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Datebook

BY DEANNA ISAACS

NEST EGG

If you're looking for the world headquarters of Ostriches On Line, which calls itself "the world's largest international ostrich company," you'll find yourself at the door of Steve Warrington's modest home in Elmwood Park. There's no big bird there, and no staff either, just a small living room jammed with boxes of feathers and other ostrich paraphernalia, a serious computer setup, and Warrington, an amiable 39-year-old Englishman with a gift for promotion and a mission. He wants to put ostrich meat on your plate, ostrich skin on your back, and ostrich oil on your kisser.

Both Warrington and the ostrich industry are in turnaround. In 1995 Warrington lost his investment in a security business when his partner took off; then his wife left him. "I was a bit low at the time," he says. (Those Brits, so understated.) He resisted his parents' suggestion that he come home and run the family farm in Manchester, but when his father complained about a lack of information on ostrich farming, Warrington thought he could help. "I had just gotten onto the Internet," he recalls. "I said, 'Don't worry, Dad, I'm sure everything will be on the Net.' When I looked, there was nothing."

Bingo. In that vacuum Warrington saw his future. He sold his car for \$5,000 so he'd have cash to live on, moved into the Elmwood Park house, and started his business on a borrowed computer. Originally he planned to sell ostrich hides on the Internet: "That failed—miserably," he says. But he turned an ostrich farm business plan he'd written for his father into a salable software program, and things picked up. To reach potential customers he started a Web site and a newsletter; soon he was selling everything from feather boas and eggs to chartered plane loads of the eight-foot, 300-pound birds.

The ostrich industry got its start in the mid-19th century, when the feathers of these flightless African giants became status symbols in Europe. By the end of the century ostrich feathers were South Africa's third-largest industry, surpassed only by gold and diamond



PHOTO/EUGENE ZAKHINCO

Web entrepreneur
STEVE WARRINGTON thinks
he has a bird in the hand.

mining. During World War I, however, the business came to a sudden halt—done in by the war, the motor car (with its limited hat room), and a pronouncement by England's queen that the plumes were no longer in good taste. It was 30 years before the industry began to gear up again—this time exporting hides—and another 20 years before South Africa started to export ostrich meat. Meanwhile the feathers were sold for

dusters. These were peerless products, Warrington says: ostrich hide is the strongest leather commercially available, and ostrich flesh offers the red-meat protein of beef with fewer calories and less cholesterol than skinless chicken. Even the feathers have a unique, desirable property: a negative ion that actually attracts dust. In the 1960s, Warrington says, the South African government, noting that nearly the entire world population of this increasingly valuable animal lived within its borders, instituted the first of a series of bans on the export of livestock.

Twenty years later supplies were so scarce that ostrich-leather boots were fetching a thousand dollars a pair in the U.S., and American farmers were itching to get into the business. With entrepreneurs hyping the investment opportunity, prices soared. Eggs that cost \$25 in South Africa sold for \$500 in the U.S.; breeding pairs of birds were purchased for as much as \$80,000 by people hoping to get rich quick on the offspring. "People were queuing up to buy these things," Warrington says. "They thought it was going to go on forever." In the early '90s, however, South Africa began to lift its export restrictions, and by '95 the market had collapsed. "There are many people stuck in the industry today with huge loans for these birds," Warrington says, people who got into the business for the wrong reasons. For everyone else, he maintains, it's a great industry, still in its early stages.

When Warrington started his newsletter in April of '96 it went to 200 E-mail addresses; it now reaches 13,600. His Web site, replete with ostrich facts and photos, has swollen to 3,000 pages. You can find it at www.ostrichesonline.com. If you want a look at his free classifieds, however, be forewarned: "The only way you can access my forum is through a password; the only way you can get a password is to give me your information and your E-mail address." Do that, and soon you'll be receiving regular communications on ratite nutrition and the optimum thickness for ostrich belly fat.