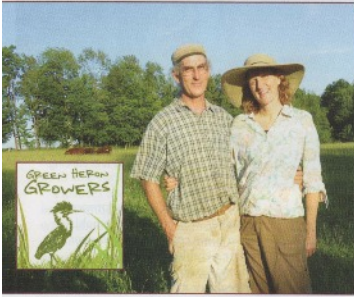


The Heron: Stewardship Through Diversity

Two very different enterprises are integrated to offer a variety of opportunities for people to get to know and appreciate the land.

by Tamara Scully



Steve and Julie Rockcastle

When Julie and Steve Rockcastle returned to her family's western New York state acreage, they were also coming home to a family tradition – the Great Blue Heron Music Festival. The Festival, an annual three-day event held over Independence Day weekend, had been held on the family's property for 22 years.

The Great Blue Heron Music Festival features a wide variety of musical performances, spread across several stages. There is something for everybody.

Kids' activities feature art from recycled products, beaded jewelry making, drumming, yoga, flower crowns and karaoke. Teenagers get creative with tie-dye, hula-hoop and pottery art.

For adults, workshops held during the festival include: yoga; ecstatic dance; drum circles; chanting; old-time jam session; fiddle or banjo lesson; and other such soulful experiences. Their recycling program reduces festival trash, reclaiming 50 percent of the refuse.

The festival has always been merged with the stewardship of the land itself. Existing open fields can accommodate park-



The large shiitake mushroom Julie Rockcastle is showing will soon be harvested and sold in the farm store or at the Williamsville Farmers Market (N.Y.), along with their organic vegetables and chicken and grass-fed beef.

Rockcastle plans to start new chicks early this fall, in an effort to keep a consistent winter supply of eggs for their customers this season.

Rockcastle's broilers are pastured in the "Joel Salatin method," he says – in moveable chicken tractors. They share the pastures with the Devon cattle, "helping to build pasture fertility," Rockcastle said. The poultry is fed certified organic feed.

Getting people on the land

The Heron continues to develop programs "so people can get on the land," Rockcastle said. In keeping with their mission, he and Julie host events such as pasture walks and retreats. He says the August "Night Lights at the Heron" is part beauty, part spiritual experience, as installations throughout the property feature light and music that mesh with the natural beauty of the land.

The campgrounds are open to the public on a call-ahead basis, and weddings and other family events are hosted on the farm. Guests staying on the property are welcomed to participate in supervised farming activities: moving the cows, feeding the chickens, harvesting vegetables from the certified organic farm garden, or collecting the eggs.

"This isn't 'agri-tourism' run amok," he says; "it's low-key agri-education."

Steve and Julie Rockcastle have incorporated mind, body, spirit and soul into The Heron by integrating the functional aspects of the farm (Green Heron Growers) with the positive energy of the annual festival (The Great Blue Heron Festival) and other events that bring visitors to the farm.

Their mission – "hosting events, growing food, and enriching lives" – nicely sums up the philosophy keeping this family's business evolving. ✨

The Heron, www.greenherongrowers.com, 2361 Wait Corners Rd, Panama, NY 14767 716-720-3695

ing and RV camping, while shaded, wooded hillsides are a natural fit for hiking trails and secluded tent camping. A natural bowl in the foothills was the ideal spot for the main stage.

The scenic acreage of lake, woodlands and fields complements the musical elements. Festival participants can reflect on the beauty of sight and sound, renewing their senses and encouraging community, well-being and harmony.

The Rockcastles added a new dimension to the festival – a working, diverse farm known as Green Heron Growers that specializes in certified organic produce, eggs, poultry, shiitake mushrooms and 100 percent grass-fed beef.

Today, that farming enterprise plus the Great Blue Heron Music Festival and its extended event facilities are joined together as The Heron. The Heron continues to combine both farming and festivities, seeking ways to integrate them more closely and organically expand their horizons.

Why the farm?

Steven Rockcastle explains that the couple "moved into the farm part of it" almost by accident. He and Julie sought out "something that we can do that didn't take away from the resources needed for the festival." They wanted to continue the festival's eco-friendly, holistic vibes, complementing the festival without interfering with it.

The first idea to grow shiitake mushrooms came from a visiting friend in 2007, who pointed out that the existing hemlock groves were the perfect natural environment in which

to grow the mushrooms. Since then, the farm has cultivated shiitake mushrooms outdoors, using three foot lengths of hardwood logs.

At first, many of the logs were



The 21-year-old Great Blue Heron Music Festival, held annually on the Green Heron Growers farm around the July 4 holiday, is a combination of art, entertainment and education for both adults and children, topped off with a lot of music and dancing.

red maple, considered a weed tree. They were thinned from the property, which opened the canopy and allowed more desirable cherry trees to thrive. The red maples, however, do not hold up well to fruiting.

The shiitake will only grow on certain specific species of wood, including beech and sugar maple, also harvested from the property. After the logs are inoculated with spores and stacked, they require one year to produce a harvest.

In 2012, Green Heron Growers harvested approximately 800 pounds of mushrooms, a number which Steve said is "going up slowly every year." The success of shiitake production forced the couple to look around, and see what else the idle land could produce.

Adding livestock

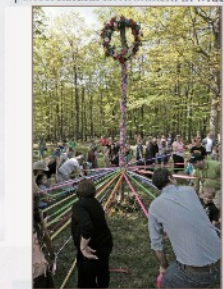
The cows also became part of the farm almost by accident. Julie's father, who is also the

festival's founder and the property caretaker, was mowing the fields when some cows wandered over from a neighboring farm.

Seeing cows on the field sparked the realization – a grazing herd would be an eco-friendly way to maintain the fields. No more mowing.

So, a rotational grazing system was devised. The cows are rotated to fields "in the back, out of the way" during the annual festival or other scheduled events.

Rockcastle, who considers himself a grass farmer, definitely has a connection to the cows. "I name all of them," he said.



That's a lot of naming to do, as the farm now maintains a herd of three dozen primarily Devon cattle. Rockcastle is breeding back with 100 percent Devon semen, using artificial insemination. He chose the Devon breed because of their grazing ability.

Improvised mob grazing

The herd is 100 percent grass-fed, raised on a rotational grazing system, utilizing 50 acres of pas-

supplements year-round. "Because we are 100 percent grass-fed, we process July-December," Rockcastle said. Some meat is kept to sell as retail cuts in their on-farm store, and freezer meat



Visitors are attracted to Night Lights at The Heron from August through October. The unique,



Steve Rockcastle cares for the cage-free, organically fed chicken. After processing, the chickens are sold in their on-farm store, at the farmers market, and through pre-orders.