

By now our first-time mothers are settled into their parental roles, and the kids are all big enough to stay with the herd. If you drive by, it is a peaceful rural scene. But, oh, the trouble to get them there!



Some help...

Goats consider themselves helpers. This weekend, MyKeeper and I were out in their pen replanting a fencepost. I was on the shovel end of the job.

Stella could hardly contain her curiosity. She nosed the shovel and sniffed. I jabbed the shovel into the dirt. She shied away, but only for a second. She called the other goats over. She's boss. Their job is to follow her lead. Except for a few head butting conflicts of opinion, they do.

Now a group of goats are crowded in around me, sniffing the shovel. I can't move, so I stamp my foot, wave my arms, and chase them off. They aren't very scared of me. There is only time enough to scoop out one shovelful before Stella is back, the others close behind her.

Stella thinks the shovel smells awfully good. Wooden handles are second in choice behind tree branches. She clenches her teeth and tries to tear off a bite.

It occurs to me that since MyKeeper is just standing around, he could do a better job of supervision. I suggest to him that he can keep the goats away while I dig more dirt. He says he'd rather watch the fun. He does his job well, too.

Reviewing the situation, I had wanted some help, but not from the goats. MyKeeper kept them at bay for a few minutes so I could work unhindered. But goat persistence tops all, and pretty soon Stella came back. She followed my every move with her nose. It was a few minutes before I realized that the reason I couldn't seem to get at the post hole was because the whole herd milled between me and the shovel. Some help!

MyKeeper is laughing. It's a talent that comes easily to him. I'm tempted to forgive him. Almost.

When I lean over to pick up the fencepost, I find myself reaching over the back of a goat. Five goats help me lift it into place.

Finally, I extricate myself from the goat committee. The post stands upright and firm, the fencing attached with clips. MyKeeper fastened the clips. Goat muzzles assisted him. It's my turn to laugh. I did.

The fence repair could have been a five-minute job, but with the help of all my goats, it turned out to be a twenty-five minute job.

MyKeeper said they should be rewarded for their assistance. Especially Stella, for being the most diligent. Turning to her, he asked, "Would you like to go to a barbecue?" To me he whispered, "She'd make a fine barbecue, don't you think?"



Fencing 'em in...

Fence making is routine for farmers and ranchers. Putting up an electric fence is no big deal. Except around here. Nothing gets done around here without a hefty measure of the catastrophe factor.

It took only a few hours to pound fence posts and string wire. But the charge was so weak it didn't faze the goats. The box the charger came in said "for livestock" and "for up to six miles." Picture of cows, goats, and sheep encircled the words. I showed it to the goats. They were unimpressed.

The next charger didn't work. We should have known. The box was retaped shut and had a customer name written on the lid flap.

Days later and two more stores later, another charger. No surprise, the goats broke out and the dogs broke in. There were tangled wires, sprung wires, bent wires, and stretched wires. Wide gaps. Easy exit.

Each time, as soon as the goats got out, they made a mad dash for my new peach trees. Even

though the spindly trunks are wrapped with welded panel for protection, the leaves are gone now, along with half the branches. The poor baby trees have been mauled flat to the ground more than once. I fear for their survival. Trees need to be upright.

Every day MyKeeper assured me the fence was fixed. Each morning it went like this:

Run and get a can of grain.

Unhook the top fence wire and hop over.

Open the gate.

Enter the pen, holding the can high.

Push the goats off me.

Throw the grain into their feed trough to distract them.

Dash to the gate and hook it open, leap over the wires, reconnect the electric fence, race to the house - up the steps - open the outlet cover - grab the cord - plug in the charger...

I turn around and there are the goats, on the porch steps behind me.

More grain.

Unplug everything.

Get the goats back in the pen.

Start over again at Step One.

Today the fence is supposed to be working. Again. I run the goat gauntlet THREE TIMES!!! I check and double check everything that could go wrong. I huff and puff to catch my breath, and I sweat rivers.

