

Spring is full of surprises. And each new day seems to pop one into our daily routine.

Not surprising about the seasonal surprises is that many of them have to do with babies.

The first turned up sooner than expected. Kittens. Hidden away in that site of so many interesting farm surprises, the old bank barn. More specifically, in the straw mow of the old bank barn. Four, in a variety of colors - black, gray, yellow, calico. fat, furry and adorable.

With a nest of kittens there, perhaps 'twas a sensible turn of events when I earlier interrupted one chicken's intentions to raise a family in a nest just a few feet away. At some point, the pecking order would have been resolved. And probably not in the chicken's favor.

Another three very welcome surprises have turned up in the dairy barn. Spring is usually when we have our least number of calves due, so only a relatively few number of cows are calving right now. To get four heifer (girl) babies in a row is a pleasant turn of events. While the bovine gender ratio probably evens out over time, there always seem to be a few more bull calves born than there are heifers, which we raise for herd replacements.

Statistics on humans report

that the number of male babies slightly surpasses the number of female babies. So, maybe that's true for cows, too. Heifers seem to thrive and survive, on average, somewhat better than bulls, so perhaps a slightly higher rate of bull calves is Mother Nature's compensation for a natural higher death rate of the bovine "weaker" gender.

A quick walk around the meadow ponds a few evenings ago turned up the beginnings of another annual and welcome surprise in process. The dark mound of feathers snuggled down into the pile of dry grasses on the mid-pond nesting platform, shiny black neck tucked around toward her wing, confirmed that the goose hatching season is again in full swing. If all goes well, there should be fluffy goslings just in time, appropriately, for Mother's Day.

Why, we continue to wonder, when some ponds and wetlands areas have geese peacefully nesting in sight of one another, are ours so highly territorial that only one pair ever hatches a family here? We've been curious

about that for a long time. On the other hand, since more than a few geese in a given area tend to get "messy," one family is probably just the right number.

Also on the feathered-front of surprises, a loud, raucous, repetitive squawking erupted one morning last week from high up in the maples around the house. Though I sneaked outside several times to try to locate the source of the racket, which kept moving around, the bird continued to elude me. It sounded like some sort of woodpecker. Finally, quietly easing out the front door onto the porch, in yet another attempt to put a face to the squawk, I spied a flicker flitting from one tree to the next.

Flickers - those beige-brown-colored, ladderback-marked woodpeckers with the bright flash of red at the base of their neck, are common around the neighborhood. But they don't usually hang out in the back yard. A couple of days later, the squawking began to immediately be followed by a drumming sound, as the surprise visitor took to hammering on a piece of dead limb high up in one of the old trees. Selecting from a buffet of bugs inhabiting the dead wood, no doubt.

The racket gets amusing, even louder and more frequent, anytime a cat stalks out across the back yard. "Noisy and conspicuous," grumbles the flicker description in one Eastern birds reference book. Wonder if the author of that note had a cat companion along during observation jaunts?

"Look at this," beckoned The Farmer one day last week from

the back porch. He pointed out a robin that was settled on a cozy nest, eye-level with the back porch, in a small niche in still another of the maples.

"Looks like we can watch

another family of babies being raised."

Not only is the nest handy for observation, it's also right, smack, above my washline.

Should I be surprised?

Learn Art Of Dining

PHILADELPHIA (Philadelphia Co.) - Does your dining table need a little dressing up? Are your linens limp and lifeless? Are you looking for more creative ways to show off your unique tableware? Reading Terminal Market's Art of Dining investigates the aesthetics of dining.

On Friday and Saturday, April 24 and 25, Reading Terminal Market sponsors the Art of Dining. From 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on April 24 and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. April 25, the market focuses on arts that enhance the experience of dining: table settings, flower arranging, and garnishing. An array of table arrangements ranging from country to urban will be on dis-

play both days. Demonstrations on Friday include preparing afternoon tea. Demonstrations on Saturday include creating your own decorative vegetable garnishes, displaying and properly caring for antique linens, and creating unusual floral arrangements.

The Art of Dining takes place at Philadelphia's Kitchen in Reading Terminal Market and is hosted by Foster's Gourmet Cookware, Amy's Place, and the Pennsylvania General Store with special guest, the Sweet Liberty Candle Company.

For more information on the Art of Dining or other events at Philadelphia's Kitchen in Reading Terminal Market, call (215) 922-2317.

Spring Homemaker Day

FLEMINGTON, N.J. - The Rutgers Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Advisory Council will sponsor its 55th annual Spring Homemaker's Day on Wednesday, April 29 from 9:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. at Echo Hill Lodge in Clinton Township. A buffet luncheon will be served.

The program includes the following: "Perennials For Your Flower Garden," "Protecting Yourself From Scams," and "The Colors of Spring" fashion show,

sponsored by Walmart.

All proceeds from Spring Homemakers Day will go toward the scholarship fund for a Hunterdon County student to study in the area of family and consumer sciences.

The fee is \$15. Checks payable to Home Ec Advisory Council should be sent to Rutgers Cooperative Extension, 4 Gauntt Place, Flemington, NJ 08822. For further information, call (908) 788-1342.

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