

On Being a Farm Wife

(and other hazards)

Joyce Bupp



It's all about the birds and the bees.

Spring's early insistence on rushing into summer picked up the pace recently for critters that snooze away the chilly months.

Nowhere is that more evident than at calf feeding time, when last week's imitation of July stirred the dive-bombing-bunch out of hibernation. Weeks earlier than usual, feeding calves began requiring a sort of weave-dodge maneuver to deliver bottles around an aerial threat that usually turns up only by early summer.

After being continuously buzzed by this slow-flying formation last year, it took some studying to pinpoint their source. The

fat, slow-buzzing bumblebees would cruise around my head and ears as I fed calves, then suddenly disappear, as if into thin air. Finally, I spotted a couple of tiny, perfectly-round holes in the two-by-fours overhead which support the calf condo's metal roofing, and watched the pudgy bees neatly vanish into them.

Those bumblebees had tunneled holes right through the wooden beams to locate their homes snug against the shelter of the roofing. It would be hard to find a more ideal hibernation site than that, where the winter sun warms the metal roof, a secure and handy hideaway for a buggy bunch.

With increased hours of sun-

shine, enhanced by the early burst of heat, the bees were stirred into action earlier than usual. Naturally, their emergence for breakfast, and later reentry for the evening, coincide right on schedule with calf feeding.

We can coexist with bumblebees. Their foul-tempered cousins, the wasps, which also burst from winter sleep, are another story. Wasps are just plain-down hateful, and too often choose to build their papery nests in busy people-right-of-way places. Inevitably, a couple of tall cans of "wasp wipeout" arrive on the scene and in the coolness of evening, when these nasty bugs settle in for the night, we mount an attack.

Well, maybe it isn't a fair fight, this version of a stinging rebuke. But it works.

Equally persistent on moving into our turf, but more fun, are the birds, driven by spring frenzy to homestead anywhere they can find three square inches of nesting space. Which becomes a problem only when their space and ours clash.

Robins — those rusty-breasted, cheerful-songed, harbingers of spring — are notorious for their nest-siting. Each year, The Farm-

er relates new tales of robin nests in equipment: poked into tractor motors, packed into mufflers or balanced on truck frames. This year they chose the spray ring, with two pairs sharing the same piece of equipment. The pairs balanced their nesting effort, one out on each of the opposite folding spray booms. Maybe one of them was the robin he earlier evicted from a tractor cab.

Who knows? Maybe they planned to snatch worms on the move and save the effort of flying.

The robins he finds entertaining. Not so the busybody blackbirds that — literally — stripped away the outer layers of protective paper from a bag of seed corn left uncovered in the machine shed, shredding and carrying off bits of the paper to feather, or maybe wallpaper, their nests.

After the birds and bees came the beasts — at least a beast — getting into the act.

On a very warm afternoon last week, I paused at our little greenhouse to run a bucket of water

for some potted pansies beginning to droop in the heat. When a rustling started back in the far corner, stuffed with a Norfolk Island pine and several large sprawling plants, I glanced back to see which cat was lounging around in there this time.

The head that popped out from around a large potted calla lily was not of a cat. It belonged to a groundhog. A groundhog? And a big one! Without thinking, I turned the hose toward the spot from which the startled chuck had already disappeared.

In a split second, though, one of those quick "management decisions" was made, based on the realization that I was standing, barefooted, at the only exit. I departed as quickly as the groundhog had.

No sign of a groundhog in the greenhouse has turned up since. My level of comfort, frankly, would be a lot greater if I'd seen the tail end of that "hog" fleeing across the yard toward the field.

Which leaves me wondering: where did it go?

And, of more concern, how often does it come back?

Questions, Anyone?

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