



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

by

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SEA AND SAND VERSUS RAIN AND MUD

After an absence of more than two months it was a pleasure to re-connect last week with Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road. I caught up with life on the education working farm and can once again resume my monthly sharing of information through Farm Connection in the Delaware Gazette.

I made an unexpected trip to England last November to support my sister as she dealt with a health issue. She and her husband live in Northumberland, a fertile farming county bordering Scotland. Their small unspoiled village called Bamburgh is dominated by a huge castle and lies beside the North Sea with its offshore bird sanctuaries, long stretches of sandy beach, wide dunes, and public foot paths across the surrounding countryside.

Every day I took time to explore on foot, sometimes giving back to this beautiful community by helping in their efforts to pick up litter left by thoughtless visitors. For once the weather was dry and mild instead of bone chilling damp. My senses seemed heightened and the lack of any hum of traffic was very apparent, as was the uninterrupted 360 degrees view of the sky with its varied cloud formations and colors, even blue! A bench on the highest dune near the castle sported a plaque stating that in 2013 this spot was voted one of the UK's Top Ten Lunch Spots in partnership with Visit England.

During the winter months beef cows and their mature calves graze the dunes under a controlled program to maintain and enhance the wild flowers and grassland. The animals are much bigger than Stratford's, and the size of their cow pies would have our visiting school children in fits of laughter. I was warier than expected the first time I walked beside the cows. I was just giving thanks for safe passage when an enormous white head swung through a tall clump of Marram grass, whose network of underground stems helps stabilize the dunes. I jumped and gave a pathetic scream, but the head simply turned and disappeared in the opposite direction, and I continued to the beach none the worse for my surprise.

My sister's health is improving, and her son flew in to relieve his worries and stay awhile as I left. We were grateful to be together, and the beauty of the area was my bonus. Stratford's winter weather may have been mild at times, but there has been more than normal rainfall and less frozen ground. The pastures, fields of spelt, the corral, and the tractor routes are a sea of mud. What had been lush grazing in November looks a

sodden mess. Farmer Jeff is still allowing the cattle to wander through the fields and graze, but the pregnant sheep and goats remain in the barn. Hay supplies were not brilliant this past year and are dwindling rapidly and we will likely have to buy in. Twenty-one wooly ewes are in lamb and expected to start giving birth later this month. Once again, we shared Delaware Preservation Parks Galant Farm ram, Dodge, to breed with the ewes. Randee Summers, a Development Council Member, has generously loaned us an Oberhasli buck to mate with our five yearling and two 2-year old Toggenburg goats. Kids are expected in late April/May. This week three 2-year old goats were donated to us; a Nubian, a La Mancha and a cross of both. The friendly newcomers are in a small pen with the buck. The La Mancha are all white with tiny ears, quite a contrast to the lop-eared brown Nubian.

The five fattening hogs are scheduled to go to the processors in a week. Only two have reached a marketable but lean 200 lbs. Farmer Jeff is hoping the horned steer, that he was unable to process last fall, will replace the other three hogs. Skunks have been seen in the vicinity of the chickens in the orchard but there have been no losses. Straw has been laid in the most trampled areas, and the chickens are faring and producing well.

One hundred thirty maple trees were tapped on Sunday, February 3 by volunteers, to capture sap during the forecasted warmup after the late January polar vortex. The prediction proved correct and 110 gallons of sap was collected and stored in the evaporator on Tuesday, February 5.

There are plans to tap another 130 trees. Last year production slowed down in early March and the operation was shut down. Another farmer who was still waiting to tap decided to go ahead at that point, and due to the unusual weather pattern last year lucked out and had his best season ever. Who though can predicate the weather? We may stick to tapping in February.

Sap cooking has started and will be in full mode for the Messages program and school tours. Sugar Shack tours for the public are offered next Saturday, February 23, from 10-1 pm., for \$4 per person. Please call to reserve a time. Our annual Pancake breakfast is Saturday, March 2, with seating for 100 adults and children every hour starting at 8:00 am. Please see our web site to register and check our calendar for other events scheduled early this year. As usual there are plenty of opportunities and we look forward to another bustling year. I am glad to be back in the swing of things. Pauline Scott is a farm and nature guide at Stratford Ecological Center, 3083 Liberty Road, Delaware. She can be reached at 740 363 2548 or by email at info@stratfordecologicalcenter.org Website StratfordEcologicalCenter.org