

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Unsolved mystery in the hen house

BY SIOUX ROGERS

This is a tough write—emotional and with an inconclusive ending.

The story began last winter as dozens of poultry and “buy me” catalogs began arriving. I said, “Oh honey, wouldn’t it be great to have baby ducks and goslings?” Strangely enough, Honey agreed and we ordered eleven ducks and five geese. Even though we have been raising backyard poultry for nearly 25 years, we are always very excited expectant parents. This time we planned the arrival during the time our grandsons would be visiting.

Despite everyone’s bewilderment at my love of geese, I really do adore them. I actually like everything everyone proclaims to *dislike*: their stench, their loud “bark,” and their aggressive nature. I also *love* to eat goose eggs. Some of the geese we bought are “weeder geese.” When they were about five days old, we started feeding them the weeds we want them to seek in the orchard when they are large enough to roam.

As for ducks, well I just like to watch them waddle since they waddle so much better than I do. And, oh yes, duck egg whites are bakers’ numero uno choice. While I am an awful baker, I must say that attempting a perfect meringue with the whites of a duck egg made this daunting culinary creation a cinch.

Onward to the rest of the story as a mystery unfolds. When the goslings and ducklings were about two weeks old, hubby mentioned that one duckling had a slight limp, which was barely noticeable to me. However, a few moments later the duckling was down for the count with a very flaccid leg and zero muscle tone. I ran to the house for Rescue Remedy and

ran back to the duckling to administer the “remedy.” Moments later, ducky was walking around as though nothing ever happened. Go figure!

This scenario repeated itself over the next five weeks, but with less than acceptable results. Sadly, we ultimately lost 50 percent of the flock.

When a duckling or gosling was affected, she was put in a safety pen. To keep her from getting lonely, the pen was placed with the rest of the flock. In addition to Rescue Remedy, and since I nor anyone, including the hatchery, had any clue as to what was happening, I gave the entire flock a green smoothie powder in their drinking water, sprinkled it on their food, and, with the aid of a homeopath, added two remedies that could do no harm but just might help. Every morning was a frightening and emotional trial as I did not know how many bells would toll. Total loss was 8 of the original 16.

One duckling, “Choo-Choo,” and one gosling, “Mother Goose,” were under my constant watch, which they probably considered torture, but they did survive. As soon as Choo-Choo and Mother Goose showed some muscle tone in the affected limbs, I started them on physical therapy. To translate, this meant putting them in a big galvanized tub to exercise. For incentive, I added cut up pieces of lettuce, weeds and kale for them to dine on while they were paddling around. I believe this might be equivalent to lying on an inflatable mattress in a swimming pool and drinking a beer. Say what?

One day during therapy, Mother Goose jumped out of the pool. That was the end of her therapy, and she is now

growing and walking minimally pigeon-toed. Just when we thought the entire emotional, frustrating—not to mention fatiguing— ordeal was over, after five weeks little Choo-Choo became symptomatic. Back to round-the-clock Ducky Nurse 101. Today, Choo-Choo can hop almost as fast as the big girls can run. However, because she is way undersized, tires easily while getting around on her deformed leg, and may never reach full growth, I sent her to a “safe” home where she won’t be competing with larger geese. This was a decision I happily made for Choo-Choo.

For almost every question that is popping into your head, I very likely have a response. I was queried by the hatchery (who actually has a good reputation and has been in business for years), two aviary veterinarians, and OSU

(Oregon State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory). All were as befuddled as we were. The autopsy report done by OSU on three of our ducklings and one gosling was long, but inconclusive. After a very extensive conversation with the kind pathologist from OSU, the verdict was, “Sometimes we just don’t know.” A friend two valleys to the west of us had the same experience with her ten ducklings. She had a 90 percent mortality rate with a different type of duck but from the same hatchery. The bottom line for me is blank. I did not learn anything from this summer-school experience.

Dirty Fingernails and All
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Gosling “Mother Goose” during her “physical therapy” session, complete with fresh greens to keep her paddling around.

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