

CO600 Smallholding Poultry Research

Sparrowhawk residence transcript

30-09-2018

- All: [After general introductions and polite exchanges, the poultry related questions begin]
- Joanna: Hi Suzie and Steven, thank you for taking the time to speak to us about your smallhold chickens on such short notice.
- Damon: As it stands we are just looking to basically understand the process that non-commercial poultry holders undertake and the potential challenges with keeping them.
- Joanna: Firstly, though I think I can see them out there in the garden, are you able to tell us what livestock you keep?
- Suzie: Haha, not a problem, we currently have two chickens living in the garden, though we've had a few more in the past.
- Damon: Thanks, so why did you have more in the past?
- Suzie: So, in the past when Jacob, our eldest, was younger we got a few chickens as a family pet and loved them since, they make the place feel homely. However as everything, they have a finite life and there's always foxes about.
- The two we have at the moment were picked by my two youngest who named them Hedwig, after Harry Potter, and Teresa. We've never had more than three-four at once.
- All: [Laughing]
- Joanna: Cool, are you able to tell us about your daily routine?
- Suzie: Well I start of by brushing my teeth and making a cup of coffee!
- All: [Laughing]
- Joanna: Are you able to tell us about your daily routine that you go through when managing your chickens?
- Suzie: Haha, sure.

Well, so on the weekdays I get up in the morning and make sure the chickens have enough feed and water, or if Steven's up first he sometimes does this.

On the weekends if I'm downstairs I'll do the same thing but let the chickens out into the garden to have a bit of a wander. They forage around and dig up the worms and weeds.

Each night if the enclosure is open I go out and make sure the chickens are all locked up, though the main chicken house inside the enclosure is always open so they can go for a walk if need be.

Damon: That sounds nice for the chickens, always able to get out and about.

So have you faced any problems since keeping them?

Suzie: So the biggest problem we face with our chickens is the foxes. I have lost count the number we have lost to them, they don't just take one they take them all.

Steven: They just completely wipe you out.

Joanna: So do you only face this problem during the night?

Suzie: No, they also come during the day and try to dig down, and we even had one where the lid was down and locked with a latch and it nosed the lock open. It got into the laying box and that was the end.

Damon: Sorry to hear that, so are the foxes around when people are home or is it mainly when the house is empty?

Suzie: We occasionally see them nosing about during the day when nobody is in the garden, though mainly they seem to explore when it's dark.

Joanna: Are you using anything to stop the foxes getting at the chickens as it stands?

Suzie: It's difficult as they are clever little things, there's a reason they call him fantastic Mr. Fox'.

Sometimes you're even chasing them and they don't run off, and you start thinking well what am I actually going to do.

Steven: One time I chased a fox round and round the garden before finally cornering him at the far side where he made his escape.

Suzie: We do get to know them though, the foxes, there was one family of them that lived over the field there. There was a mother, cubs and a father, the Dad you could easily tell as he had a manky tail.

He kept coming in obviously looking for food for the family. So, there's not a lot of them around but they're very persevering. Very tame, no fear.

Damon: So, you mentioned that you lost a lot of your chickens to the foxes, how'd that happen?

Joanna: Also, how are you now preventing that?

Suzie: Well we started by deliberately building an entirely new chicken enclosure with the main goal of making it as fox proof as we could.

It's completely contained, there's no open top, it's completely covered on the top and dug down quite deep into the ground.

Damon: So, they can't jump over, can't burrow under?

Suzie: Yeah, exactly.

Damon: This is where the fox shows up with a pair of wire clippers.

Suzie: Well we even bought the most expensive mesh to try and avoid that very issue. That definitely would be a Fantastic Mr. Fox.

All: [Laughing]

Suzie: The biggest failing in the system though is human error, so when you don't shut the door. You can have all these fox proof mechanisms, but you know, they are pointless if you fail to shut the door.

The chickens are out there now, in the garden, they roam around during the day if someone's about, though they have enough space in their enclosure that they don't need to be.

Joanna: Can we have a look at your chicken coop and take a few pictures please?

Suzie: Sure, don't worry about taking your shoes off just walk straight through. Floors mucky enough with these kids.

Damon: Thanks, just going to grab my shoes.

All: *[Walk into garden to see chicken enclosure]*

Suzie: So we've had this run about a year now and it's been much better but I did get up the other night as I woke up at one point and thought 'oh god I forgot to shut the chickens in', so I woke Steven and said 'did you shut the chickens in?', he said 'No', so I got dressed, went down and they were shut in.

I came back to bed and said to Steven, 'I don't know who did it but they're all in, someone must have shut them up?' and he rolled over and said 'Oh yeah, think that was me.'

