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Community Breeders

Animal Husbandry in Portlandia

by Kurt Spickerman

Six years ago, when Oregon State University’s Director of Extension Services, Beth Emshoff, received a phone call from a veterinarian regarding care for a sick chicken, she was at a loss. “I said, ‘I have no idea! Let me ask around, and I’ll copy you in on any emails,’” she recalls. “So, I made a couple of phone calls, and there was this poultry guy on campus. So I sent an email to the poultry guy, and he writes back, ‘It’s a chicken! They’re sick, you wring their neck!’ When the vet read that, he called. ‘Who the heck

is this guy?’ he sputtered. “Doesn’t he understand—this is a family pet!”

Just about everyone probably knows by now about the influx of farm animals, in recent years, into the backyards of their Portland Metro neighbors. The “rationale for it,” says Nathan McClintock, Assistant Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University, “is very much connected to not wanting to participate in the kind of industrial food system—not wanting to participate in factory farming, or factory keeping of animals. Peo-

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ple want to be in touch with their food, where their food comes from, kind of in touch with nature—they want to have the educational experience, they want to have their children around animals, to see where eggs come from, and to see where milk comes from, and to experience that.”

At one time, much of the country was intimately familiar with the workings of a duck and a cow, a chicken and a goat. But we have lost touch with our agricultural roots. “During the Second World War,” says Emshoff, “20% of the food consumed in the United States was grown at home. That was part of the rationing process. People would come out of the Depression having really relied on those sorts of skills to stretch your dollars. We don’t have those skills anymore.” People who have grown up in rural areas may still interact with these animals, but “most of us who grew up in cities,” says McClintock, “or didn’t grow up around chickens or goats or rabbits, you know, or ducks, or whatever—they’re not dogs and cats and guinea pigs, we’re not used to seeing them. We’re not learning anything from seeing a dog, but we’re actually learning something from seeing a chicken.”

But what is even more interesting is that somewhere along the line, what drew these animals to the city expanded from simply being a dietary need, into being something else entirely. “We did this survey of about 140 livestock owners around the U.S.,” says McClintock, “and across the board, people treat their urban livestock like their pets. Urban livestock now is completely a different sort of ball of worms than it used to be.”

Kevilina Burbank used to drink the “yummy milk” produced by her Nigerian Dwarf goat, but “you have to be pretty disciplined about it,” she says. “You have

to decide: are you going to bottle feed the babies, how much to separate the mom and the babies at night, you have to do it regularly, every day. But you can keep her into about two quarts of milk for three hundred days out of the year.” The companionship aspect of owning goats is what drives Burbank to keep these pets, though. “One of the coolest experiences of my life with another animal has been when she was giving birth. It was such a bonding experience—we lock heads, when she’s pushing, until the baby is born. We slept out here for three nights with them, and the mom lets us snuggle them, and bring them in the house, and we got little baby goats running around.”

Alyssa Vetsch, of Bee Thinking, a beekeeping supply shop on 15th and Poplar, is a little more apt to enjoy the fruits of her labor, but it’s still not a priority. Her employers “have about 25 hives in the Portland Metro area, so we harvest their honey probably twice a year, Spring and Fall, do a crush n’ strain (where the honeycomb is crushed, and then the wax is strained out). It’s raw, all natural honey—it’s just the best.” But “honey is definitely a side-note to keeping bees,” she says. “It’s a nice reward, but it’s not the reason. Especially Portlanders—they’re really in it for the pollination, they’re in it to benefit the biodynamic flora that we have around here, and they hear the plight of the honeybee—they hear stories of the colony collapse—and they want to help out.”

