

It is impossible to even estimate the number of workers on a small farm. The farm family, of course, is given the credit if the place is in good order and seemingly in no danger of collapse, and they, too, are responsible if failure occurs and a sale or auction results. But, they aren't the only ones hard at work on a farm. The insects and microorganisms, the earthworms and birds, the rooting of the pigs and the hooves of the livestock—all these beings and many more are laboring hard day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year.

Then, there is the farm cat. Vilified as a bird murderer, the domestic cat is, instead, a necessary worker on a small farm. It is true that most cats will, given the opportunity, catch birds and eat them. It is also true that without cats, farmers sometimes resort to copious amounts of inhumane poisons to protect their crops, barns, and houses. And, there are precautions that can be taken to drastically reduce bird hunting by farm cats.

The farm cat here at Coe Creek is Muzzy. He is a neutered cat, white with a gray tail and gray markings that are primarily on his head. He is one of the hardest workers on the farm. He is also the family member that rests and sleeps the most. I have read that a cat may sleep as many as 20 hours a day. That doesn't leave a lot of working time, so it must be used well.

Muzzy has a fairly dependable routine. He meows to go outside just as night turns into day. His first stop is the woodshed door casing, where he sharpens his claws. Then, he heads to the yard gate, hops up onto the gate post, and jumps down again to head for the horses' round pen. The attraction there is a wood pile. He often finds good hunting in that area. If that location proves to be a disappointment, he goes to the hay barn. This is probably his most reliable hunting ground. Small rodents and cottontail rabbits can get under the posts and boards that keep the 4X4 round bales from standing on bare ground. Muzzy watches at one of several places where he has had good luck, and if conditions and timing are right, he catches a mouse or vole, or even a bunny.

If there is no action in or around the hay barn, there are other hunting grounds. He tries the area around the chicken coop, where spilled feed attracts small creatures. He goes into the sheep shed, or on into the barn. And, he patrols the grassy areas in the barnyard and on the path to Pony and Topsy's pasture.

If Muzzy is successful in his hunting endeavor, he usually brings his catch partway back to the house. Often, I will see him with a mouse or other rodent hanging from his mouth as he comes from the barn. Usually, he will stop and go under the pickup where it is parked in order to eat his prey. I sometimes think he does this to annoy the dogs in the yard that can see him but cannot get beyond the gate.

If, however, Muzzy has caught a shrew or other animal that does not have an appealing flavor, he will bring it into the yard. There, Blue

usually takes it away from him. That happened today. I don't think Muzzy likes to have his victim stolen by a dog, but I am not sure. Perhaps, it is one way of getting rid of a less than tasty catch.

I cannot say that Muzzy never catches and eats a bird. Sometimes, I see him with a small bird, usually a house sparrow, a species all too numerous around the farm. And, once this past summer, he caught a swallow. And, he did eat a whole family of starling babies a year ago. Now, though, I can call him out of the big maple tree when he starts for the nesting area. He is not immune to intimidating talk from me. And, I make sure he is always in the house before dark. No night hunting for Muzzy!

We would be overrun by mice and voles if not for Muzzy. As it is, he has steady work. When he comes in after a hunt, he goes to a comfortable chair or other chosen nest, curls up, and sleeps. That is where he is right now.

