

BETWEEN NEIGHBORS

GREAT GALLOPING GUINEAS!

Just how long do guineas live?" asked my husband, Emil, as we watched Wilda the Widow slip by on her way to check the grasshopper-free perimeter on the south side of the house. I couldn't hazard a guess. We have discovered that our guineas are a law unto themselves.

At six years of age, Wilda is the remaining survivor of the 15 day-old chicks I brought home in Moulton, Texas, on May 13, 2003. Our friend, Duckie Baetz, had taken the eggs in 28 days earlier, and, as a special favor, she said they could be ours for the price of 50 cents per bird (to be paid to the gin for hatching them).

What a deal! Sick of seeing the pests destroy everything in sight, I was ecstatic at the thought of a grasshopper-free summer. I was right about that, but just about everything else we'd heard about guineas didn't apply to our flock.

Perhaps it was the way ours were raised.

The guineas chirped most of the way home, reminiscent of the Leghorn chicks my mother bought every spring when I was a child. We set their box in my office out of harm's way and gave them food and water. Katy, the cat, had to have guinea orientation because she assumed we'd brought her a live extra-special treat. The next day, when I caught her putting a paw through the handle of the guinea box, I scolded her, not convinced when Emil said she was only counting them.

Meanwhile, Emil was adapting

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Photo: Elaine Thomas

Wilda at work.

a huge dog cage with a cover over its top and several roosts for the guineas' comfort and safety. They moved in on day seven. Within three weeks they were roosting and crowding the front of the pen when I brought their morning treat — a handful of live grasshoppers that I picked off a little cedar tree beside the house. The guineas shared the big ones like they were eating a pizza, while they wolfed the little green ones down without any help. Yes, indeed, our guineas had the grasshopper gene!

They made their initial grasshopper foray late in the day on June 18, 2003. Then we herded them back into the pen, and the next day they took up their steady jobs. Our vast grasshopper population never knew what hit them and neither did our nerves.

When our guineas weren't working, they liked nothing better than to keep us company. Their peculiar singsong — *Kapich! Kapich! Kapich!* — at the top of their lungs filled our days. The guineas

followed Emil around the yard like they were groupies and he was the rock star. They lined up outside his shop and competed with the volume on the radio for attention. When I was working in my office, I'd muffle my voice, but they'd hear me and rush over to the door and *Kapich! Kapich! Kapich!* until I couldn't talk to my client on the other end of the phone. On a Sunday afternoon, Emil and I would watch TV. The guineas missed us so much that they would hop up on the bench outside the window and stare in. Picture it, 15 little bird brains watching us, only to leave a messy, splashy white call-

ing card when they were chased away.

We had been told that guineas act like watchdogs and would let us know when a stranger came near. Our guineas, though, may have thought they had enough responsibility with the size of the grasshopper population on this hill. At any rate, they elected to let people come and go as they pleased.

One summer a guinea hen hatched more than 32 eggs in the machine shed. What transpired minutes later was the guinea leading a fast-paced, hard-core forced march around our yard during

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