



BUCK-WHEAT BYTES

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GFIA 2009 Conference

Despite a slow economy, members of Guinea Fowl International gathered once again for an annual Guinea Fowl Conference, this time in Georgetown, DE, USA, in April.

This was GFIA's 4th annual conference; it was a cooperative effort among GFIA, the University of Delaware College of Agriculture & Natural Resources, and Delaware State University.

GFIA member Bill Stevenson generously used some of his guinea fowl as the subjects of an experiment conducted by Dr. Dan Bautista, studying the effectiveness of various medical and natural treatments for worms. The use of natural treatments for parasites in poultry has never been studied previously. Preliminary results were discussed at this conference, but the study will be ongoing for another year or more.

Training Your Guineas to Return to the Coop

By Cindy Gibson

In the US, it's that time of year when the keets that we purchased or hatched are old enough to start going out of the coop and ranging. It's a scary time: Will they get lost? Will they find their way back home? Will they roost in the trees?

If you want to have your guineas for more than just a year or two, they need to be trained, from an early age, to be herded and to go into the coop every night. Going into the coop is important for their protection: Guineas are just not equipped to be able to defend themselves against the kinds of nighttime predators that they will encounter in most parts of the world. Training them to be herded will make your cooping easier; in addition, you'll be better able to get them in if you need to, for example, in case of a weather emergency. I've twice

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Hedy and Steve McCarter conducted a tour of their coops, biodiesel production, corn-cob heater, and other environmentally friendly and sustainable practices on their property, not far from the conference site.

had to herd mine in, in the middle of the afternoon, because of oncoming very severe storms. I've herded them in from over ¼ mile away.

Some people train their guineas to return home by letting them out of the coop just a few at a time, which keeps them close, but isn't really teaching them anything. Your guineas already know they want to stay close to their flock. What you want them to learn is that at a certain time of day, or when you say so, it's time to go back to the coop.

The best way I've found to do that is to let them all out, but for just a little while the first day or two (maybe an

Please see *Training Your Guineas* on page 4

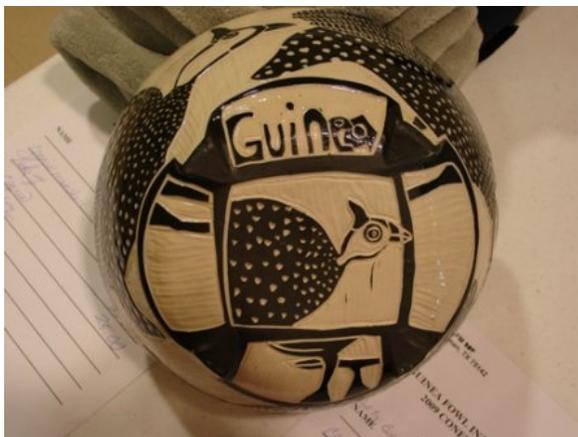
Photos From the Conference

Saturday night's dinner featured two guinea fowl dishes on the menu; Susan Schaler, Ann Conlon, and Bill Stevenson wait for the rest of the diners to gather.



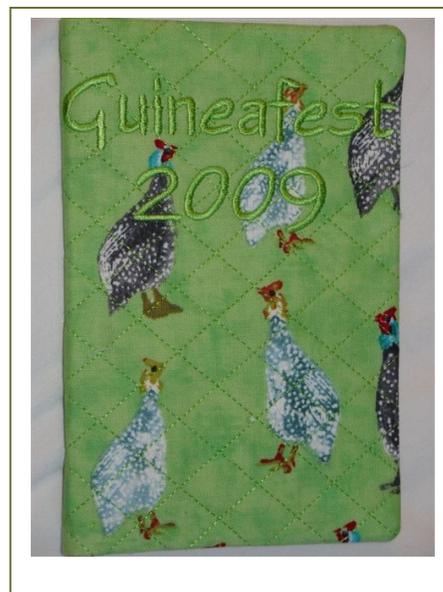
Cindy, taking notes

Conference organizer Dr. Brigid McCrea made these beautiful Japanese Washi eggs, using guinea eggs, and donated the item to our auction.



