Emus thrive here
Spread the word about this breeders' market

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

DUSON — They have a saying in Texas, according to Amelia Conrad: “The emu will never take the place of the moo-moo.”

But Conrad and her husband, Charles, are doing their best to see that emus thrive in Acadiana as well as in Australia.

The Conrads do business as Old World Exotics near Duson. Their small farm produces or provides a home for unusual animals like Vietnamese potbellied pigs, Tennessee fainting goats, Corsican and Barbadoe sheep, white rheas (another flightless bird) and pygmy goats. But none is more unusual, or potentially more profitable, than the emu.

The Texans may be forgiven for thinking that, in terms of public relations, beef cattle have nothing to fear from the emu (pronounced E-myou). Like its larger cousin the ostrich, the emu is a gawky bird. Fully grown, the birds stand 5 feet tall, weigh 120-150 pounds, and walk as though their feet hurt.

But unlike the ostrich, the emu is docile. Conrad has two pairs of breeding emus — George and Loretta, and Tango and Cash — plus six young birds. Their pens are large rectangles, catering to the birds’ love of walking endlessly along fences. Step into the young birds’ pen, and they display their other notable trait: curiosity. Some shy away, but one or two others will walk up and stare, looking for something shiny. If they find it, they try to eat it.

“We have to keep everything shiny away from their pens,” Conrad said.

But curiosity may be the emu’s only shortcoming. The long-necked birds are quiet, except for the October-March egg-laying season. Then the females let loose with a deep drumming sound, the emu equivalent of “What’s your sign?”

The males grunt.

Each breeding pair will produce 25-30 eggs during a laying season. In the wild, the males incubate the eggs, each of which is about the size and color of an avocado. But at Old World Exotics, the eggs often go into incubators. Breeding pairs are penned separately, because females with eggs don’t get along.

The chicks are born with striped feathers, which change to a solid chocolate brown when they reach the juvenile stage. The feathers change color again at maturity, becoming a lighter, mottled brown.

But gold might be a better color.

In May 1989, Conrad said, a veterinarian suggested that Conrad take a look at raising Vietnamese potbellied pigs, a fat pet that sells for $1,000-$2,000. He also mentioned emus. Conrad began raising the pigs, and has done well.

But “I should have gone with the emus,” she said.

At that time, emu chicks were selling for $150 each. Now, Conrad said, they sell for $1,500. A juvenile can sell for $3,500; an emu of breeding age will go for $7,500.

All this for a bird that can be raised in a 30 foot-by-30 foot pen, can live in areas as diverse as Canada and Louisiana, and costs a mere 20-50 cents a day to feed.

“They’re very hardy birds,” Conrad said.

Emus are good for a variety of products, she said. Among them are:

• The meat, which Conrad said is hard to distinguish from beef roast. But it’s lower in cholesterol than fish, chicken, turkey, pork or beef, she said.

• The feathers. Not only can the feathers be used for garments, Conrad said, but they contain an oil that makes them good for cleaning dust from computer components.

• The oil. Emus have a layer of fat on their backs; the oil rendered from that fat is thick and translucent, and makes a good moisturizer, Conrad said. And it has pharmaceutical applications.

Each bird produces four to five liters of oil that sells for $150 per liter.

• The leather. Thinner than ostrich skin, emu leather can be used for boots, briefcases and other items.

• Even the eggshells and toenails can be used to make jewelry.

Currently, Conrad said, the emu business is a breeding business. A U.S. processing industry will require 100,000 breeding pairs, and the U.S. now has fewer than 50,000 individual birds, she said. Australia has prohibited the export of emus for about 30 years, so all the birds must be bred and raised here.

But Conrad is doing her best to give the industry a foothold here. She is a member of the American Emu Association, Louisiana chapter. She shows the birds at local festivals and attends seminars on the health and care of “ratites,” or flightless birds.

A fledgling ratite industry, devoted mostly to ostriches, already exists in America, especially in Texas, she said.

“A lot of people are switching to emus from ostriches because the ostrich is so mean, and because the fencing (needed to

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Amelia and Charles Conrad have 10 emus on their farm.
raise ostriches) is so much more elaborate,” Conrad said. “Ostrich fences have to be built for bulls.”

In the meantime, she’s spreading the word about emus. “I think the breeder’s market will go on for another five or six years,” she said. “Then it’ll be like any other industry. The prices will slack off as processing starts.”

Conrad thinks the agriculture industry has something to gain from emus. She calls it the “alternative livestock” idea.

“It’s a diversification agriculture,” she said of emu farming. “We’re doing our best to put aside the myth that you need cattle or sheep or the usual animals to start farming.

“We’ve enjoyed the emus. You don’t need a lot of property. And they’re so quiet, you can raise them in your backyard.”