

On Being a Farm Wife

(and other hazards)

Joyce Bupp



For awhile there, it was almost as if they had ceased to exist.

Oh, occasionally we'd catch a glimpse of them. Maybe some would turn up way back in one of the (nearly empty) hay mows. Or we'd catch a glimpse of a couple flying overhead. Sometimes it would be their calls from out behind the barns.

For much of the frozen-over, snowed-in, iced-up past months, the smaller animals and birds that live around the farm, domestic and wild, hunkered down to wait out the worst, as best they could. A myriad of criss-crossing tracks, fox and rabbit, squirrel and bird, attested that they were getting on with life, despite having to hop, jump, and wade through the drifts.

Most of the tamest cats, of course, showed up as always for chow at calf feeding hours. The less-tame would sneak out from the more shadowy corners of the hay mows, once dinner was served and they felt comfortable that us humans had departed. The deep drifts did deter the feline "porch perchers" from hanging out at the back door, waiting to snatch bites from gentle Derra's meals as they like to do. Not that they can get many bites in during the five seconds it takes her to scarf down a dish of dog-food.

Thick ice seals on all of the ponds discouraged visits by the ever-growing flock of Canada geese that claims the meadow as

home. When fields highest on the hills began drying enough in recent weeks to support manure hauling equipment, all the meadow geese arrived — and apparently brought all their relatives. Bits of grain and seeds in the straw-bedding manure spread an offering of protein at a time when natural food was scarce and inaccessible.

What a honking good time they seemed to be having.

Now a good two-dozen or so regulars squabble and chatter in goose talk day and night. They're jostling for nesting sites, slopping and poking through the meadow mud, and flapping back and forth to the grain fields to dine on tender shoots of grassy clumps just coming out of dormancy.

Keeping the honkers company are the quackers which, about mid-January, suddenly moved in and claimed squatters' rights to the goldfish pond. With the underground spring which feeds it back to full flow, a large section of that pond remained open through the coldest nights. That gave our flock of 20-plus mallard ducks a safe and sheltered haven.

After accidentally spooking

them a couple of nights after dark, Derra and I rerouted our evening strolls to the road until some of the other ponds began melting out. Most of that time, either the snow or the mud was too deep around the ponds anyway to walk with sense. The ducks were pleased.

Now, along with the honking and the quacking, we have gobbling.

That addition vocal section to our spring chorus comes from the handsome suiter The Farmer acquired as a companion to our two "wild" turkeys, one original hen and the daughter she hatched and raised last spring. "Wild" by bloodline only, their favorite food is calf feed — and they show up like clockwork each morning for a handout.

The gobbler, another pen-raised "wild" turkey, sulked alone in the barn when he was first introduced. Although the hens promptly took to trutting and preening so he could see how lovely they are, the old bird eventually took up with a trio of ancient bantam chickens, more wild than the turkeys.

One afternoon last week,

though, I glanced out the road while retrieving the mail and was astonished to see all three turkeys, streaking down through the fields toward the woods. Good news, I figured, was that they had bonded. Bad news, it appeared, was they were all taking off to the woods together. A half-hour later, doing a visual check for their whereabouts and expecting to see nothing, instead I spied a turkey tail just disappearing behind the barn.

The hens are back to showing up faithfully each morning for calf feed handouts. The gobbler has returned to his bantam gang. But he's been spotted all puffed up, strutting and gobbling, and probably not for the benefit of the nasty bantam rooster.

With squawling cats, honking geese, quacking mallards, gobbling turkeys, chirping robins and, any moment we expect, the peeping of the peeper frogs, our animals have fared better through the winter than the contestants they boot out weekly on those TV "survivor" shows.

And, from the sound of all the racket out there, are getting ready to double their numbers.

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