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Innovative Ideas Help Produce Low-Cost "Range Chickens"

Some people call it "pastured poultry" but Jamie and Chad Henneman like the term "range chicken" to describe their grass-raised birds. They've come up with some other new ideas, too, that have helped lower their costs.

For laying hens, they converted an old two-horse trailer into a mobile henhouse. The unit provides shade and nest boxes in the daytime, and a place to roost at night.

The Hennemans bought the used trailer for \$300. "We removed the stall partition inside the trailer and cut a hole at the bottom of the board between the stalls and tack area to allow the birds to access all the floor space. This created a comfortable place for our hens to roam in and out throughout the day," Jamie says. "We also added a piece of linoleum flooring, which makes cleanup a lot simpler because it's so easy to scrape. We put some grass hay litter on it to absorb waste."

The chickens roost at night on an old wood ladder that stands against the trailer wall. During the day they remove the ladder and slip in a couple homemade nesting boxes.

The Hennemans use a long outdoor extension cord to run electricity to the trailer, enabling them to set up a light bulb inside. It encourages the birds to go inside where they are safer from predators in the dark.

"The light is also crucial to making sure the birds keep laying, even as the daylight hours wane. A chicken determines when to lay, based on how much light hits a certain part of their eye. Therefore, as winter approaches, their egg production will drop if there isn't a constant source of light," Jamie explains.

The trailer is easy to move once the grass becomes matted and short.

"Next summer, we're building an even bigger mobile shelter for them called an 'egg-mobile.' It's basically a chicken house

built onto a haywagon, and it's an idea we got from a popular pastured poultry book author, Joel Salatin," Jamie explains.

Since the Hennemans have 42 acres of pasture available, they also produce a large quantity of range chickens for the broiler market. Jamie says they've tried various breeds, but like the Cornish Cross best. It takes them about 10 weeks of grazing to harvest a 5-lb. bird.

"We put them out into our special 'chicken condos,' when they're four weeks old. Each unit holds about 40 chickens," Jamie explains. "The 8 by 10-ft. condos are bottomless, mobile houses with angle iron frames covered with expanded metal meshing. Each chicken condo features a waterer and a feeder at each end for easy chicken access."

Since the birds are inside all the time, there's a door in the roof to access them.

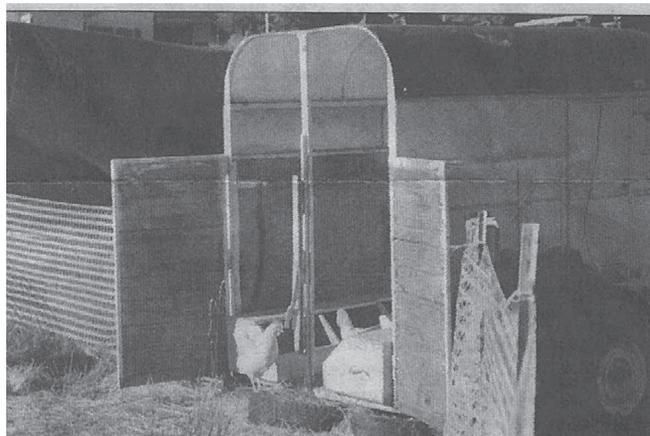
An unusual feature is that the structures are wired for a heat lamp in case of bad weather while the birds are in the critical early stages of their pasture stay. Jamie says they usually tarp the whole thing and plug the light in at night, for the first two weeks or so.

Each condo has a set of attachable wheels that lifts the house about 1 1/2-in. off the ground, so it can be rolled by hand to a fresh piece of pasture. They're moved once or twice per day, according to Jamie.

The couple sells their range chickens from June until September. While many are pre-ordered, and they also sell at various Farmer's Market locations.

Last year they sold 1,600 birds (pastured in four batches of 400). This year, their goal is to produce 2,000.

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Layer hens nest in a converted two-horse trailer

He Markets His Life Stories

Duane Kusel used to tell funny stories to friends and relatives about farm life for fun. Then someone asked him to speak at an event and he realized he could get paid for doing what he liked to do anyway. He hasn't given up farming, but invitations to speak are on the rise and his reputation has spread from where he lives in western Wisconsin to the rest of the state and beyond.

