

CLIPPED WINGS

By Sue Jackson

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Seven years ago my sister Jude made her sea change. She moved with her partner to an ex-ostrich farm north of Bendigo. Jude loves animals and before long, ducks, guinea fowl, goats, sheep, horses, maremma dogs – some bought, others rescued – had joined the many different kinds of chickens that free range over the property. But Jude had a problem.

Her silver lace chickens, whose gourmet palette match their exotic appearance, were constantly scaling the fence and marauding her vegie garden. She knew she'd have to do something. Although we'd had chooks in our suburban back yard when we were growing up, and she'd watched Dad clipping their wings, Jude couldn't remember how to do it. So she was reassured to learn from the numerous sites she consulted on the internet that wing clipping was both simple and guaranteed to solve her problem.

With the research phase behind her, Jude phoned to arrange a date for us to implement the action plan. As I've always lived in inner-city Melbourne, you might well question my suitability for the task. But as Jude's Number 1, (well only), willing worker on her organic farm – her own personal WWOOFer – my enthusiasm more than makes up for my inexperience.

One freezing cold morning found us both in her chook shed, her with glasses sliding down her nose as she consulted her notes with one hand and held our first candidate - the struggling and outraged Imelda - with the other. I was

somehow designated to do the deed, gingerly spreading the wing whose ten flight feathers, according to the illustration, should have been easy to identify and clip. Obviously, Imelda hadn't seen the illustration.

We'd been instructed to eliminate stress by covering the head with a towel, but Jude and I were still haggling over which of us should get to wear it. Finally, we tried to offer Imelda the blindfold, but she wasn't having a bar of it.

Jude's research findings had been definitive - with a single wing clipped, the bird would lack the balance needed for flight, and would be grounded for life, or at least until the next moult. I was grateful I could stop at one wing - my clipping skills were proving no match for Imelda's determination.

Finally, red faced and dripping with perspiration, and with the job done, we gratefully released Imelda onto the ground outside. She looked back at us disdainfully, just once, before making a run for the vegie patch. After only a momentary hesitation, and with a curious jumping, hopping, flapping action, she was back on top of the fence again, ready for lunch.

Which goes to show, whatever the research might suggest, sometimes you just can't keep a good bird down.