Erin Copley is even less enthralled by the offerings of her three chickens: “I haven’t bought eggs in the last month, but I fed them for four months before then. And cleaned them, and took care of them, so really it’s more of an exercise in taking care of something that’s not giving anything back to you than anything else. Which is a big part of what having

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a pet is.” But, for Copley’s two children, that’s exactly the lesson that the chickens are meant to teach. “It’s been good for the kids, because they’re responsible for taking care of them, so they’ve had to do the really gnarly chicken coop cleaning. But that’s in part because they want a dog, and they want other animals, and I said if they can take care of the chickens, then we can talk about them having other pets. It’s like a step—a graded step—towards taking care of other animals that are harder to take care of. The self-sufficiency aspect of it is an interesting goal to attain, but considering how many they’re laying, and how much we actually use eggs and stuff,” Copley doesn’t see it working for her family, in the long-run.

“In the Bay Area there’s much more of an explicit focus on food justice, food security, and inequities in the food system, and urban agriculture is one tool to address those inequities,” says McClintock, who earned his PhD studying the agricultural movement in Oakland. “I would say that what I’ve seen thus far in Portland is more of an emphasis on environmental consciousness, environmental sustainability, (and) self-sufficiency.” All very Portland things. Here, as opposed to Oakland, “it’s much more connected to the lifestyle, like the sort of Portlandia lifestyle. It’s one of the things Portlandians do: we drink craft beer, and we grow our own food—everything that the TV show mocks.”

The urban animals of today have taken on new roles, still producing edibles to different degrees, depending on the needs and desires of the owner, but also becoming companions, educators, and community builders. “It draws neighbors, creates those connections—people come over, they share their eggs with people, the neighbor’s kids come over and play

with the chickens—it’s like the glue of the social fabric,” says McClintock. Kevilina Burbank has had that experience with the three goats she keeps in a pen in the front yard of the Airbnb that she calls “Goatlandia.” “They’re super community-building,” she says. “A lot of these kids in this neighborhood would never go to a petting zoo, and don’t even know what kind of animal this is. So, especially in the summer, like last summer, we had so many kids who come up and help clean, and go do research, and all this stuff. You know, that side of it’s pretty powerful, too.”

“These are urban livestock,” says McClintock, “because they’re farm animals—but in addition to our food production, a primary goal is community building and education—goals not only for individuals and families, but then for the community as well.”

“That’s what’s really great about the beekeeping community in Portland,” says Vetsch, “the ‘Portland Urban Beekeepers Association.’ That’s been really nice for all the beekeepers, because they have this network of information, and they have people they can go to if they need assistance or help (or) guidance... There’s a Tour de Hives, as well. Tour de Beehives. It’s just like Tour de Coops.” Burbank also finds support in a community of like-minded neighbors, with goats of their own. “A bunch of goat people in the neighborhood went to one house last summer and brought our goats for goat daycare/blackberry-eating. For like four weeks.” The life events unfolding on her lawn are also focal points for neighbors, and visitors, alike. When mother goat, Violet, gave birth, “we had like sixty people a day show up to see the babies, and as she was giving birth, there were like 25 people standing around, dead silent, in awe.”



These animals also educate their communities is by clearing up misconceptions. “I think with keeping bees, there’s generally a misnomer that honeybees are a dangerous insect, and they’re going to sting you to death, or people are going to have a serious allergic reaction and die,” says Vetsch. “But honeybees are pretty docile, they don’t really care about you.” Fear seems to be a shared reaction to bees and goats. “They’re not evil,” says Burbank, running her hand through Violet’s thick coat. “We have people come and think that they’re mean, and that they’re going to hurt them.” People also seem to hold onto that image from cartoons, of the goat that will eat anything. “People will come by and throw lettuce in, or throw whole apples in. Their mouths don’t function like that. If you cut apples into slices, they’ll eat them. They love bananas and banana peels,” Burbank says. But even Portland goats have to draw the line somewhere. “Kale they won’t eat.”

