



Will Harris's chickens are free to roam as they please. Chicks are brought to skid shelters on pasture, where they're confined for 2 to 3 days before being turned loose.



Great Pyrenees dogs protect chickens on pasture from predators.

These Birds Are Really Free To Range

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Will Harris doesn't believe in "chicken tractors" or other moveable, pastured poultry enclosures. But he's serious about free range poultry. His birds are free to roam and free to do as they please, all 60,000 of them. Of course, food, water and shelter are always nearby.

"Chicken tractors do let the birds get to grass and bugs, but they aren't really free ranging," says Harris. "I wanted to raise birds that were unrestricted and loose, so they can flap their wings, run and fly up into trees and roost. I think it changes the quality of the meat. Our birds are more muscular and athletic."

Harris' chickens may be loose, but his production system isn't. It's tight as a drum and as carefully managed as an assembly line. A fourth generation cattleman and former crop farmer, Harris concentrates today on intensive grazing. With the help of 85 employees, he runs 700 brood cows, 500 ewes and, on any given day, 60,000 chickens. He recently added turkeys to the mix.

Farm employees slaughter all animals raised on the farm in two USDA approved packing houses, also on the farm. That includes 30 cattle a day and about 1,000 chickens. Meat is processed and packaged on the farm and marketed both on and off the farm. All the offal is composted, blood is retained and bones are ground with the end products going back on the fields as fertilizer.

Everything is designed for the protection

and improvement of the environment and the animals. The entire farm and packing houses have received the highest animal welfare certification.

"Animal welfare, land stewardship and environmental protection are our claim to fame," says Harris.

Harris believes that letting his chickens express their natural characteristics, like scratching, running and flying, is key to healthy, productive birds. His production system is set up to let them do just that.

Harris has 5,000 chicks delivered each week. New chicks are the only things confined on the farm. They are kept in brooders for the first 2 to 3 weeks of their 12-week production cycle.

Once they are feathered, they are brought to skid shelters on pasture, where they are confined for 2 to 3 days before being turned loose. The farm's 100, 16 by 20-ft. shelters have garage doors on one end that can be fully opened or nearly closed in bad weather. A standard entry door on the other end lets workers enter and leave if the garage door is down. Panels near the floor on the three solid sides can be raised for ventilation.

Food and water is replenished with twice a day visits by farm workers. Chickens get accustomed to people, which is important when they are ready for slaughter. If cattle are present, a single strand of electric fence charged by a solar panel is set up around the shelter area. This keeps cattle away from the

chicken feed.

Letting the chickens truly range free means Harris may lose a bird or two to hawks. However, he learned what kind of damage ground predators can cause when he started raising sheep.

"We've got Great Pyrenees dogs to protect our sheep flocks," says Harris. "When we started raising pastured poultry, we got dogs for them as well. They protect the chicks from feral cats and even opossum, as well as coyotes wild dogs, bobcat and fox as the chicks grow."

Puppies are introduced to chickens at an early stage. Harris says it's vital they bond with the species they are to protect. He keeps 12 Great Pyrenees with the chickens on pasture.

"They spend their days in the woods or nearby swamps and range around the chicken shelters at night when the danger of predators is highest," says Harris. "Even during the day they're close by."

When the chickens have cleaned out an area, the skid shelters are moved 50 to 75 yards to fresh pasture. How often depends on the size of the chickens and how much they are scratching and eating.

"Every time a shelter is moved, the manure around it is loaded into a manure spreader and taken to fields that most need it," says Harris. "We want it well distributed. If there is too much in one place, it can be toxic to the grasses."

At 12 weeks, the birds will produce the desired 3 1/2-lb. carcass. Catching the birds is easy, thanks to those daily visits and the design of the shelters.

"From 60 to 70 percent of the birds perch inside at night, while the rest are close by," he explains. "After dusk, a couple of workers visit the house and drive the outside birds in like you would push cattle. The garage door gets closed and they are left inside with water, but no feed till the next morning. Then they are caught, caged and taken to slaughter."

