum, while the male grunts like a pig.

They're cleaner than cattle but taste just like beef.

At 97 percent lean, they're much lower in fat and cholesterol than cattle.

They can produce dozens of healthy chicks per year, compared to only one calf per cow. They can lay eggs until they're 30 years old or more.

And more parts of these flightless birds can be used than their friends, the ostrich.

They're emus, and from their meat to their feathers, they're becoming increasingly popular as "the livestock alternative to cattle," according to Rupert emu breeder John Bringhurst and his parents and partners, George and LaRee VanLeishout.

But they weren't always popular, especially in their native Australia.

In the 1930s they were hunted extensively due to their nasty habit of gathering in large flocks and destroying crops and rangelands.

Now they're a protected species, and the creatures have been successfully bred since 1830.

They get to be about five feet tall and feed on vegetation, fruit and insects, and they reputedly are friendly to those who raise them domestically.

"They're clean, and there's



Emu oils

Products made from the oil of emus include moisturizer and emu oil, said to be medicinal for a variety of ailments (SIP photo by Ken Levy)

no smell," Bringhurst reported. "And they're very docile, but exciteable."

George VanLeishout can attest to that. One feisty adult kicked him hard in the knee.

The partners own five pair of breeder emus on their five-acre Rupert ranch, which is shared by sheep, geese and other, more conventional farmstead regulars.

The initial emu investment can be pretty steep: a pair of two-year-old breeders can run \$5,000, LaRee said, with yearlings running about \$2,000 apiece.

But they live 60-70 years, she said, and reach 125 pounds. And a pair can produce up to 60 chicks in a

year, according to Bringhurst.

The U.S. Dept. of Agriculture approved emu meat for consumption in the past year, according to Bringhurst, and slaughter markets are opening in Gooding and Nampa.

The birds' feathers are used in the electronics industries because they carry no static electricity and are ideal for cleaning sensitive computer and other electronic devices, he said.

Markets for emu feathers have opened in China, said Bringhurst.

The only layer of fat they have is on the back in adults," he said. Each adult can produce five liters of the oil, which is rendered and used for cosmetics and in medicinal applications.

LaRee said the oil sells for about \$100 a liter.

Emu hides are also ideal for tanning, Bringhurst said.

The birds first became popular as commercial breeding livestock in Texas. Ranchers there breed thousands of breeder pairs, LaRee said.

"It's a great thing for people to get involved with," she said. "It's just like the cattle industry, because that didn't catch on at first."

The partners will sell breeder emus to interested ranchers or sell them to production facilities. Those interested in obtaining emus can contact the VanLeishouts at 436-9589 or Bringhurst at 423-4204.