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up on

Fickle Creek

by JODI HELMER



"If the steers start charging towards you, take a low, wide stance and block their path."

My eyes dart from the three five-month-old steers in their corral to Farm Manager Brian Horton.

"You want me to step into the path of a charging steer?"

"Yep. They'll put on the brakes, I promise."

I briefly wonder whether putting a trio of 500-pound steers out to pasture for the first time should be left to an actual farmhand instead of an inexperienced journalist in search of an agricultural education. With all of the false confidence I can muster, I stutter, "OK...let's do it."

When I signed on for a weekend at Fickle Creek Farm, a 61-acre sustainable farm in rural Efland, NC, I imagined idyllic farm chores like bottle-feeding lambs and collecting eggs in a wicker basket; the possibility of being trampled by cattle never entered my mind.

Once out of their dusty corral, the steers trot along the narrow path, stopping to munch on tufts of grass. In their apparent excitement, the frisky young boys kick up their heels, their bovine bodies dancing in the spring sunshine. And then it happens—halfway to the pasture, one of the steers turns around and starts racing towards us.

"Get wide and low," Brian calls to me.

Against my better judgment, I plant my feet and spread my arms. The steer sees us blocking his path, stops in his tracks and turns back towards the pasture.

"See? I told you he would put on the brakes."

Experiences like this are the reasons guests participate in stays at Fickle Creek

Farm. Academics-turned-farmers, Ben Bergmann and Noah Ranells opened the farm to overnight guests in 2004.

"We wanted to offer people a way to really experience the farm," Bergmann explains.

Farm stays were first introduced in Europe in the 1980s as a means for farmers to supplement their incomes during tough economic times. In recent years, farmers in the U.S. have thrown open their pasture gates to welcome guests. The concept took off and farm stays have become a nationwide trend.

I dream about owning a small farm in the mountains of North Carolina. But before I order a flock of hens or purchase a tribe of goats, I decided to get some hands-on experience.

Brian, a chef-turned-farm manager at Fickle Creek Farm agrees to let me act as an apprentice farmhand.

Our day starts not long after the sun comes up. We refill water dishes for newborn chicks, check feed levels in the hog pens, and uncover flats of veggie seedlings in the greenhouse.

I follow Brian for most of the morning, climbing over fences to feed dogs and fill the troughs in the sheep and hog pens, but I freeze when he enters a pasture where dozens of Barred Plymouth Rock hens strut to and fro, scratching the ground in search of insects.

Brian greets the hens, makes a few clucking noises as they flock around his feet, and starts to explain the egg collection process; without taking my eyes off of their bright yellow beaks, I interrupt to make a confession.

"I'm terrified of birds."

"Really? Well, these girls aren't going to hurt you..."

To demonstrate that I have nothing to fear, he reaches beneath one of the hens perched in her nesting box and pulls out an egg. The hen never clucks or ruffles a feather. Brian waits for me to follow his lead.

His this-is-so-easy-little-kids-can-handle-it attitude puts me at ease. I reach toward a nesting box and slowly slide my hand inside.

"It's OK, girl, I'm not going to hurt you," I assure the chicken. "Just give me your eggs and I'll leave you alone."

I feel an egg, grasp it between my fingers and pull it from the nesting box.

I make the same move a second time and a third, adding the eggs to the basket hanging from the henhouse. Brian collects at least five eggs for each one I place in the basket, often pulling two or three at a time from the nesting boxes; I pick up the pace, determined to prove myself a worthy apprentice.

"You're getting the hang of it," he remarks.

Over the next few hours, we gather more eggs and I start to feel more at ease. By the time Brian announces his plan to put the steers out to pasture, I have plotted a career change; I imagine trading pecking away at the keyboard for raising chickens—though I never admit that I plan to collect eggs in a pretty wicker basket, wearing striped rubber boots.

Jodi Helmer is the author of The Green Year: 365 Small Things You Can Do to Make a Big Difference. Since returning from Fickle Creek Farm, she has been researching chicken breeds and drawing coop designs.