

“Guard” Llamas Helping at an Emu Farm

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On June 13th, 2012 Ken wrote the following story: “Last week an emu farm five miles east of my place called up and wanted to get some guard llamas. A pack of canine critters had gotten through their barrier fence and killed off an entire month’s worth of hatchlings, 60 small birds already about two feet tall. The attack also put about 150 laying hens off their nests, so the farm was losing some big money. I picked two good animals for them; beautiful six-year-old Peach had already proven herself capable of killing coyotes, and two-year-old Dobbin was a crafty little bugger whose second name was Houdini. Within two days they were earning their keep.

Back to today. I had just finished dishes and decided that it was cool enough that I should wear a heavier pair of jeans for making my insect trap rounds when the phone rang. It was Pat, one of the owners of the emu farm. Peach was dead and Dobbin was exhibiting what she called “erratic behavior.” I dropped everything and made turns for Dorset. Dobbin was not exhibiting erratic behavior. Dobbin was flat out in murder mode. Some predators had gotten under the six-foot-high barrier fence, forced open a light wooden gate and attempted an attack on six hens in the farm’s infirmary. Peach and Dobbin got there first. If you’ve never seen an emu, just picture a velociraptor from the movie Jurassic Park, four feet tall, feathered, but with smaller teeth. They have a central toe four inches long ending in a viciously sharp nail. They can inflict serious damage, but their normal method of dealing with a predator is to run away.

Peach and Dobbin went to work. Whatever those critters were, they left large dog-like paw prints and a trail of blood more than 100 feet long. Peach was charging them so hard that when they scrambled through the hole under the fence, Peach smashed into the fence with such force that she pulled two 4x4 wooden posts over and bowed the fence out about three feet. The impact broke her neck. Dobbin was batting cleanup. By the time Pat and her husband got to the scene the predators were gone. They counted beaks and found all of the birds unharmed. Dobbin lead them to Peach’s body and showed them the hole under the fence, but he was still in kill mode. The blood had him all worked up and neither Pat, George, nor their hired hands wanted to try and corral Dobbin. That’s when my phone rang.

When I got there the last of the loose birds were being rounded up. Dobbin had been fenced off in a patch about an acre in size. He recognized my voice and came when I called him, but passing over the blood trail put him right back in fight mode. I pushed him into a corner and tried to get a lead on his halter. That’s when my day turned from caviar and crackers to a shit sandwich. I easily got my arm around his neck in the normal hooking up posture. But when he saw the lead he bolted, dragging me about 20 feet and tearing open one of my fingers. Fresh blood. That’s all he needed to know.

He was on me. He caught me in the left arm, ripping my shirt from shoulder to elbow and striking a perfect blow to my ulnar nerve. So much for being able to use my left arm. He bunched up and went after my legs with his hind feet, two hard hits to each leg, smacked me in the left temple, and then ran back to where Peach's body lay.

And that interesting thirty seconds or so is how I learned that Dobbin is right-handed. I was smart enough to stay down for a few minutes. Well, maybe not so much smart enough to stay down as being unable to get up for a bit. When I was able to stand I wrapped my kerchief around my hand and went in for round two. I got him into a corner again and began the tune mother llamas hum to their crias to comfort them. His ears came up. His eyes stopped flashing around in search of something (me, at this point) to smack up alongside the head. His nostrils returned to relaxed mode. I held out the lead, draping it around my own neck to show him it wasn't a snake or something similar. He let me hook him up. I win, right? Not quite. By this time my left leg had swollen so much that it filled my relaxed fit trouser leg to full capacity. It goes without saying that at that moment I was not in Olympic footrace form. My kerchief was blood soaked and my red corpuscles were liberally scattered across Dobbin's white sides. He decided it was time for round three. Dobbin bolted. Had I been using one of my own halter and lead combinations, Mr. Houdini would have been off for another romp over what remained of my body. Pat and George, however, buy only the best. Instead of a standard half-inch, five-foot lead, they had given me a braided eight foot lead an inch in diameter. That means, among other things, that the spiffy lead can stretch about six inches, and that six inches gave me the chance to snake a double wrap around a convenient fence post. It takes a llama about three feet to go from standing still to Mach two. I had five-and-a-half feet of time during which to locate an anchor, affix said llama to said anchor, and save my sorely abused body from more fun and games. Fight over! Ken wins on a decision, two rounds out of three. I check Dobbin for tissue damage. The only blood visible is my own, but there is one bite mark on Dobbin's right rear leg. Any predator dumb enough to bite a llama on either hind leg is in for a rude surprise. His belly was mildly bloated, the result of having dredged the contents of his third stomach up for many nasty spits. His pulse was at 120. I hummed for him, cradled his head against my chest as I did when he was really small, and stroked his neck for about fifteen minutes. The bloat went away and his pulse dropped to 60. Dobbin was once again a gentleman.

Having done all I could, I loaded my bones into my car and headed for the Fargo VA Emergency Room. Five hours later I was back at the farm. No broken bones, but my left leg looks like I have elephantiasis and I have some really neat patch work on the central digit of my right hand. Go ahead, ask me to show you my finger. I'm sofa-bound for the next three days and have to watch to see if blood flow to my feet fails. Have good pain meds, though -- hydrocodone. Once I am back on my feet I am taking Oscar over for a few days of guard duty at the emu farm. He's already taken on a cougar and won, and a few dying dogs or wolves or coyotes might be just the thing those emu need to see to become comfortable with their new fuzzy friends. Anybody want to buy a llama? Just \$100 will set you up for more fun and exercise than you could get by being George Foreman's sparring partner."