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Erick Bengel | Features Editor
ebengel@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK

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THE DAILY ASTORIAN • FRIDAY, NOV. 17, 2017 • 1C

Colin Murphey photos

Claus the dog keeps a close eye on the poultry at Blackberry Bog Farm.

Fowl play at Blackberry Bog Farm

Knappa-Svensen poultry operation raised 10 times more turkeys this year than in 2016

By HEATHER DOUGLAS
For The Daily Astorian

Turkeys raised at Blackberry Bog Farm in Knappa-Svensen have only one bad day. This may sound like a joke, but the farm means it.

"Up until the day they are processed, we want them to have a healthy existence," owner Scott Thompson said. "It's not a confinement operation; they're just out there doing turkey things, running around on two acres."

Over the last two years, the farm has become known for raising chickens for Fort George Brewery, and selling retail frozen chickens at the Astoria Co-op and at various farmers markets across the county. Turkeys are their newest venture.

Abandoned for 15 years, Blackberry Bog Farm was founded by the Thompson family who began restoring the property when they purchased it in 2015.

Scott, a former science teacher who dreamed of being a farmer "when he grew up," heads the operation.

His wife, Bonnie, provides off-farm income and assists with various tasks: "I am so grateful that she enables my farming addiction," Thompson said with a laugh.

Their 22-year-old son, Andrew, helps with day-to-day operations.

Last year was their first raising turkeys. All 17 birds sold out. In 2017, the operation raised about 170 birds, and the ones available for purchase were spoken for before August, including ones presold to local vendors.

Growing demand

Ways to improve efficiency became obvious during the pilot year. Managing the Heritage breed birds proved problematic: The turkeys could fly over 7-foot fences, even with clipped wings, and liked to hang out in trees 30 feet off the ground.

So the farm switched to the Broad Breasted Bronze and the Bronze Breasted White breeds. "These birds have been bred over decades to have more white meat, because that is what Americans have tended to want, and we can manage more at a time," Scott said.

The decision to go with the broad-breasted turkeys is, in part, an attempt to meet a growing demand.

"We're running out of space for all the chickens and the turkeys that we want to do. We think we could do more, but we don't quite know if we have the space," Thompson said. "But there is a market — we're confident of that."

'Processing'

Blackberry Bog Farm has a licensed processing facility on the premises.

"We say 'process' as a euphemism. I kill every bird on the place," Thompson said. "That's what I do, and we try to be very respectful and very calm, and it's kind of a solemn occasion to me."

Thompson is willing to share what a bird's last day on the farm looks like, with one caveat: Only people willing to

be reverent can bear witness.

"I've had people say, 'Hey, can I watch you kill some birds?'" he said. Other people, however, are sincere and truly want to learn how it's done. "It all depends on their attitude. Some people are 'not worthy' to see what we do."

"Processing" aside, just about anyone driving by can view the turkeys free-ranging in their pasture. Unlike the flocks of chickens the farm raises in the summer, the turkeys free range 24 hours a day.

"Because the birds are on pasture day and night, the meat has a different quality to it ... They are out on pasture chasing each other. They're eating grass and bugs. They build muscles," Thompson said.

Precautions

The turkeys are also medication-free, which comes with challenges.

For example, people who have birds of their own must disinfect their boots before they go out to the Blackberry Bog Farm's pastures. If anyone wants to handle the birds, they have to use hand sanitizer first.

"If diseases are brought in, our chickens don't have medications, and we could lose a whole flock in days," Thompson said.

In addition, the farm keeps two livestock guardian dogs.

Claus, a Great Pyrenees, is the farm's primary livestock guardian. He lives with his flock 24 hours a day, seven days a week. His young apprentice, Ginny, a Pyrenees mix, is still in training. Claus patrols day and night against predators like raccoon and mink.

In the last two years under Claus's protection, the flock has suffered only three losses. When a fencing issue kept Claus sidelined for a few nights, the farm lost four birds in one night and two the following night.

The dogs, Thompson said, make all the difference. "That's what lets this operation work."

Local impact

The operation has been felt in the local economy.

Patrick McKerren, owner of "Two Old Goats Farm and Feed" in Knappa, is the main supplier of feed for Blackberry Bog Farm year-round.

"Scott has supported our business and the local economy by purchasing grain, as well as herb, vegetable and flower starts for resale to my customers," McKerren said.

During chicken processing season, the farm hires five off-farm workers and uses local contractors as they continue to renovate the farm. The lumber for the chicken tractors comes from City Lumber.

"There's a lot of evidence that the dollars that recirculate in our community build wealth and food security," Matt Stanley, general manager of the Astoria Co-op, said. "And it's great to know that your Thanksgiving turkey came from right down the road."



TOP: Scott Thompson of Blackberry Bog Farm watches as his dog Claus monitors his herd of turkeys. MIDDLE: The turkeys at Blackberry Bog Farm near Svensen roam their field. BOTTOM: The turkeys wander around their enclosure.