Predator Control: A Big Bird for Wily Coyote?

Roy S. Mann

Perhaps only an ethologist can imagine what goes through the mind of a coyote as he hears the steadily gaining footsteps of a five-foot tall, 120-pound bird that seems (at least to the coyote) intent on running him down and kicking the daylights out of him.

Whatever really goes through the mind of a predator under such an attack is what Jerry Thompson of Eagle Creek, Ore., believes makes emus *(Dromiceius novaehollandiae)* an effective deterrent to predators in pasture situations with sheep.

Thompson raises sheep on 65 acres of pasture about 25 miles southeast of Portland, Ore. When Jerry first acquired a pair of emus, several years ago, he was unaware of their apparent malice toward certain critters.

Shortly after putting the birds in a pasture with sheep Jerry discovered they were very compatible with sheep, but would attack on sight, dogs, cats, chickens, and even a coyote.

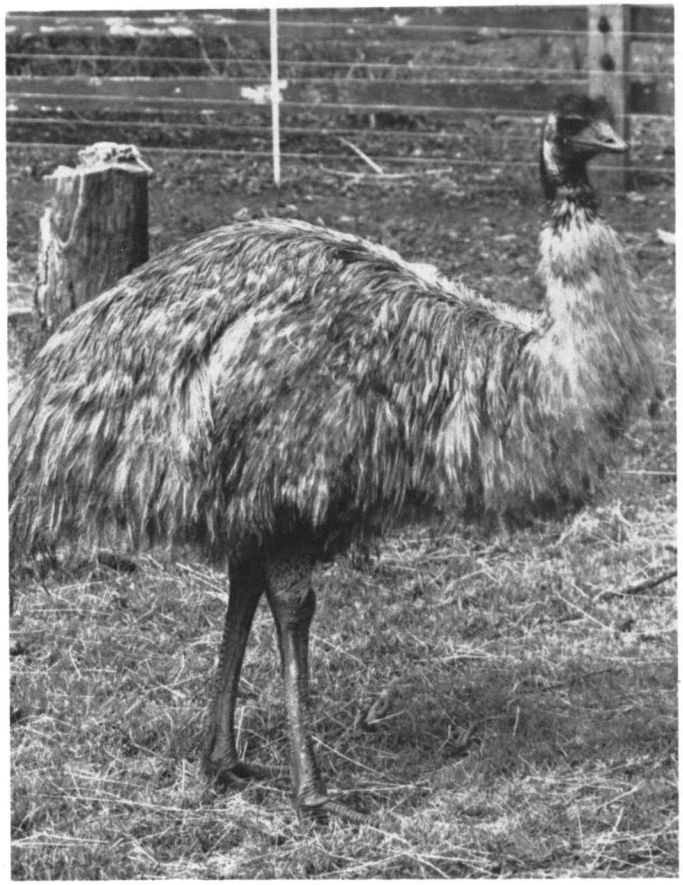
Mr. Thompson "guesses" the emus will aggressively go after a dog in the pasture when the animal is as far as 100 yards away. This is based on several observations. He also describes the bird/sheep relationship as symbiotic, with the sheep scaring up insects for the emus and the emus providing some protection for the sheep.

Experience so far has shown that a typical "attack" by an emu is to chase the dog either out of the pasture, or in one case, into a corner and kick it. According to Thompson, a canine emits an extremely mournful cry when briskly "drop kicked" by a big bird. Whether this would serve as an effective warning to others contemplating an intrusion into the pasture is unknown at this time.

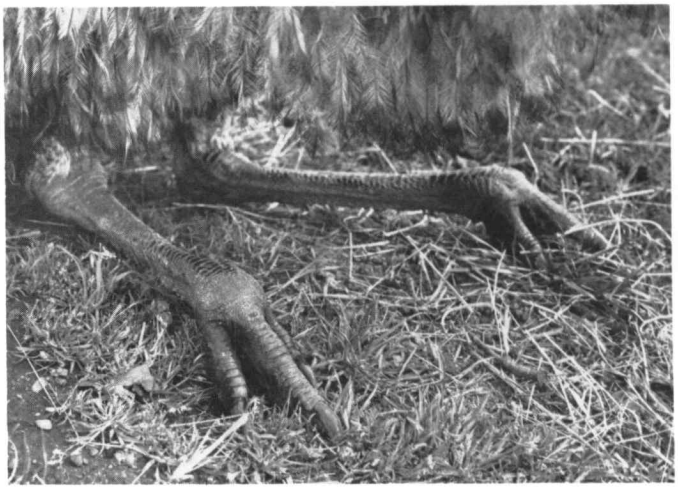
The emu is a native of Australia and evidently evolved in the arid open grasslands of that continent, in an environment more similar to our Western U.S. ranges than Thompson's Western Oregon location. However, it is not known by this author how well the animal would adapt to a typical rangeland situation in this country or how effective it might be in warding off predatory animals in a large range pasture setting. Jerry Thompson believes the birds would tend to stick with a herd of sheep, because of the "flushing" of insects, snakes, etc., rather than choosing to exist independently of the livestock. Cattle may (and likely would) present a different picture; for instance, what goes though an emu's mind as it hears the steady pounding of an irate, 1100-pound mother Hereford that seems intent on adorning her horns with exotic plumage.

