

Bottom of the Pecking Order



This month our Richard takes on a mighty opponent in the shape of the family cockerel. But will he win?

I WAS DETERMINED NOT TO BE BEATEN BY Captain Bertorelli as I crept through the undergrowth of what passes for our garden. I had concealed myself behind a large clump of stinging nettles. Now was my chance. He was looking away, distracted by an object on the ground.

I stole silently forwards, cat like in my silence. I had almost reached my goal when with a sharp turn of his head he glared at me – and I knew I had to make my escape.

This war has been going on for two years or more. One day the Captain took against me, and the next thing I knew of it was a searing pain in the back of my legs. Blood gushed from the stab wounds.

I had to make for our first aid box and anoint myself with antiseptic medication and plaster over the holes in my leaking skin.

Even though, among men and women, I am considered to be something of a force to be reckoned with (I said something of a force – not much of a force though, it has to be admitted), the animal kingdom does not share that view.

If I so much as look at a dog sitting in a car waiting for its owner, it immediately bares its teeth and lunges at me with such force that it seems most unlikely that the mere toughened glass will provide any protection from the belligerent beast.

Seagulls circling overhead zone in on me and make sure that my hair, my best suit and even my tie are adorned with guano.

A DEFINITION OF

pecking order

a dominance hierarchy, seen especially in domestic poultry, that is maintained by one bird pecking another of lower status.





Domestically it is no better. I have written about our sheep before (see P&F January 2012). What I did not tell you then was when our sweet little lambs (as they now aren't) were born a couple of years back, one of them turned out to be a ram. My wife, who not only has compassion for dumb creatures, but is also never molested by them, decided that a single ram in a field would be lonely (as we cannot keep him with the rest: lambs have not learned the finer elements of the laws against incest). So she acquired another ram to keep him company.

Now these rams have bonded well. Rumour has it that they are applying to become civil partners. They roam around their field in happy companionship, occasionally head butting each other, but otherwise living in almost biblical harmony – until I am sent into the field to feed them.

Then all of a sudden their manliness returns and there is a thunder of little hooves, followed by a thud as the first one butts me hard in the back just above my pelvis. A second or two later I turn round ready to butt him back but they are both munching grass, as if butter (or at least hay) would not melt in their mouths.

Then there are the slimy things, also known as snakes. Tom, my stepson, acquired these long before he went to university. Since then, he was awarded his degree, then started his own business and set up home with his girlfriend in Oxford.

Five years later the snakes have gone nowhere. They sit in his room doing very little, except (probably) a few algebra sums to while away the hours. From time to time they have to be fed dead rats and mice which are mainly acquired from the local pet shop or, rarely, brought in by the cats (ha, the cats. I will come to them in a moment).

To make the snakes eat, the rats and mice have to be dangled in front of their noses – provoking them to hiss

alarmingly and snatch not only at the mice but also my fingers. I have taken to wearing gardening gloves when feeding the snakes. Several of my fingers are now very short.

And so to the cats. We started with Missy and Sebastian, a brother and a sister. Then Missy had a date one night and a few weeks later she had to have an emergency caesarean to deliver her seven kittens (at a weekend and at great expense). It was all so traumatic – and they were so charming – that we eventually could not bring ourselves to send them to new homes.

No guesses about who now gets bossed around by several enormous and well fed cats who insist on the best food that the supermarket can provide and drape themselves on all the most comfortable chairs.

So let us creep back to the world of Captain Bertorelli. He is a cockerel and was named after the colourful Italian Officer in the TV comedy series 'Allo 'Allo. All day long he struts around keeping watch on his harem of two hens. That is until he sees me. All I want to do is collect the eggs, but that is an affront to the Captain (who incidentally has so far, despite his strutting, not been able to fertilise a single egg) and he regards me as a more deadly enemy than a fox or a rat. He entirely overlooks the fact that I am the one who feeds him and his girls.

But he reckoned without my resourcefulness. With a hose in one hand and a water pistol in the other I stopped him in his tracks. Instead he blinked and started pecking nonchalantly as though attacking me could not be further from his mind.

Does that mean that at long last I am no longer bottom of the pecking order? Not on your life. He will repeat the attack tomorrow. And I will have more punctured ankles to show for it. But I do have a Green Goddess fire engine with a very powerful hose cue for you to read yet another of my pieces in P&F (Fire Fire March 2012).