

Me & my birds...

# The magical broody

According to **Jack Smellie** and **David Chidgey**, it just doesn't get much better than hatching with broody birds on their smallholding in Cornwall. This is their story.

We keep a most delightful assortment of birds on our smallholding, nestling as it does, on the edge of Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. There are chickens, ducks and turkeys of all ages, descriptions and characters.

Some are young white others are not so; there are pure breeds, cross-breeds and commercial hybrids. Visually, they range from the beautifully manicured to the downright scruffy and behaviour can be just as variable, too.

Some are very well behaved and are content to stay in their extensive free-range enclosures, but others jump over the fence and go hob-nobbing

A Muscovy on the move with her ducklings.



with the goats and sheep. There are those that insist on travelling far and wide to find the most obscure places to lay their eggs but, thankfully, plenty that reliably use the luxury, straw-lined nest boxes provided.

## Convenient layers

There's also the Gang of Three who, like the perfect ladies they are, make their way up to the barn each morning and lay directly in the egg basket on the table, although we'll ignore the fact that they usually squabble like mad to get in there first...

But this is why we love our poultry; because of the characters, the stories they inspire, the adventures they take

us on. We keep our assortment of birds all year round, but have also dabbled with geese and quail. Typically we'll take 30-40 birds through the winter but, at the height of our hatching and rearing, can have well over 100 on site.

We lamb and kid each year as well, but nothing quite beats the sight and sound of a mother hen, duck or turkey (yes, turkeys can make great mums, too) scratching, pecking and talking to their broods of youngsters, and teaching them how to get along in the world!

It's always been our aim to use broodies as much as possible for hatching and rearing chicks, ducklings and poults, as we believe it's better for the birds because they're able to engage in their normal behaviours as early as possible. Getting the chance to scratch in the grass/soil, dust-bath, start finding their own food and begin appreciating the social niceties under the guidance of an attentive mother hen, gives them a genuine advantage.

We have a 'growers' paddock where most of our broodies raise their young and, at any one time, it'll be full of birds of different ages. It's a great melting pot of activity where squabbles occur and valuable lessons are learned.

There are many ways one can use a broody effectively. The most reliable will lay her eggs in a totally predator-



Jack with a tame Amber Ranger hybrid layer.

The main paddock, complete with alpaca guards!



proof place, sit tight, have a 100% hatch rate and then raise all the chicks to at least eight weeks old before quietly leaving them fully prepared for the 'adult' world.

At the other end of the scale is the broody that lays in a totally unsuitable place, refuses to be moved and sharpens her beak purposefully to be ready for you each time you approach.

## Gentle encouragement

Whenever possible we try to move our broodies into places where they'll be quiet and safe, but still have access to the outside world for the essential breaks from the nest to poo, eat and drink outside. We use false or 'spare' eggs to encourage the birds to stay put where we want them, and then give them the real eggs once we're satisfied they are serious contenders!

Some broodies will tolerate interruptions while others will defend their nest and allow no other bird access. There are even those who disappear for hours on end, and you worry that they're never going to return. The secret is to get to know

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your broodies, and to match them to the jobs that need doing.

Trust can be important, too. We gave our red Orpington 10 mixed Orpington eggs and, 21 days later, she hadn't managed to hatch a single one; two were eaten, two cracked and oozing, another had vanished altogether and, of the remaining five, all turned bad!

Yet we retained faith in her. Once we'd recovered from that fiasco (which we put down to her being disturbed too much by other birds), she went broody again and we gave her 'ready-made' chicks in the form of two goslings. These had been incubator-hatched, and we were very keen for a natural mum to take them on. She was (and still is) perfect with them, to the point of standing on tip toe, wings out stretched to try to get them to go under her

to keep warm, even though they're virtually as tall as she is!

Of course, we use incubators as well, and have a couple of very smart machines for when no broodies are available. We may start a batch of eggs off in one of these, then hand them over to one of our birds. Some eggs, as with those goslings, are taken through to hatching, then the resulting youngster are entrusted to a 'one-we-prepared-earlier broody'.

A quick hand movement removes one of the eggs and pops a chick into its place, this being repeated until all the eggs have miraculously turned into fluffy, dry chicks. This sleight-of-hand manoeuvre is best done at night, in a confined space, and is something that we've accomplished successfully many times.

## Shared responsibility

We've also had lots of instances of 'sharing', our best being a bantam and a duck sharing the job of incubating 15



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duck eggs (13 actually hatched). We currently have a Silkie and an Indian Game hen sharing the job of raising seven cross-breed chicks and, when a Light Sussex left her nine Orpington charges at just four weeks a Pekin, who already had three of her own, took them all on!

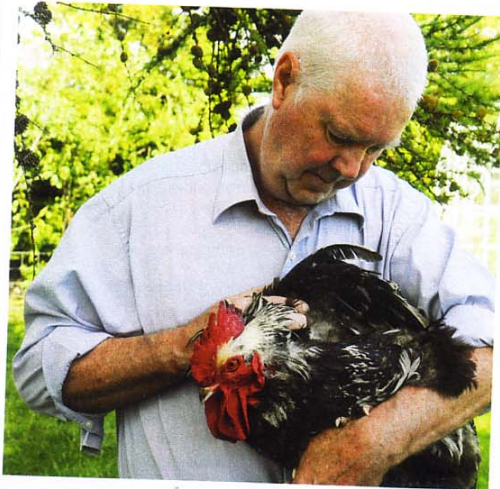
"But our best success this year has been a Bourbon Red turkey that hatched seven of her eight turkey eggs, and was the most perfect mum. Fellow turkey breeders had told us that turkeys make bad mothers, but we have the video evidence to prove otherwise, plus a stunning photo showing her perching, wings outstretched, so all seven can snuggle in under her to perch at the same time!