Laws aren’t stifling any of this animal action. The Portland region has very relaxed laws, as do most surrounding cities and counties—the urban chicken crusaders saw to that. Would-be chicken, rabbit, duck, dove and pygmy goat owners need no permit for three or fewer animals, in any combination. According to Portland’s animal ordinance webpage, however, any more than that requires a permit, and a \$31 fee. And if you are interested in keeping turkeys, geese, doves, pigeons, peacocks, cows, horses, burros, sheep, llamas or bees, no matter how many of these animals, you need to apply for a permit. With bees and pigeons, there is also a 150 foot perimeter space rule, so a would-be beekeeper must get permission from neighbors in closest proximity to that 150 foot perimeter by going door-to-door, getting signatures on a petition,

Social cache goes along with raising your own food. It’s like, “yeah, I have these pets, but I also am living sustainably.”



and filing it with the county. Chickens, goats, bees: the sense of community maintained by metroscape husbandry aficionados makes most people comfortable about seeking support from their neighbors. It turns out that metro-area Portland is very accepting of urban agriculture and beekeeping. As McClintock points out, “Social cache goes along with raising your own food. It’s like, ‘yeah, I have these pets, but I also am living sustainably.’” That’s signature Portland.

Even though metro-area husbandry is growing in popularity, drawbacks to animal ownership should give would-be urban farmers pause. There’s a misconception that what’s great for one urban farmer is great for all people of Portland: “It’s not so amazingly wonderful that I’m suggesting everyone should always have chickens.” Cleanup seems to be the biggest drag. “Chickens stink when you don’t clean them,” says Copley. “And you have to get up and take care of them in

the middle of winter when it's cold and raining." For Alyssa, the drawbacks include "the reactions from people when you tell them that you're keeping bees—people sometimes will get a little weirded out. They think you're crazy. And getting stung is never fun." The time commitment also should be considered. "The drawback of keeping goats is finding people, if I need to leave town, to wake up at six-in-the-morning and feed them, because they're creatures of habit. You have to be responsible."

Nevertheless, for many, the benefits outweigh any drawbacks, and not all urban animals require intensive time. "It's not like chickens are hard to take care of, or you can't leave town because of them," says Copley. And Melissa Kerry, who works with Alyssa, assures that "you can be a lazy beekeeper." Even the specter of clean up can take a positive spin. "Having to take care of chickens in the winter rain is part of the kids learning to take on that responsibility. Last week, Nora cleaned the cage out instead of James, because I asked him to do it, and he was distracted with something else. Since cleaning is part of his allowance, he didn't get paid as much, but he didn't complain at all—he was mad at himself, but he totally got it. And that's the kind of lesson I'm not sure he gets anywhere else." Sometimes clean-up can be cathartic: "It's manageable. It's like gardening," says Vetsch. "You just have to set aside time for it, and you're going to dread it sometimes, but then, after you're done, after working with the bees, it's always a delight, and you're whole day is changed because of it. There's some sort of calmness that usually comes afterwards, because you have to be calm when you go into the hives. It's a nice addition to the day. Afterwards, I'm happy that I did it, and it gives me confidence, and I'm

excited again." Cleanup can be community-building, too: "When you have to clean the pen, it's a pain," says Burbank, "but even then, people want mulch, so they'll come dig it out for you!"

Emshoff, however, wonders what the long-term effects of added animal waste will have on a city designed with only its people in mind. "This is a city that's got a lot of concrete. We just finished the big pipe project. People say, 'well, you just put it in your compost.' And I'm thinking, 'yeah, this could be nice, but we've built a city with concrete streets, and so growing stuff on that little boulevard next to the curb—which people do—means waste matter. It rains here! A lot! Not everybody's going to be organic in what they do. We learned some tough lessons in the 70s, 80s and 90s about what run-off from fertilizer was doing to trout streams, and killing off lakes. What are the longer-term implications of run off? What if everybody did it? I really don't have answers. I just don't think we've thought about it much. It's just sort of like, 'Portland: things happen.' What's a reasonable expectation of an urban community, in terms of all the systems that have to work? The water system, the trash system, the waste into the water stream, the dead animals—Who really knows?"

Whatever the answer, these animals are likely here to stay, and their presence is already shaping the lives of metroscape inhabitants. **M**

Kurt Spickerman is a freelance writer pursuing a master's degree in technical and professional writing at Portland State University. Kurt was born and raised in the outskirts of Eugene, in the days when peacocks and wild turkeys roamed the streets, and geese freely bit little boy's fingers.