Above, one of the donated auction items was this lovely pottery bowl, done by Lisa Skeen, donated by Bill.

Below, Bill's guineas await the Show Standards presentation by Robert Powell.



Although they could not attend, Bob Kitchell's wife (screen-name Mrs. Bigdog) made these beautiful calendar covers for the conference participants.

Notes from the 2009 Conference

Attending the annual Guinea Fowl Conferences held by GFIA, one receives a lot of information, in lecture and written form. In fact, it would be easy to leave each conference feeling inadequate to the task of implementing all the suggestions for housing, treatment, etc.

To me, the value of each conference is the little nuggets of information that catch my attention – sometimes in an off-the-cuff remark or an aside. These are what I capture in my notes, and these are the items I am most likely to use in my own setting. Here are a few such notes from this year's conference:

Coccidiosis is a leading cause of death for keets. "Medicated" feed containing Amprolium – often the dose is not strong enough to prevent coccidiosis. If you reduce the coccidia load such that the bird's immune system can handle it, you won't lose birds to coccidiosis.

Composting is very helpful in combating coccidiosis; the composting process kills or greatly reduces the number of coccidia. Amprolium has been in use so long that coccidia are becoming resistant to it. It's used in medicated feed because it is inexpensive. To supplement, especially during conditions under which coccidia population would flourish (wet, warm weather), add sulphaquin to the drinking water.

Coccidia have a 7-day life-cycle inside the bird, so it's important to stay ahead of the problem – death results very quickly.

If you look at the bacteria levels in an organic setting, there will be a more diverse bacteria population in the gut of those birds raised in an organic setting than in a non-organic setting. That diversity of bacteria helps displace some of the

harmful bacteria, lowering the risk of disease. Composting helps to create a more diverse bacteria population. The downside of the use of medication is that medication selects for certain bacteria, but overall it reduces the diversity of the bacteria present in the gut.

For most issues, it is a numbers game: you should not be trying to eliminate the bacteria or parasite, but rather reduce the load so that it doesn't overwhelm the birds.

Lawns around dwellings were developed as a way to keep mice at bay. Mice are reluctant to cross large open spaces, so lawns were a deterrent. Use this principle and keep growth cut down around poultry coops and feed storage areas to deter mice.

Some people put a clove of garlic in their waterers, and change it once it starts to sprout. Both garlic and cayenne pepper are known to be immune-system stimulants.

Fibrous materials such as pumpkin seeds, artemesia (wormwood), and others will help the bird expel worms. Tea tree oil, orange oil, eucalyptus oil and rosemary have insecticide properties. Some songbirds use rosemary twigs in their nests.

During hatching, the embryos need to breathe. When incubating, be aware of conditions that can cause CO2 buildup.

The broody hen deposits a glycol-protein coating on the egg, which breaks down as development begins. The chick/keet removes calcium from the eggshell, which helps its bones develop and also helps thin the shell for pipping.

Training Your Guineas from page 1

hour). Let them out in the late afternoon. Then, after they've been out awhile, use herding sticks (two long sticks that make it look like your arms are really long) and walk slowly behind them, gently moving them to the coop. At first, the keets are going to not respond to the herding sticks and you may have to actually push them with the sticks to keep them moving. After just a couple of days, though, they respond to the presence of the sticks. Guineas and other ground-grazing birds have a built-in instinct to respond to "pressure" from the rear. This instinct ensures that, as they're grazing, the birds at the back of the flock will get some food. Otherwise, those at the front would linger until all the food was gone, and those at the back wouldn't get much. This same process is at work in flocks of geese and other birds. Using herding sticks and walking behind them takes advantage of this hard-wired instinct.

If you want to have your guineas for more than a year or two, they need to be trained...

Repeat the process of letting them out and herding them in, extending the amount of time outside, until they're out the whole day.

If possible, start by having their free-range time in the afternoon so they start to associate lowering light levels with going back into the coop.

Before long, they'll be returning to the coop on their own. There will probably be some slip-ups, however. They may range out and be away from home when it starts getting dark. Their instinct may be to hunker down under a shrub or in some tall grass. This may happen a time or two, so be ready with your herding sticks to go guide them home. When mine are first learning this process, I try to find where they are an hour or more before sunset, just in case they don't get back on their own.