"Broody hens act as great guides, indicating to their young when and where it's best to peck, scratch, take a dust bath and preen. This is an essential part of the development process for the youngsters, and we love it when a hen starts scratching, finds something worth digging up and

immediately calls her chicks over.

"Muscovy ducks don't appear to do as much of this 'calling' over; instead you get the delightful sight of the mother duck leading her ducklings off to the pond or feeder, or that perfect patch of grass 'over there'. Interestingly, three of our four female Muscovies all left their ducklings at around four weeks, by which time they'd introduced them to the pond and the compost heap (plenty of worms to be had there), and obviously considered their job to be done.

"The fourth female is still with her brood of 11; she hasn't yet led them to the pond and, while they're now six weeks old, she still guards them ferociously and hisses both at us and other birds that come near!



Above: David checking for lice.

Below: A Bourbon Red turkey roosting with some cosy youngsters!

"We also wonder if broody mums teach their youngsters just how sociable these activities can be, and whether that affects how they behave in later life? Again our own observations would suggest there is some mileage to this theory.

### Friends for life?

"We had two red Leghorns that we bought as four-week-olds and raised in an enclosed run until we felt they were old enough to survive the hurly burly of the whole growers' paddock. They were inseparable and also became very tame.

"So, when one sadly died in the winter, we wondered if the other would latch on to another bird or birds and seek companionship elsewhere. She didn't, though, and even now is still a loner; a happy loner we believe but, nonetheless, a loner!

"Contrast this to a bantam chick who was raised by a bantam broody along with three siblings, but who then lost the use of her legs at around six weeks old. We isolated her for a week and then she was kept inside as she slowly learnt to walk again.

"Meanwhile, her 'mum' went broody again but little 'Wobbly' latched back on to her and then, even more amazingly, the new chicks that mum subsequently hatched.

"What's more, when 'mum' decided she'd had enough of this raising chicks lark and 'left' her second brood at the tender age of just three weeks, Wobbly became the new mum and, to this day, still is!

"Using broodies is so much less work and, especially in the case of

ducks and geese, so much less mess. Ducklings seem to relish their 'who can lift their bum the highest and squirt up the walls' competitions, and is just amazing how they seem able to keep themselves looking pristine, while their broody box resembles something dredged up from the bottom of a slurry pit!

"We began keeping Muscovy ducks last year simply because, unlike most other domesticated ducks, they go broody and make great mums. Also, in theory, it's less expensive to have a broody raise your chicks; no heat lamp or heat pad, less bedding, possibly less food. We've never worked out the actual costs, but logic suggests this should be the case.

### Defensive measures

"The broody chicken, duck or turkey can be a ferocious beast – on occasions, blood is drawn, but this can be good. The best broody should defend her eggs and then her chicks. If the birds free-range, as ours do, it's a jungle out there and 'bad things' can happen. After a few days inside bonding and having the space to themselves, we encourage our new families to discover the outside world. We don't confine them to runs; we let them go where they want.

"Our growers' area used to be the garden of the house, but nowadays it's called the 'lambing paddock' (not that we've ever lambed here), and is basically a grassed area with plenty of



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Above: One of our bantam broodies with cross-breed chicks.

Below: A Pekin bantam cockerel in good voice.

trees, a mini orchard and surrounded on two sides by a Cornish wall/hedging. It's a big area for tiny chicks but, with mum to look after and guide them, it's a wonderful land of adventure.

"One consequence of what we do is that we do spend our lives counting our birds and, of course, there are losses. So far this year those that have disappeared included two ducklings, one turkey poult and two Legbar chicks.

The ducklings no longer had a mum with them, the turkey poult had never had a mum (and was five weeks old), but the Legbars were with a Light Sussex hen that, in theory, should have been protecting them.

"We hate any losses and always feel guilty, but the percentage is actually very small and, on balance, we feel the benefits of the free-range approach

we offer are huge. We could confine our families to runs, but feel this would seriously limit their experiences and learning!

"The housing for all our broodies occupies the entire end of our main barn, accessed through a pop-hole. It's filled with straw, perches of varying widths and heights and, when the weather's terrible, we even have food and water in there for them, too. It's about as safe an environment as one can have and, touch wood, rats and other undesirables do seem to keep out.

"So, for us, the pleasure to be had from raising new birds each year is made all the greater by using broodies. We never tire of watching the interactions between mums and their youngsters, and regard it quite simply as a fascinating privilege." 🐣



### → Find out more

To find out more about Jack and David's smallholding and the livestock they rear on, visit [www.relaxedfarming.co.uk](http://www.relaxedfarming.co.uk) where you'll also find an online resource for teachers, home educators, fellow smallholders and much more besides.