

## AGRITOURISM

# Evolution of the Heartland shows strength of rural Iowa

By MAXIMILLIAN LISOWSKI

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The Evolution of the Heartland event on Thursday, Aug. 3 showcased several farms highlighting how rural Iowa continues to thrive.

When one thinks of rural Iowa, one may think of corn and soybean fields beyond the eye can see. However, rural farmers in the area have been up to much more. From farming with cover crops to raising Ostriches and Yaks, Iowan farmers are looking for ways to shake up the agricultural industry.

#### Yak Farming:

The most common kind of livestock in Iowa include cows, pigs, chickens and sheep, but a couple in Exira have been looking for ways to stand out

Neal and Lisa Meseck now use their space to farm Tibetan yaks. It started when Neal Meseck went to the 2019 Denver Stock Show where he saw yaks and became interested. The following year, he purchased 5 yaks and has grown his herd to around 17.

The couple owns the first registered yak in Iowa and will continue breeding yaks to the point where they can butcher two per year. Currently, they only take one yak to a meat locker once per year and use the rest of his herd's shedding hair to be



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The incubation process for ostrich eggs takes about 36 days. Irlmeier shows what its like for a chick to naturally break from its shell.

mixed with alpaca to create yarn. Meseck said the quality of the hair is similar to cashmere.

Following the week of extreme heat across Iowa, Meseck explained how to keep the yaks cool even when their hair has grown tremendously.

“The main thing you can do for them is give them shade and lots of water,”

Meseck said.

Meseck plans on working toward improving his herd to process 2 yaks per year.

#### Ostrich Farming:

Heath Irlmeier of Audubon, Iowa kicked off his leg of the tour by giving tour-goers a taste of something akin to beef. Tasting, smelling, and looking almost exactly like it, Irlmeier explained that it was ostrich meat.

Starting in 2017, Heath Irlmeier and his brother started their venture in the ostrich business to bring ostrich meat to rural Iowans. Containing less cholesterol and less fat, Irlmeier's goal is to make the meat an affordable and healthy option for rural Iowans.

Irlmeier said that there are three different subspecies of ostriches: common,

blues and reds. Common ostriches, much like their name, are the most abundant species of ostrich and are found throughout the entirety of Africa. Blues are located near Somalia, and Reds are found in northern Africa — they are the largest subspecies which can grow up to 10 feet tall. Ostriches take about two to three years to mature, with the males

maturing faster due to their high amount of testosterone.

While they are native to Africa, much to his surprise, Irlmeier says that the ostriches do “very very well” in the winter months. At Irlmeier's small farm, he installed small huts for the birds to take shelter when snowfall arrives, but Irlmeier said they're extremely self-sufficient.

“I've come out here and it'll be negative 26 degrees and they'll just be sitting out there, snow completely covered on them.” Irlmeier said. “They're not radiating all that body heat off, and their feathers are a very good insulator.”

During the late spring and summer seasons the ostriches lay their eggs which can weigh up to 3 pounds. Equivalent to about two dozen eggs, Irlmeier says he sells his eggs for \$20 for those who want to have a bit of fun with them. With the help of a certified food processor in Illinois, he also sells ostrich meat to locals by word of mouth. Since they do not take many resources to care for, Irlmeier is able to keep the cost of his meat and his operation down.

Irlmeier said he has heard of farmers with ostriches living as long as 20 years and within the next 10 years hopes to turn his ostrich

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