

# dancers IN THE desert

The return of Ostriches to the Sahara

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS ELSA BUSSIÈRE





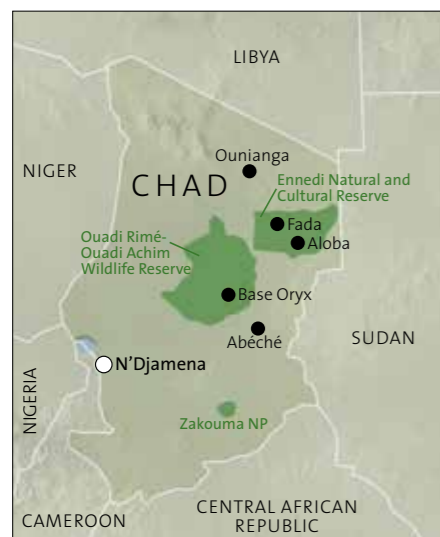
Anyone who has studied, and loved, the Sahara Desert can surely bring to mind the Ostrich with the red neck, the northern race of a species that is more familiar in the southern and eastern regions of

Africa. Sadly, wars and the advent of motor vehicles in the last century led to the demise of much of the remarkable wildlife of the Sahel-Sahara region, so the appearance once again of this beautiful, highly endangered bird's silhouette on the crest of a dune could signal a conservation battle not yet lost.

The government of Chad, together with NGOs African Parks Network and Sahara Conservation, decided to make this dream come true and launched a project called Sougounaw – 'for the Ostrich' in the local language. Its story began in October 2019, when a bold action plan was given the official go-ahead. According to this plan, in February the following year young wild Ostriches would be collected in Zakouma National Park in the south-east of Chad – the last stronghold of the subspecies – and half of them would be flown to the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve 432 kilometres away.

The remaining birds would be transported to the Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve, where I am based, 734 kilometres from Zakouma. The chicks would be raised to the age of 18 months in their new homes and then, in the middle of the rainy season, they would be released into the wild.

It was also decided that, to avoid having to repeatedly remove Ostriches from Zakouma, a breeding farm would be built near Fada, a town within the Ennedi reserve. We began work on it immediately and, far from any building material suppliers, we used local red clay to erect walls and create pens. A 1000-square-metre plot that could be irrigated with underground water was prepared for sowing alfalfa, but we still wanted to provide the developing birds with a varied diet. So at harvest time we travelled to Abéché, a major town more than 400 kilometres south of Fada, to purchase sorghum, beans, maize and



peanuts. Then came the logistical challenge of transporting back to the farm 2000 bags (29 tons) of fodder – enough to feed 30 Ostriches for a whole year!

As the new year approached, we turned our attention to Zakouma, where about 300 Ostriches thrive on more than 3200 square kilometres of protected land. Ennedi rangers prepared three vehicles for the long journey south. It was their first venture so far from the desert and into a land where giraffes browse the tops of acacia trees, birds darken the skies and elephants make the earth tremble. Their mission: to find 30 young Ostriches for Ennedi.

On arrival at Zakouma National Park, the teams set about scouring its swampy savanna. After covering 2722 kilometres on the ground without finding a single nest, they needed a new plan – it was time to go high! A Cessna 182 took over and in the course of flying almost 5000 kilometres its pilot located 13 nests. We set up camera traps to monitor them and found ourselves in front-row seats, observing the ceaseless effort required of the breeding Ostrich pairs to raise their chicks. And we were about to steal them! But, we hoped, by disrupting the natural order of things in this small corner of paradise, we would be able to create another piece of paradise in the north of Chad.

We waited until the chicks were about two months old, when they were still small but had already begun learning from their parents, so they would be less likely to imprint on humans. Then the Ennedi rangers ambushed the nests, scaring the adult Ostriches away and picking up the abandoned chicks.

With the chicks now in our care, we took off from Zakouma for the flight first to Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim and then on to Ennedi. Amused, the pilot commented, 'I've flown a lot of planes, but flying Ostriches – now that's thumbing your nose at evolution!'

As we drew near Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim we looked down on its grassy

