

I don't think we give farm animals—or probably any animals—enough credit for intelligence and even cunning. I have become convinced that they know a lot more than we believe. My experience with the big white rooster has persuaded me that chickens, at least, are really quite smart. This is a continuing saga—the rooster will crow on command. I find him a treat in the garden. A big lettuce is his preferred reward, but he has not refused to perform for other vegetables when there is no overgrown lettuce available. The most interesting part of this story is that I am fully convinced that he now has me trained. If I don't think to tell him to crow, he will, in time, stalk to the fence and crow and then wait for me to come. Then, when I ask him again, he crows immediately.

He is also mean. He would attack me without delay or guilt if I stepped into the chicken yard without my little white pin from a defunct section of electric netting. That is a deterrent, but I dare not turn my back to him. That would invite attack, regardless of our treats-for-crowling detente.

The interaction with the rooster has led me to wonder about other animals' intelligence and reasoning powers. Especially, I have wondered about cattle. Our two milk cows, Halvan and Junie, have a small pasture north of the barn. But, now, when the grass has been well pastured, we will turn them into the lot between our fenced in house yard and the barn. And, it seems to me that they are depositing cowpies strategically.

Now, this may sound strange, but I am fully convinced that they have shown us their position of superiority quite effectively. When we leave our yard in the morning to go to the barn to do chores, there is very often a fresh cowpie on the path we take. It is not always in the same place. One day, we had the pickup parked close to the gate, and we had to walk between it and the fence to access our usual route. Right there as we stepped past the front bumper was a lovely, fresh cowpie. And the day that we had a load of firewood to unload, cow manure graced the spot in front of the woodshed door where we had to step to reach the latch. This morning, one of the cows had left a donation just in front of the door to the hay barn—right where we would step.

Halvan and her daughter, Junie, are never seen leaving us these gifts. By the time we went out the cabin door and left our yard, they were waiting by the big barn for us to open the door. Innocent expressions on two bovine faces as they placidly chewed their cud, they strode into the barn and waited for milking. But, they had obviously “saved up” a little, too, and as they were turned out to pasture again, both made sure to leave a fresh pie on the way, doing their best to get rid of that gift before reaching the door.