Also, when they're teenagers, they may go through a rebellion period, just as all teenagers seem to. They may decide that the roof, or a tree, is more fun than the coop. This will be the time you'll need to really reinforce the training, and be ready with herding sticks and even a ladder to make sure that all go in at night. If you let them get away with staying out at this point, before long, part or all of your flock will be roosting outside.

The benefit to this program is that, if you should be

away from home until after dark, you'll likely find all or nearly all your flock has put themselves up for the night, and all you'll have to do is close up the doors. Those that haven't gone inside will be sitting nearby and can be herded in with herding sticks and a flashlight to help them see where they're going. (Guineas can't see well at all at night.)

Other factors that will help you train your flock to go into the coop:

- **It's helpful for you to have a light** (on a timer) inside a coop, which turns on an hour before sunset. Guineas hate going into a dark building. Their instinct tells them to go toward light, and it's more light at the top of a tree or rooftop than on the ground, so they'll fly up to roost. A light inside the coop will help tremendously. A red light, instead of a white one, will help settle them (red light doesn't interfere with melatonin production, which is the sleep-hormone). If you don't have electricity in your coop, or can't run an extension cord, get one of those battery-powered tap-on closet lights and turn it on before sunset. There may be some solar lights that would work, too, but I haven't researched whether they would come on in time.



This little flock of 3 chicks and 4 keets has been ranging for a few hours each day for less than a week. They are used to the herding sticks now and head straight for the coop door when they see them.

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- **Make your coop as easy to access** as possible. Have more than one door, if you can. Have your doors at ground level, or make sure your ramp is big and easy for them. Having a small or high door or a skinny ramp just makes it harder to go inside, which makes it harder to train them and gives them more opportunities to “miss” going in the door. Avoid high doors, as you want your guineas calm at herding time. If they need to fly to get in, they may just as readily fly to trees or rooftops as to the coop entrance. Herding should be a slow, calm process.
- **Speaking of coop doors**, it helps if you have more than one door, or if your door is very large. In every guinea flock, there will be one or two self-appointed door-bullies. They think their job is to stand inside the door and harass every guinea coming in. The birds lower in the pecking order, or the less confident birds, will soon become reluctant to go in at night and may start roosting outside in preference to taking the abuse. It is harder for the door bullies to “guard” the door if it’s a big door, or if there is more than one door.
- **It is a good idea to put out treats** in the coop area, when you first let them out in the morning and in the late afternoon. This gives the guineas something to look forward to and pleasant associations with the coop yard. In fact, putting treats out randomly throughout the day will keep them coming home to check for goodies. It also makes you the “Food Goddess” (or “Food God”). It’s always a good thing to have your flock respond positively to your presence.

I start this gradual-release training when my keets are 3-4 weeks old, but I live in an area with long stretches of warm, dry weather, almost no daytime predators, lots of ground cover - and I’m fortunate enough to work at home, so I can keep an eye on things. You may want to wait until your keets are closer to 6-8 weeks old, depending on your circumstances. I recommend against keeping keets cooped up for 10 or 12 weeks or longer, just because guineas are very athletic birds and they need a lot of exercise. Also, I find training youngsters much easier than training older birds. Keets are less likely to run or fly from you at the first herding try than older birds are.

Good luck with training your flock. Go to our Message Board online, or call or write us, if you experience problems not mentioned here, or if you have more questions.



Any kind of long pole or stick works for herding. These are 6' bamboo plant-stakes found in the garden department of home-improvement stores.



Tammy Leigh’s creation, a guinea fowl bust entitled Miss GFIA 2009. She was donated to GFIA and now resides with Connie in Delaware.



Steve and Hedy's son explaining the process of making their own biodiesel for the farm tractor

More Photos from the Conference

Photos courtesy of Carl Schaler



Most of the men skipped the Washi egg-decorating craft demonstration by Dr. Brigid McCrea. The session demonstrated that there are several ways to generate income from guinea-keeping.

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