

The Saga of the Guineas and Snakes

Eager to foster wildlife and reduce the grasshopper population in the fields that surround his home on Simms Creek, John O'Keefe, SCWMA member, began raising and maintaining a large Guinea flock a few years ago. Grasshoppers are now non-existent on much of the property, and the Guineas have provided hours of entertainment for John and his family as they have learned about the birds' unusual breeding and survival habits.

As breeders will tell you, though, Guinea hens are not the best moms. Indeed, it's not unusual for a hen to hatch a large clutch only to have the chicks all die of hypothermia in their first early



morning trek through dew laden grass. Meanwhile, predators like owls, hawks, raccoons, and bobcats love dining on Guinea. In order to sustain his flock at between 30 and 50 birds, John began incubating Guinea eggs each spring and summer, rather than relying on natural hatch.

Now, laying Guineas and their mounds of eggs also attract snakes. So John checks his chicken and Guinea house for rat snakes several times a day. In fact, his daughters will tell you he's kind of obsessed with finding and killing rat snakes.

In mid-May, John found a snake in his 10' x 20' Guinea house. It was long and fat. He dispatched it with one dose of instant lead poisoning from the trusty .22 pistol he always carries in his right pants pocket. Upon further inspection the snake looked lumpy. Suspecting the cause, John pulled out his pocket knife and slit open the snake. Slowly, the snake gave up one egg, then two, until a total of eight just swallowed and still warm eggs lay on the ground. An inveterate inventor and experimenter, John carefully placed the eggs in his cap, carried them into his kitchen, washed off the snake goo, labeled them "5/11 S (for snake)" and placed them in an already operating incubator.

Three weeks later, John "candled" the eggs, finding five of eight eggs to be developing. Of the remaining five eggs, three hatched, and two chicks lived—not an unusual hatch ratio for free-ranging Guineas.

About the time of this hatch, John noticed a hen had begun laying in a nest box inside the Guinea house so he began to watch her more closely, as she was undoubtedly going to attract rat snakes.



The very next day, Pat Cantu, came by to see the miracle-rescue Guinea chicks. She is the wife of Rick Cantu who runs the Natural Resources Conservation Service office in Lampasas. As the two entered the Guinea house to check on the sitting hen, their eyes fell on the nest box to her left and a large, coiled rat snake. Much to John's surprise, Pat reached right into the nest box, grabbed the snake by its head, and threw it to the ground outside. And much to Pat's



surprise, John drew his .22 pistol and dispatched another lumpy snake. Another six eggs were extracted, found to be warm, and placed in the incubator. A day later, John killed another lumpy snake, and rescued another eight eggs.



Two morning's later, John discovered that the remaining dozen eggs under the Guinea hen were gone, and he began the snake hunt. About three hours later, he found the long lumpy snake coiled up in a corner under the nest boxes. Sadly, these eggs were cold. All totaled to date, John has or is incubating 21 eggs with the next hatch of 14 expected in mid-July.

The hunt goes on.