I blew. It was not a pretty sight. I wished I were Superman and could yank on the nearest post and watch the entire fence pop out - bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop - one post after the other, all the way around the field. Oh, it would have been so gratifying.

This mess might have gone on longer, except for one little thing, The next day it rained! The electric fence works real good now, whether it's ON or OFF.

Music of the earth

First my kids, then my grandkids, my little ones learned early not to bring their own noise with them when walking the fields with me. We learned together to listen to nature's own song, the perfect harmonies of the earth.



Utter silence...

I'm on my way to the goat pen with a flake of hay in my arms when I notice. It's that fleeting, peace-filled moment of the morning. It is compelling, and I stand perfectly still to be part of it.

That brief still moment steals up so quietly. Framed on both sides by the noise of daytime, it is this contrast to the frenetic activity that catches my attention.

Before it comes, cars and pickups first rush up and down the road as people race off to work. Dust is thrown up from the gravel road, and waves of it lap at the countryside. Bird families cluster in the trees and fenceline briars, trilling and cheeping their joy of another new dawn.

Dogs yip, screen doors slam, school buses growl all the way to the school grounds. I've fed the dogs and MyKeeper, in that order. (Yes, he complains about that.) Each goat has munched her morning grain ration at the stanchion. The water trough is re-filled. A handful of alfalfa and an apple quarter

are stuffed into each rabbit hutch. The dogs got their biscuit reward for not running off while I was busy with the goats. They have no idea how much I appreciate that.

At this moment, the dogs are sprawled on the ground, which was frosty earlier, but is steaming in the sun. The goats are lounging and taking their leisure re-digesting their breakfast.

This moment holds me arrested in action. There is no wind, no sound, only a warm sun and a few seconds tied together and frozen in time. I soak it up and commit the feel of it to my memory files for later.

From this nest of silence, Bunny's nose twitches. Lydia the Lady Mockingbird watches me from her favorite "good morning" fencepost. A leaf falls, crinkling as it skitters along the ground. A weed seed bursts, and after a pause, another. The squirrel chitters, and I catch a glimpse of his flicking tail. A crow calls from a pecan tree in the distance. Farther off, a car whooshes by on the paved road a half-mile away.

This moment could have slipped past without my noticing. What an awful thought. HisMama comes to mind, and the words she left me for moments like this - "Little is much, if the Lord is in it."

Goat at Giglio's

O titled laborer
O goat of great
significance
no junkyard caprine
but a high calling —
weed control
in a fenced yard —
a guard goat of
experience and
exemplary
qualifications.

Far From Town

Lazy air glides across smooth hills
lounges in the clefts, tiptoes the ridges
then stands stock still, a mid-morning
quiet I wait to hear. Once the schoolbus
growls off into the distance, the critters
are fed, everyone's off to work, then
even the wind takes a well-earned break.
From that matrix pops a staccato bark,
a seed pod burst, a ruffle of breeze
traipsing the tip tops of tall trees.
I lean against the fence, just listening,
the dog at ease beside me.
Even the brush of clothing, or fingers
through hair is rude intrusion.
Hush. Echo the stillness.
No sound but the ring of silence.

The anointing storm...

Booms and crashes and crackles made a terrible racket overhead while I sat scrunched in a big chair, wringing my hands and fretting. The TV was tuned to the weather report, as was the radio. Clutched in my hand was a hastily scrawled sketch mapping out the Big Country counties. A flashlight lay beside me, right next to the dogs who were quivering as I was.

I wished I could wiggle my nose and find myself back in Seattle where the worst is mists and fogs and three-day drizzles, all dreary and grey.

The storm oozed in like slime, pointed north by the long finger of a cold-front cloud.

New residents, we didn't yet know how to read Texas storm language, so we had watched during the afternoon while the front dragged the storm clouds across the blue sky, erasing the puffy white clouds as it came.

Dense clouds packed together until they had to wrestle for space. By late afternoon, there was no sun left, only a dark brooding sky and buzzards

tickling the underbellies of the heavy, low-slung clouds.