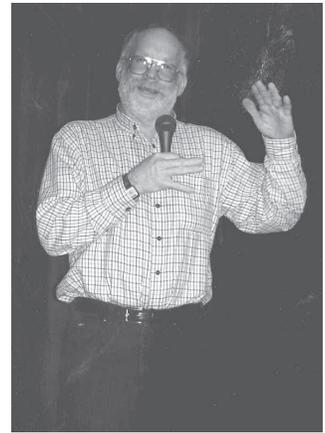
"I have been doing gigs in Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois," says Kusel.

"Many of the stories I tell are about my family and I and various incidents around the farm," explains Kusel. "Speaking to groups and telling the stories just started from that."

He prefers farm audiences because they "get" his humor. Non-farm audiences can be tricky. Over time he has developed several lines of stories, and if one isn't getting the desired reaction, he switches to another.

"Making people laugh is the reason I do it, and when it goes well it's a great feeling," says Kusel. "Of course, it doesn't always go that way. You learn early on how to recover. Up there on stage, you're all alone with no one else to fall back on."

As an example of his humor, Kusel says one of his favorite stories has to do with when he was bringing his new bride home to the farm and he put her on the tractor while he rode the bale wagon. Without going into detail, he says, "the honeymoon ended real fast, and I learned a lesson on the importance of good communication between my wife and myself."



Duane Kusel gets paid for doing what he likes to do anyway - telling funny stories.

Kusel's fee varies depending on the distance he has to travel, size of the crowd and the time of year. So far he has tried to limit jobs to the upper Midwest during the winter months.

"I've probably turned down as many jobs as I've accepted," he says. "I don't milk cows anymore, but I do have livestock, and in the summer, farming keeps me busy."

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Big Guard Dogs Handle All Predators

Guarding dairy sheep against wolves, bear and coyotes requires a special kind of dog. Mary and Dave Falk found the dog they needed in the Spanish Ranch Mastiff.

"These dogs are rugged, taller versions of the purebred Spanish Mastiff often seen at dog shows," says Mary Falk. "They were developed by Spanish shepherds who don't worry about how the dog looks, just how it works."

Because the Falks run their flocks outside year round and because they live in a forested area loaded with predators, the Falks rely heavily on guard dogs. They often run four flocks in separate paddocks on their 200-acre farm. The goal is for each flock to have two dogs with it at all times.

"We always have two dogs together so they can back each other up if one gets hurt," says Falk.

Milking sheep guard dogs get twice-daily human contact when the sheep get milked. The Spanish Mastiff is more accepting of people than many sheep guard dog breeds.

"I can't have a dog around if I don't trust it, and I would trust mine with a six-month old baby," says Falk.

Originally, they started with Italian Maremmas, which they liked for their temperament. The Falks recognized they needed a larger breed that could jump the paddock fence and move from flock to flock if predators threatened. A friend had Polish Tatras, which they crossed with their Maremmas. Although larger, they still didn't have the needed size.

On a trip to Spain to visit sheep cheese makers in that country, Falk encountered Spanish Ranch Mastiffs. They had the size she wanted at about 165 lbs., so she brought five pups representing four different bloodlines back to cross with the Falk guard dogs.

"They were like our Maremmas, but with the body of a Great Dane," says Falk. "They



Mary and Dave Falk rely on the Spanish Ranch Mastiff dog breed to protect their sheep.

are suspicious of a stranger, but fine if I am with them. They come over for a few pets and then head back to the sheep."

Falk reports the only predator loss in more than 10 years were two lambs attacked by great horned owls. Although they weren't able to carry the lambs off, their talons penetrated the lambs' brains, and the lambs had to be destroyed. She credits her guard dogs with keeping the owls away since. She recommends that livestock producers use guard dogs instead of trapping or shooting at predators.

"All you do is kill off the stupid ones and leave the smart ones to breed," she says of hunting and trapping predators. "That just makes it worse for everyone."

After seeing how well their full-bred and crossbred Spanish Ranch Mastiffs do, the Falks have started placing them with livestock producers in the region. A full blood (no papers) three-month old is priced at \$850 while a half Mastiff, Maremma/Tatra cross is priced at \$550. A year-old full blood is priced at \$1,000.

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