Once the shelter has been cleaned and moved, it's ready for the next batch of birds. Meanwhile, Harris's chickens are distributed up and down the East Coast, as well as to the on-farm restaurant Harris recently opened.

"Each day our 85 employees, my two daughters and a future son-in-law sit down at the restaurant and eat dinner," says Harris. "My employees are great workers, and I am very grateful to them. They go above and beyond."

White Oak Pastures' website store also sells their farm raised and grass-fed lamb, beef and poultry, including chicken, turkey, duck and guinea fowl. Rabbit is sold as well.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, White Oak Pastures, P.O. Box 98, Bluffton, Ga. 39824 (ph 229 641-2081; info@whiteoakpastures.com; www.whiteoakpastures.com).

"Churt" Design Boosts Pastured Poultry Productivity

Tom Delehanty likes his pasture poultry protected and productive. His chicken "churts", as he calls them do both on the pastured poultry farm he and his wife Tracey operate near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Delehanty uses them to raise 20,000 broilers, layers and heritage turkeys each year.

"I use rebar to make 10 by 12-ft. pens with 20-in. sides and slightly rounded tops that dome to about 36 in. Chicken wire around the outside and a plastic covering over the top protects the birds and contains them," explains Delehanty. "We move the churts every day, so the birds get at the bugs under their feet and eat the lush greens. However, they also eat more grain than they would if they ran loose."

The churts let Delehanty balance the birds grazing with productivity and ease of handling. Two employees can move, feed, water and observe them all in half an hour, thanks to the design of the churts. That is important as Delehanty and his employees have several hundred shelters that house approximately 50 chickens each or up to 25 turkeys.

Delehanty uses old trailer houses to start chicks, putting them in the churts at about 2 to 3 weeks. He raises both American and French-style broilers. By the time the

American style are 9 to 10 weeks, they have reached his goal of 5-lb. dressed weights. The French-style birds take a few more weeks to finish.

To make the churts, he uses a permanent jig made of 2 by 4's and angle iron to hold the rebar pieces in place until they can be welded. Two benders mounted to a wood pallet raised to a 4-ft. working height make the bending easy. One is a 55-gal. barrel for the wider bends. The second is an 8-in. tire rim for tighter curves.

A third bender is for even tighter curves, including rings for supporting hanging feeders. It is simply a 5-ft. length of telephone post set in the ground with a short piece of pipe attached to the side. To make the two rings needed, Delehanty sticks a length of rebar in the pipe and walks it twice around the post. He then cuts and trims the coil and welds the ends to make two rings.

Each churt starts out as two 10 by 12-ft. rectangles with rounded corners from 20-ft. rebar. Each rebar is bent to form a 10-ft. side and two 5-ft. legs and then is set in the welding jig. Scraps of rebar are welded between each of the two sets of legs to make the 12-ft. sides.

The jig holds the two rectangles 20 in. apart, the distance needed for the churt



Tom Delehanty says his homemade "churts" keep his pasture poultry protected and productive. Photo shows churt with roof up for access.

side height. As more curved rebar is added overhead, the jig makes it easy to clamp each piece in place for welding to the two rectangles.

When complete, Delehanty's churts rest on one rectangle, which acts as a skid. The plastic-covered roof curves up and over the upper rectangle. One section of the roof is designed as an access door.

Efficient use of time and resources includes fashioning water pans and hanging feeders from barrels and buckets. Delehanty buys used blue iodine barrels from dairies for \$8 to \$10 each. Each end is cut off to make an indestructible water pan that holds 5 to 6 gal. and is easily cleaned, moved and refilled.

Delehanty is modifying his design for laying hens and expects to build 30 to 40 new churts when he is satisfied. Low cost, solar-powered driveway lights provide the extra light needed by layers. Delehanty pulls the stake end off and mounts them to the layer pens with hog rings. At night they give off just enough light to keep the hens laying.

A CD with plans and detailed instructions on building churts sells for \$39. He is also available for consulting.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Pollo Real Pastured Poultry, 108 Hope Farm Rd., Socorro, New Mexico 87801 (ph 505 550-3123; polloreal@q.com; www.polloreal.com).