All: *[Laughing]*

Suzie: There I am wandering around in my dressing gown in the middle of the night and they're absolutely fine. It would have been nice to have known that the chickens were in and safe without having to get out of bed!

Joanna: So, you have a daily routine that you follow to sort out the chickens, what happens when you're away from the house, do you have someone that comes and sorts them out?

Suzie: Yeah, yeah so if we are away, then they tend not to come out of the main enclosure into the garden, they'll just stay in their run whilst we are away. My neighbor and her children come over and give them water, feed them and stuff like that.

They don't let them out as they are just not comfortable letting them roam. Though they should have enough space inside the run.

Joanna: For just two hens it looks like plenty of space outside the main hutch with lots to do.

Damon: So, have you had any other problems with other vermin like rats or mice?

Suzie: So that was one of the other big things we were thinking about when we redid the enclosure as previously we've had huge problems with rats.

When we lived at our last property when we dug up the run there was a whole rat run underneath where the chicken house had been. The tunnels even looked like they had been wallpapered, the rats pulled the paper out of the chicken house and had used it to papier-mache the sides.

Steven: I think if we had left it there any longer they may have put up a telly and a few other bits of furniture.

All: [Laughing]

Suzie: We've had less of a problem here and I've been looking to see if there's been any rat activity since we put that one in place, and I don't know there might be, but there's no obvious point of entry where they can come in and no signs.

Joanna: With that wire mesh unless they burrow down I don't imagine there's much chance.

So do you know what breeds of chicken you have?

Suzie: I have no idea, a red one and a white one.

All: [Laughing]

Steven: I think they're Rhode Islands, but I think they may have been cross bred.

Joanna: Ah, so they're just hybrids.

Suzie: Yeah, they must be.

Damon: So how is the internet connection here? Do you have WiFi reach?

Suzie: Yeah, I must do as Jacob usually sits at the end of the garden on his phone when he has mates around.

Steven: Yeah, not the best signal, but you can definitely listen to Spotify as I had it playing on my phone when I was redoing the fence last summer.

Joanna: Awesome, do you have cellular connection, like mobile data and if so what was the signal like?

Suzie: Yeah, we all have mobile contracts with data, and most of us have 4G working perfectly.

Damon: That's great. Are we allowed to take a look into the house or will the chickens get angry?

Suzie: Yeah, of course you can. They don't mind - they're really friendly.

Damon: Thanks! So how do you usually collect your eggs?

Suzie: Well, I can show you actually. So, in the main run, we can open up this flap on the house and that's the lid to the nesting box.

Joanna: Oh, that's quite convenient. With some of the other houses we've looked at, it's a bit of a pain to get the eggs.

As the chickens are out, am I able to open up the nesting box?

Suzie: Of course, feel free to open up anything you want.

Joanna: Thank you.

[Joanna opens lid]

Oh, these are quite cosy! What's this red thing on the wood?

Suzie: Oh, they're red mites. We've had them for a while, and whatever we do, we just can't get rid of them! Steven has jet washed it, hoovered it, put bug spray down, but they just keep on coming back. I don't know if it is the area or if they're ingrained in the wood.

In our last house with the old run, we didn't seem to have as big a problem.

Damon: Is there any felt on the hutch? As I've read online that they like to breed between the felt and wood.

Suzie: No, there's no felt. It's a bit of a bummer as they can make the chickens quite anaemic. If it gets bad, they can stop them from laying, so we have to constantly keep an eye out. We are currently keeping them under control though, and we've had this issue nearly as long as we've had chickens in this house.

Joanna: Oh, when I was speaking to a lady who owned a petting zoo in Meath Green, and she used this powder called Diatomaceous earth which apparently helped a lot. Doesn't stop them from living in the wood, but the chickens bathe in it and it apparently dries the lice out.

Suzie: Oh, never heard of that. I'd have to look into that. Can you text it to me?

Joanna: Sure, what's your number?

Suzie: It's 07\*\*\*\*\*.

Joanna:            Alright, just sent that to you now.

Suzie:            Thank you so much. Yeah, we've had this problem for years, so I would definitely like to see the end of it!

Damon:            Can you let us know if it works for you if you get it?

Suzie:            Of course. I'll get Jacob to drop you a message on Facebook.

Damon:            Cool! I think that's it then. Thank you very much for your time today, and for letting us pop in on such short notice.

Suzie:            Not an issue at all, please feel free to ask Jacob any more questions and if you want to visit again, please do drop us a message. Was lovely speaking to the both of you.

All:                [Informal Goodbyes]