



# BUYING YOUR BIRDS

## Traits

There are two groups of traits you should consider when choosing livestock. Genetic and Environmental. Sometimes it is difficult to separate genetic and environmental problems.

Genetic traits include rate of weight gain, body weight, egg weight, sexual maturity rate, temperament, egg production, chick endurance (will it survive), color of feathers, and whether or not the bird will have red toenails. (just joking, if you see an emu with red toenails, she's been to the beauty shop).

Environmental traits are those traits which can be affected by the environment in which the bird is raised, such as egg production, fertility, chick endurance (whether it will survive), etc.

Example: Emu's need a good balanced ration that is formulated to meet their needs. Birds that are raised on a good ration will reach their genetic potential. A chick that is raised on a diet of cracked corn will not. I have had people call me up wanting to know why their 2 or 3 year old emus that they bought at a flea market and raised on cracked corn are not laying. Because animals that are starving to death don't reproduce. Do I sound harsh? Good.

## What Age Should I Buy?

When choosing stock, visit several farms, look at the birds, ask **questions**. Do not be in a hurry.

One decision you will have to make is what age bird to purchase.

BUY	PROS	CONS
Eggs	Usually cheaper	Must Incubate, no way to tell if fertile, transportation problems
Chicks up to 3 months	Learn with the birds, pen & feed only, easy transportation  Economical buy	Lay in 2 – 3 years  Non-insurable
4 to 11 months	Learn with the birds,  Pen and feed only, economical buy	Lay in 2 – 3 years, may or may not be insurable
Yearlings (11-15 months)	Learn with the birds, insurable,	Lay in 1 – 2 years

Unproven pairs (17 – 26 months)	Insurable, lay immediately	Incubation costs, hatching compatibility?
Proven pairs (2 years or older that have produced offspring at least one season)	Insurable, Lay immediately, compatible	Expensive incubation & hatching

## Purchase Checklist

### ID Method

- Micro chipped
- Leg Band
- Neck tag
- other \_\_\_\_\_

### Quality of Birds

- Legs should be straight, not bowed. In older birds the backs of the legs should be rough. A sign of inbreeding is smooth legs.
- Neck straight, not curved or twisted into unnatural positions
- Back straight. A hump-backed bird has difficulty breeding, dresses out to less meat and is undesirable in the genetic pool
- Toes normal and straight. (please note - many farmers are now clipping the two outside toes at hatch. This is so when the birds reach slaughter weight the hides are not damaged.)
- Eyes clear and bright (note: a bird with a healed eye injury can still breed, but one with cataracts will be adding that tendency to the gene pool. Question the farmer as to why the blindness occurred.
- Responsive and Alert: (note: during breeding season some adult males will "freeze" when being handled and can even be mistaken for being blind.)
- Parents unrelated - read up on inbreeding and out-crossing to find out why this is often undesirable.
- Straight Run Chicks or Sex Guaranteed? \*

*\* If you are purchasing straight run chicks, they will not be tagged or sexed. While the parents may be unrelated, you will have no way of knowing that the chicks you eventually pair up are unrelated. In other words, you may be pairing up brothers and sisters. While straight run chicks are cheaper, it would be a good idea to purchase whatever chicks you pair with them from a different, unaffiliated farm.*

## Free Birds?

**NOTE - There are not many free birds left as the market demand is increasing.**

If you have the opportunity to acquire free birds, consider this:

- **Why is the farmer giving these away?**
  1. He didn't research the market and does not want to sell farm to fork.
  2. Illness or death in family, unable to continue farming operations
  3. Got them at a flea market or free, does not know what to do with them.
- **Have the birds been fed a diet that enabled them to reach their genetic potential?**
- **What will I do with these birds if they are sterile?** Am I prepared to have them slaughtered in order to market the products?
- **If these are being taken as slaughter birds,** what kind of money will I spend in getting them up to slaughter weight?

As we said on our Farming Information page, emu farming is currently a farm to fork operation. This is not for everyone. Unfortunately, some people get into emu farming without researching the market. Consequently, when they finally do learn the facts they decide it is not for them. If they are unable to sell their birds, they may slaughter them or give them away. Occasionally an irresponsible person comes along and turns the birds loose on the public. This is the same sort of mentality that dumps puppies and kittens in the country to be killed by predators or to starve to death. If you have the capital to invest in bringing free birds up to slaughter weight, processing and turning them into product, you can make some money. If the birds have been well cared for and are known to be good layers, it would probably be worth your while to take them as breeding stock. Just research carefully and don't get in over your head.

Sources for free birds: The **American Emu Association**, <https://aea-emu.org/>, is made up of state associations. Some state associations have "bird rescue programs" to (1) help place birds belonging to members who, through illness or deaths in the family, need to reduce flocks and (2) work with local police forces to capture any loose birds that are creating traffic hazards or are nuisances. Contact your local state affiliate organization for information in your state.