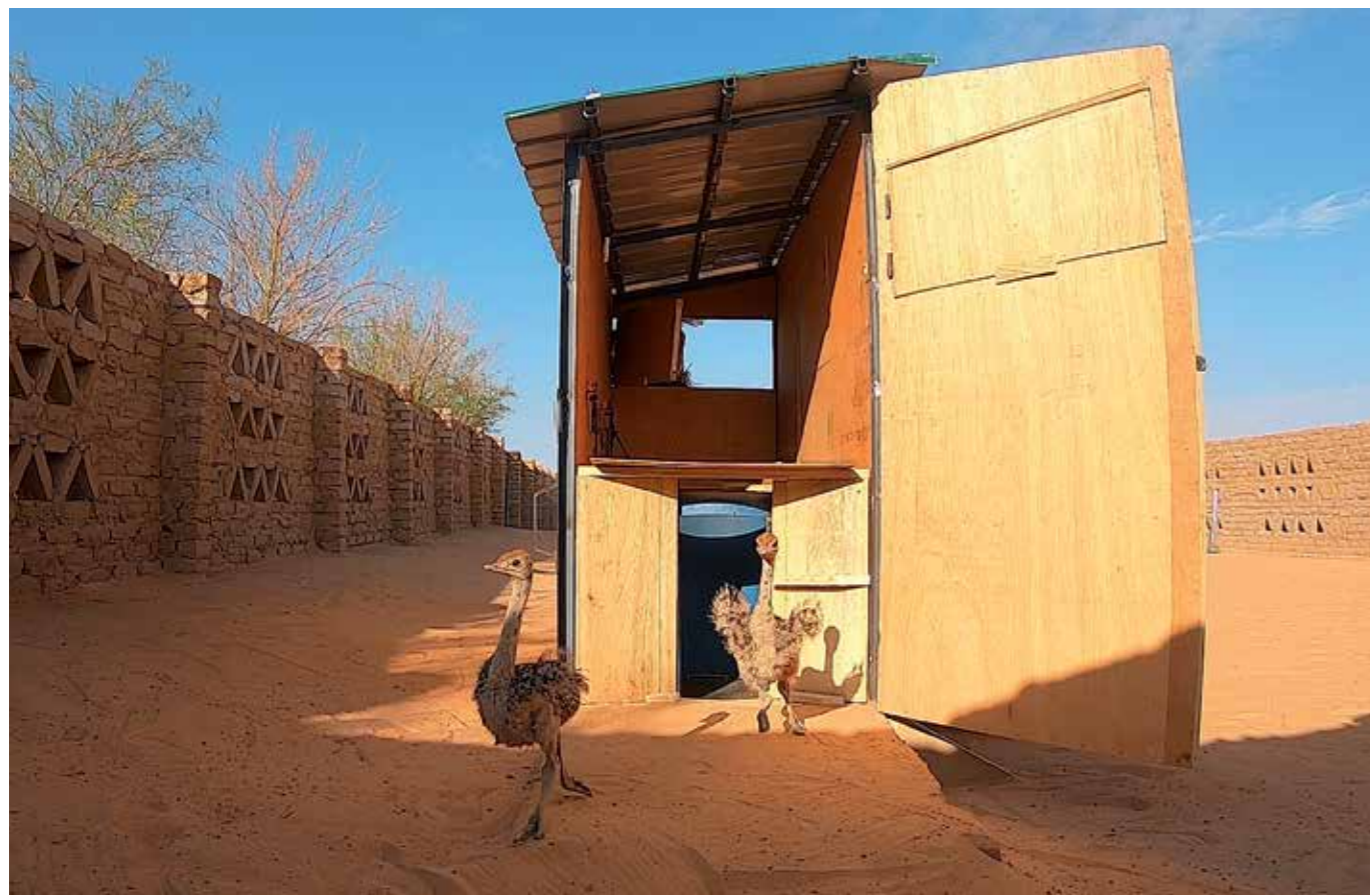


steppe, the only place in the world where scimitar-horned oryx and addax antelopes thrive in the wild. No one here has seen Ostriches for more than 30 years, I mused. Only in the minds of the elders do they still exist. At dusk, after half the chicks had been unloaded, the plane took off again. Ninety minutes later it landed at Fada, in the middle of the desert. It would soon be winter and the nights would be bitterly cold, but for the next few weeks the chicks would spend the hours of >

top and above *Moussa Sougui gently lifts a young Ostrich into the Cessna that will transport it north from Zakouma to the desert. On arrival, the birds spent 48 hours in a pen to allow their stress levels to drop.*

opposite *After only five months of freedom, and at two years old, this pair is caring for seven wild-born chicks.*

previous spread *This Ostrich family is experiencing its first dry season on the southern plains of the Ennedi Massif.*



above After a cold winter's night in the Sahara, the chicks are released from their heated shelter when the outside temperature reaches 18 degrees Celsius.

opposite As they emerge, they dance with seemingly joyful energy.

darkness in a hygienically clean wooden shelter heated to 23 degrees Celsius.

Each morning the young Ostriches left the shelter running in all directions, crossing each other's paths at full speed, twirling around like spinning tops. One,

two, three spins...round and round... have they lost their minds? Twenty spins...they all joined the dance. What a show! Then, poof, one of them would collapse, its neck stretched out on the sand... A healthy Ostrich dances and sometimes loses its balance. But if one morning one of them decided not to dance, we knew we were in trouble.

We had been warned but, naively, we still hoped we could save them all. Sadly, several of the young birds succumbed to *Clostridium* infections, Newcastle

disease and infestations of the *Taenia* tapeworm. But most survived, and as the weeks went by the chicks' leopard-like plumage disappeared. At about six months old, some of them stood more than 1.8 metres tall.

