

Where did this year go? It seems the snow was just melting and the lambs were just being born, but somehow it jumped to Fall and now Spring again! A year in a blink!! I hope all of you are ready for Spring, after a most interesting Winter!

It has been an interesting year, with plenty to keep the dogs busy. The coyotes once again seem to be coming out of the wood work, and the dogs spend most nights keeping them at bay. That's pretty normal, but a few things lately are not what we consider normal. Grrr flashed by the windows a short time back, sounding off like it was serious. At first we thought he was chasing our cats, which he knows isn't acceptable, but what else could he have trapped under the bus we park near the house? When we went out to check, and I looked under the bus near the front tire, I was lucky that little bobcat didn't take a swipe at my face, just inches away from him! We still can't figure out how it got in so close without creating a huge doggie scene! The poor little guy desperately wanted a meal, and was after one of our turkeys, who outweighed him by over 4 to one! I think even a duck would have been more than he could handle. The kitty was at the point of starvation; probably his mother had been killed, so now we are watching for his litter mates to show up. I guess the dogs knew there wasn't really much a 5 pound emaciated bobcat could do to our critters.

On the other end of the spectrum, we were awakened in the late fall or early winter by serious barking from both dogs that seemed to scream at us, "WE NEED BACK UP!" Both of us got up with flash lights and went out, only to find the dogs not wanting to go past the barn, beyond where our animals were, but looking and barking off into the pasture beyond. I have never seen our dogs unwilling to engage or go out to drive off whatever was threatening. This time, it seemed they really felt outflanked, and we could not see what was even out there. Our stomping around with flashlights and making noise seemed to settle things down for a while, but in the early dawn it started again.

Then we heard it ~ the howl was not from coyotes. We've had wolves before, but usually in the spring, and usually it is a small group of young males. This time, I later learned from a neighbor, it was a group, a pack actually, of wolf hybrids that someone in the area owns, but when she can't afford to feed them, she turns them loose to hunt! There are a minimum of a half dozen of these 'pets' out hunting in the neighborhood. We have heard about them but they have never challenged our dogs before now. In some ways, they are worse than the wild wolves, because they come in close and have no fear of people or 'civilized' places. Our dogs have protected our animals from them the past few nights, doing what Tatras do, using the least force necessary to get the job done. However, this has made us realize we have another issue before us. Our farm will need another dog or pup soon so that these dogs can drop back and let a stronger dog take the lead in defending this farm. That realization is always a sad one for me. Just like spring suddenly becoming fall, our puppies are suddenly into and getting past their prime and it seems to have happened in the blink of an eye.

Both of our dogs are approaching middle age, and have the heart and soul for protecting our farm. Unfortunately, neither dog is built perfectly. Not many are, but there comes a time when

these physical shortcomings prevent the dog from doing what it was born to do. I don't want to tear my dogs down ~ they are great dogs! ~ **but I do want to comment on the importance for breeders, or those contemplating becoming breeders, to pay attention to structure and conformation in their breeding programs, even or especially when they are not breeding for the show ring.**

This protection work is so much harder on the dogs than showing or being the companion dog, but it is what our dogs do and what we want them to do for a good long time. It's not that I didn't understand the importance of structure or a sound body in a working dog before this. It's just that it has been driven it home a bit more. I think we are fortunate that so far our breed has attracted very dedicated and concerned breeders who educate themselves on the strengths and shortcomings of various breeding dogs available, and I hope that will continue to be the case, despite how few dogs we have in the gene pool in this breed.

Watching dogs we love and seeing signs that semi-retirement is in the not too distant future, gives us pause as we also watch the re birth of early spring, with the dogs fawning over the new lambs and protecting the turkeys and geese on their nests:

Where would we be, and how could our farm survive and prosper, if it were not for these great white dogs?