

Silent Auction: Mangy Elk and Crippled Camels

By LYNN M. ERMANN

Cape Girardeau, Mo.

"Two camels," shouts the auctioneer from the block.

The animals in question move wearily into the ring, their humps pathetically lopsided and sagging.

The asking price is too high. There are no bidders.

A tall man in a black cowboy hat leaps forward to trot one camel around the ring—with adverse effects. The jaunt just draws more attention to the humps, which now swing pendulously across the camel's back.

Still no bids, just yawns.

"C'mon," shouts the auctioneer toward the bleachers. "Feed 'em a little bit and those humps will go right back up again."

Titters in the audience—but no takers.

It is late afternoon at the Mid-America Exotic Animal Auction, and the bemused crowd has heard every conceivable sales pitch. Here, mangy looking elk are not mangy; they're "molting." Elk with broken legs are "top quality." Ordinary rhea are actually a rare breed of "Darwin rhea." Geriatric camels can eat a special diet and raise their humps.

For the past hour, dozens of camels of varying quality have flowed through the sales ring. Before them were zebras and on the previous day all kinds of oddball cattle. Over three days, more than a thousand exotics will be prodded into the ring, including wallabies, miniature donkeys, llamas, miniature horses and the big birds of the ratite group: emus, ostriches and rheas. In a room at the side of the barn there is another sale—separate from the auction—for caged critters: peacocks, baby black bears, bobcats, coyotes, hedgehogs and one nonplussed baby wallaby (whose dog carrier is unfortunately situated between the coyotes and bobcats). The asking prices at this "swap meet," like those on the auction block, are all high.

The crowd, which numbers about 500 a day (a different 500 each time), is as eclectic as the critters, hailing from New York, Arkansas, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas. They are farmers, ranchers, small-business owners, teachers and lawyers. Some are loaded, others are broke. The uniform of the day—jeans and cowboy hats—makes it hard to tell the millionaires from the paupers. At times, it is impossible even to tell who is buying or selling; most communicate bids with a series of subtle nods.

"It is a buyer's market, help yourself," shouts the auctioneer to the audience several times during the sale. Translation: The exotics business has taken a nose dive. Animals are worth a fraction of what they were worth just five years ago. Where one emu once sold for \$1,000, now one sells for as low as \$25. Llamas, which once sold for \$20,000, now sell for about \$1,000. But keeping the animals gets expensive: They eat—a lot. People are desperate to sell, and for these sellers, the name of the game is find a new sucker. This is not easy, certainly not as easy as it was just eight years ago.

The exotic-animal business was in fact built on suckers—and dreamers. Sales, which have been around in some form for centuries, were until recently the domain of zoos and circuses. Then in the late '70s, the government loosened regulations on captive breeding, and zoos began selling their surplus animals into the auction market. Now there are more than 60 auctions all over the country. In the '80s, dealers brought farmers and yuppies into the fold. Suburbanites with small plots of land thought they could strike it rich quick by raising exotics; farmers whose dairy farms were then ailing hoped desperately that the exotics could be a new cash cow.

If the industry was a haven for entrepreneurs, it also sheltered charlatans. "Nobody knew anything about most of these animals," explains Mark B. Wright, an animal dealer. Any self-proclaimed expert could bamboozle a naïf. Devious (or

ignorant) breeders would often sell people two male ostriches as a breeder pair. (Males and females look alike at a young age.) Now, there are sexing services. "It is not easy to tell [the males from the female ostriches]; you have to turn them upside down," explains Jan Smith, a Massachusetts man with a unique occupation—ratite sexer. Other farmers are digitally tagging their birds.

The industry is attempting to police itself, yet its problems go beyond a few

Will trade perfect blue x red ostrich for eland. Nilgal or watusi. WA 4-15-96

Ostrich - three pair breeders - red, blue, and blue red cross, \$3000 pair; twenty chicks 5-7 months, \$300 each. Natureform NOM 45 hatcher and NOM 45 incubator, \$6000. TX 4-15-96

White rhea flock for sale: must liquidate 8 breeder pairs plus coming two's and yearlings. Early layers - 229 eggs last season. Will sell in one lot or pairs. No reasonable offer refused. VA 4-15-96

Ads for exotic animals

swindlers. For years farmers and ranchers have been overbreeding, with no thought to the demand in either of the two market categories for exotics—those that are bred for exhibition and those raised like livestock, for meat or skins or other products. Breeders can supposedly make a fortune selling animals like zebras and camels to wildlife parks or zoos or oryx to shooting preserves. Dealers also sold farmers on the idea of breeding ratites by telling them that the animals could be turned into marketable products in a few years. They are still waiting.

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"Nobody could compete with South Africa [in the leather business]," says Toby Hutchinson, a farmer from Alabama who breeds ratites. "They use cheap labor." Farmers who failed in the leather business, went on to flop in the meat market. Americans never clamored for their emu burgers and ostrich steaks. Meanwhile, few zoos are taking an interest in buying animals from auctions. So North America has filled up with weird beasts, and many exotic-animal auctions have become dumping grounds.

Animals at this sale often look half dead. Many are. One group of exhausted elk has been on a less than grand tour of the country. "This is the fourth time those elk have been run through an auction," says old-timer Woody Arrington, nodding toward the ring. The 85-year-old banker and dealer often sees the same ragged animals over and over again as he travels the auction circuit. Breeders take animals that don't sell at one auction to others, hoping the tide will turn, which it sometimes does, unpredictably. "There is no set rate," explains animal handler Dusty Kemp. "You can buy something for \$100 at one auction and take it to another sale and sell it for \$1,000." He calls the sales "the original stock market." Only in this market, the products age, lose feathers, go lame and even foul the "trading floor."

The "brokers" are every bit as cynical and profane as those on Wall Street. The aptly named Ed Otter jokes about just having sold two baby black bears to inexperienced ursophiles. He points to one new owner who is leading around his diapered new cub on a leash. "Just wait and see what that bear looks like in six months," says Mr. Otter, snickering. He expects to see them lumber through a future sale, just like those lopsided camels, whose owner had bought them sight unseen over the phone.

At this auction and at others across the country, a bizarre variation on the American dream is languishing. But no one here will declare the exotics market dead. "Meat is being introduced into nicer restaurants now," says Jack Evans, optimistically. He is an ostrich breeder from Piggot, Ark., who is trying to sell 10 birds. You can't get rich quick, he says. But soon, soon there will be more slaughter facilities out in Texas and these birds will sell like hotcakes.

As long as there are new suckers, there will be hustlers ready to stick them with strange beasts. Jan Smith, the ratite sexer, is moving on to a whole new creature, a pig with "donkey hoof" feet—the hoofs are not cloven. Smiling broadly, he says: "Jewish people can eat them."

How do you say caveat emptor in Hebrew? And make sure those hogs chew their cud.