In no mood for play, the storm howled, enraged, and threw flashing daggers. Thunder roared and lightning blazed the miles across the heavens, lighting cloud profiles in split-second flickers.

The lightning was constant, leaping from cloud to cloud and jabbing at the earth. I had never seen anything like it, so I was staying up late with the weatherman, tracking the storm as it bellowed its way over the Big Country.

The brute emerged from the south, a bear on the rampage with nothing to stop it from sweeping across this wide flat land. Then it loomed overhead and pounded out its fury, so loud I couldn't hear the radio at all.

A last shred of bravery sent me dashing down the hall to wake MyKeeper. He can sleep through anything. All he said was "ummph" and "frmmph" and "Go back to sleep," until...BANG!!!...right outside the south window.

"I'm awake!" he sputtered, lurching bolt upright. A second later - BOOOOOM!! Another direct hit to the ground on the north side. It was so close I heard the sizzle and smelled something burn. And another sharp awful smell I later heard might be ozone.

"So," I blurted, "we're still alive. I guess this is Welcome To Texas, sung by a massive, marching chorus!"

We'd been anointed on the right and on the left. In the frenzy of battle, we had heard the voice of the great sovereign. We'd felt the flat edge of the sword tap our shoulders as the thunderous voice intoned, "You are hereby dubbed West Texans, if you're brave enough to dare."

Living on eagle time...

Morning person that I am, it is my custom to open all the drapes and curtains so I can watch dawn approach from every angle.

One morning I reached for the drapery pull at our front picture window. A car was stopped out in the road, so I waited a few minutes. The car was still there when I returned. A man leaned out the driver's window, staring at the house.

It felt a bit creepy. I lurked behind the curtains, waiting for him to move on. But he didn't.

MyKeeper said my suspicions were silly. Maybe the guy had a flat tire.

In the big city where I grew up, we were taught young to beware of strangers. This qualified as strange. "But what if he's casing the joint?" I persisted with one worry after another. "What if he's a kidnapper?"

"Oh, don't worry," he assured me. "Soon as he'd get you in the light, he'd bring you right back." Bless

him, he does what he can to keep me from taking myself too seriously.

"Well, come and look," I pressured him.

He whisked the curtains aside. We stood staring back at the man in the car.

In the dimness of dawn's early light we could see the man put a shushing finger to his lips and point to the chimney, motioning for us to come out.

MyKeeper and I looked at each other, then crept out to the car, looking back over our shoulders and up to the roof. Perched on the peak of the roof was a beautiful eagle enjoying the view. It looked like a weather vane too big for the house.

The man talked to us in whispers. He said the bird had been there quite a few minutes. He had watched it land, and stayed while it preened its feathers and then searched the countryside for breakfast from the tip of our roof.

He talked about how few eagles had been sighted in recent years, and how the pheasant population was decimated as well. He answered our questions about the shiny washtubs set in the high branches of riverfront trees. He said it was a conservation program, inviting osprey to adopt them as nests. To everyone's surprise, they did.

A few minutes later the eagle decided he had attracted too much company. He unfolded his wings,

spread them with a dramatic flair, lifted up in a majestic sweep, and dwarfed the house in his glorious takeoff. We were awestruck, watching till he shrunk to a dot and disappeared.

The man was a commuter in a place where watching an eagle took precedence over rush hour. Life is much different on a county road. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Tanking up in Texas...

"Close up the shop!" the man yelled as he burst through the door. Since I just stood there, staring, he waved his arms. "Quick, lock the door and come with me! Bring your camera!"

Before I knew it, the "back in 10 minutes" sign was hung on the door, and the key was turning in the lock at the newspaper shop where I worked.

He turned his car into his neighbor's driveway. She was away, and missed it all. Draping the leaves and twigs of the old oaks were wads and wads of Monarch butterflies.

The man guided me through the butterfly rest haven. He rolled his arms in a gathering motion, attracting great round armloads to his chest. They did not panic, but simply rose back into place on the branch.

An aura of peace and reverence filled that place. I stood with my jaw open until he jogged my arm. "Take pictures!" he said.