**T**he Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve is where wild and domestic – nature and culture – meet. The time was approaching to release the birds, but we could only do so in conjunction with the Toubou people. What would be the point of releasing the birds if we don't know how the local people would relate to them?

For the people of the Sahara, the seasons, their pastures and their camels are the landmarks of their lives. The Ostrich – large eyes perched atop a long neck, a creature adapted to extreme drought – is the avian equivalent of a camel and to the community it would surely be equally valuable. >

#### PERILS AT THE NEST

In the 13 nests found at Zakouma we counted 219 eggs, of which 79 per cent – those inside the incubation ring – had any chance of hatching. Of these, 11 per cent got broken and another 42 per cent were eaten or carried away by predators, notably olive baboons and spotted hyaenas, but also lions and striped hyaenas. Honey badgers and Egyptian Vultures were unable to break the shells. Seven of the nests produced 76 chicks, eight of which were immediately eaten by hyaenas.





We decided to build an acclimatisation pen at Aloba, 125 kilometres south of Fada, that would be managed by the community there. After the first rains, the herders' animals would have to share the new, knee-high grass with the Ostriches. How would the locals feel about that? When we met them, more than 95 per cent said they looked forward to seeing Ostriches. But we also knew that a handful of them would enjoy eating Ostrich meat and eggs and using its fat, which is sought by traditional healers. We would have to remain cautious.

When the acclimatisation pen in Aloba was completed at the end of July, the Sahara Conservation team drove to Fada to transport the young Ostriches on the next stage of their journey to freedom. As night fell, human shadows silently encircled the birds and guided them into individual crates that were then loaded onto the truck. By dawn it had arrived back at Aloba and, like jacks-in-the-box, the Ostriches sprang out of their crates, their trembling legs betraying their exhaustion. Over the next 12 months they would complete their growth in the pen and under the community's protection.

A year after their arrival at Aloba, at 18 months old the Ostriches were magnificent, brimming with vitality and ready to begin their life in the wild. It was time for us to open the pen and relinquish control. As they stepped out into freedom, the birds paused for a moment, as if curious about the expanse of green pasture stretching before them to the horizon.

A month later they had travelled just over 300 kilometres, exploring their surroundings with the tip of their beaks. They moved south, dancing, cleaning their feathers and bathing in the sand >

opposite, above *After travelling for nine hours from Fada to Aloba, a young Ostrich emerges from its crate. Although shaken and exhausted now, it soon adapts to life in the acclimatisation pen.*

opposite, below *For a year, Youssouf and Mahamat live with the Ostriches, feeding, watering and protecting them.*

above *At 18 months old the Ostriches are powerful and will leave their acclimatisation pen when the impending rain transforms the landscape.*



as they went. In October, two males and two females separated themselves from the others. Courtship had begun.

The following month, satellite messages were flying around the world: the pairs had laid eggs! The females sat on them during the day, the males at night to maintain the eggs at a steady 36 degrees Celsius. By mid-January, however, the parents were still steadfastly incubating. They had been sitting on the eggs for far too long, we thought – and feared the worst. So it was a happy surprise when the rangers called to say that 13 chicks had hatched! At just two years old, ‘our’ Ostriches had performed a miracle. They still had a long road before them and would no doubt encounter pitfalls, but they had made a start.

Thanks to satellite trackers adorning the birds’ necks, Ennedi’s rangers are able to follow their movements.



One day the signal led them to a group comprising a man and 11 Ostriches. The camel herder knows that the pastures where his animals graze and the guelta where they drink belong to all, including Ostriches. But not everyone respects that; poachers may also be roaming these landscapes, or unwary

humans who approach a nest in the breeding season and risk being trampled by the angry parents. The Ostriches, too, need to cultivate their wild instincts. So we chased the birds away from the herder to continue their travels on their own.

Of the 63 Ostrich chicks removed from Zakouma, 51 have survived and reached adulthood. Statistics suggest that in the wild only nine of them would have become adults. And while we may have succeeded in giving nature a helping hand, nature has given us a great deal more. Every morning our first thoughts are of these feathered ballerinas that have given so much meaning to our lives. Seeing them breed in the wild seemed like the ultimate goal, but in fact it’s only

opposite, above *At the age of seven months the Ostriches experience rain for the first time. Resigned, they wait for the sun to return.*

above *A few moments after stepping out of the enclosure, the Ostriches stop at the top of a hill and gaze out onto their new world.*

opposite, below *Once released, the birds are closely monitored by rangers, who ensure that their encounters with local communities are harmonious.*

the beginning. Thanks to the breeding farm at Fada, we may soon be able to send Ostriches beyond Chad’s borders. The Sougounaw Project is up and running, bringing these magnificent birds back to the Sahara. ♦



VALENTINE PLESSY