The Western Oregon experience has shown that virtually any livestock fence will contain emus, yet in Australia the ranchers found the wild native emus to be a problem regarding fence breakage and either a real or perceived problem of competition for forage with their livestock. These problems led to what has been called the "Emu Wars," in which the large birds were widely hunted and shot with imported automatic military rifles. This paradox presents an interesting point of contrast with Jerry Thompson's emu venture.

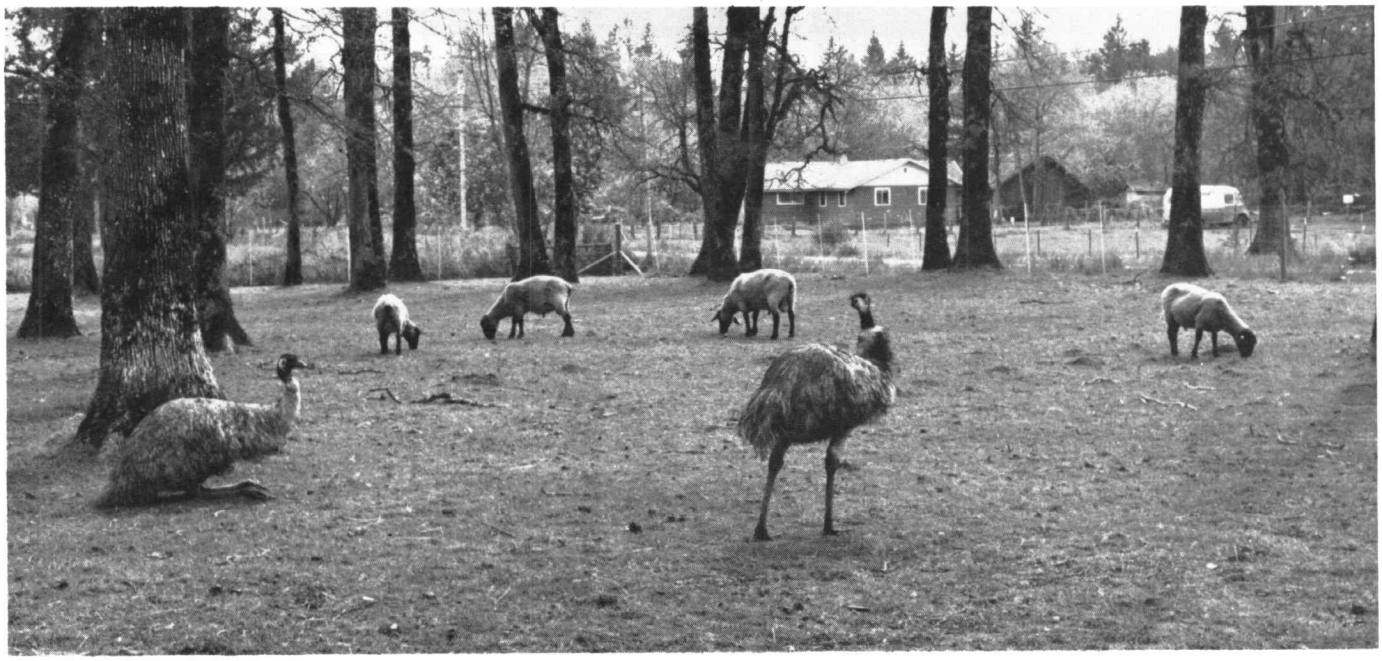
The author is Range Conservationist, Portland, Ore.



Attack Bird? The emu can be an effective deterrent to predators in pasture situations with sheep, according to Jerry Thompson of Eagle Creek, Ore. (SCS Photo by Douglas A. Bishop)



Emu Running Gear and Weaponry. Strong legs can dispatch an emu to a battle scene at a rate often faster than a predator's rate of escape—and those powerful "three-fingered fists" can quickly convince a coyote or dog that it has met its match, according to Thompson. (SCS Photo by Douglas A. Bishop)



Symbiotic? Jerry Thompson describes the emu/sheep relationship as symbiotic—with the sheep scaring up insects for the emus and the emus providing protection for the sheep. (SCS Photo by Douglas A. Bishop)

To date Jerry has not been able to meet demand for his emus. His principal market is not presently for predator control, but he expects it will be in the future.

The emus raised on the Thompson farm are hatched in incubators rather than in the nest. The reason for this, according to Thompson, is that the laying of the first egg by the female stimulates the male to begin nest building. The female will lay six to seven dark green, thick shelled eggs under normal circumstances, but the male is the one who incubates the eggs on the nest. Once he begins setting he will not leave the nest even for food or water for 55 days. This behavior of course precludes mating. Jerry says that more eggs can be hatched by collecting them as they are laid, thus preventing the males from setting, and therefore not interrupting breeding activity.

At this writing the prominence that emus will reach as a popular means of predator control is unknown, but you may want to keep your ear to the ground. . . . . and if you hear a thump, thump. . . . . .