

Raising and Training Livestock Guardian Dogs

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History



Livestock Guardian Dogs (LGD) has the task to protect (primarily) smaller livestock against predators. LGD breeds are generally “old” breeds. Most breeds originated in mountainous, rugged areas of Europe that were suitable for grazing small livestock. Shepherds needed big powerful protective dogs to keep their sheep and goats safe from predators. Each region, country or even mountain range had its local “breed” that was used to protect the stock. LGD are regarded as a landrace, breeds that were developed due to need. Selection was hard, terrain was rugged and predators fierce. Villagers would often graze their stock on high summer pastures, and then bring them back to the valleys for the winter months. During this transhumance, the dogs would live and move with the sheep and the shepherds.

These breeds were introduced into America and Canada to help prevent livestock predation, but somewhere along the way some information about how to raise and handle these breeds became lost. Many advocated for a complete “hands off” method of raising (no petting, no touching, no attention), however what seems to have been forgotten is that in Europe, these dogs had always been raised under the guidance of a shepherd, with constant supervision, living with the villagers and their families, often taking on the role of property guardians.

Most LGD are large, fairly aggressive and often (not always) white. They live with the stock 24/7/365, they are NOT herding dogs. Many of the raising issues actually arise from the lack of supervision.

Selection

selecting the “right” kind of guardian dog for your situation is important. Consider some of these factors:



- Breed- purebred, mix? Some breeds are close guardians, others more perimeter, some have higher aggression, more athletic, shorter coat, colored
- Health considerations- hips, eyes, elbows
- Cost
- Sex
- Type of work (range, pasture, cut block)
- Predator load
- Sociability
- Number of dogs you need to provide adequate protection.



Your decision to acquire a new pup must be well thought out and timed. Do your research; know what you are looking for, be aware that a pup will be an investment in time and money. Ideally, your pup will be a breed or mix you know will suit your needs, have parents who work on a stock farm, have a sound temperament and body. Collect the pup between 9-12 weeks, make sure the pup is dewormed and vaccinated. Make an appointment with your vet to finish the vaccination and plan a spay or neuter date.



Training

The young pup

Your baby pup has had an initial start in becoming a LGD, as its mother works on a stock farm—she smells like the stock, and your pup has been raised and allowed to interact with the sheep and other stock up until you collect it.

If your pup is to grow up to be a successful guardian it must first learn the basic commands every dog should respond to—it must know its name, walk on a lead, accept being tied up, and come when called.

Before the pup arrives, make a puppy proof kennel or run in among, or adjacent to, the stock it is going to guard as an adult dog. This kennel must be very well fenced and escape proof. It is important that the pup never learns to escape from this pen, so that it grows up not knowing that it can escape from any fenced area. You can allow the puppy access to the stock by making a small puppy door.

The pup must be able to see, smell and hear the livestock at all times and if you have an older dog, to see how that dog interacts with the stock. The stock also needs to become accustomed to the new pup. When you are doing chores around the stock let the pup run free and interact with the animals, under supervision. Correct all unwanted behavior, especially playful behavior towards the livestock -chasing stock, pulling wool, chewing on legs or ears, or barking. Be strict and direct: this is not acceptable behavior. Butt smelling and submissive behavior towards the stock (rolling on back, small squinty eyes, no direct eye contact, moving away) is appropriate behavior in a young pup. It is your job to protect the



pup from stock that will hurt or bully it. To start out, give the pup a few quiet, older, non-aggressive and also non-playful stock to bond to. Young playful stock will encourage chase behavior. The pup needs to feel safe and confident with the animals in order to bond with them. A hurt pup will become fearful and may either run away or react aggressively. The pup also needs to learn to respect the stock and not just barge through them. Often an older, well trained guardian dog will teach the pup manners but if you do not have such a dog it is up to you to teach it the rules of interaction.

Most problems with LGDs arise if they are not supervised enough, allowing bad traits to develop. As the pup grows, allow it more space and interaction with the stock, but remember that it is not a guardian dog until it is at least two years old. (As a rough guide, compare each month in age of the pup to one year in a child. You would also not expect a nine year old child to have to protect your home from intruders. You cannot

expect that from a nine month old pup either!)



I believe in interaction with your LGD to help create a bond with you, the dog and the livestock. I do **not** believe in half feral guardian dogs that cannot be handled. However, all the interaction with the dog has to take place at the stock. Its life is centered around the livestock. Do not bring the pup to the house for playtime as this will encourage it to leave the sheep to look for a good time away from the stock. Take it for walks, but only in the sheep and stock pastures so that it knows the boundaries. All these tips will help teach your dog to stay with the stock, in the pastures.

Don't let a young dog make mistakes; make the right thing easy to do. Spend about 10 to 15 minutes, three to four times a day, "working" with it.

The older pup (five months to adolescence)

If you have reliable, non-aggressive stock, you can greatly stimulate the bonding process by placing the young dog in a small pasture with a few ewes/goats/rams, under supervision to prevent the pup "playing" with the stock. A guardian dog should not be raised with young lambs or a bottle animal, as the pup outgrows these lambs very quickly, becoming too strong and rough in its interactions with the lambs. Older and larger animals that treat the pup kindly but do not accept any rough behaviour are preferred.

Normally the pup can be left unsupervised with the stock at around six to eight months, but use your own judgment. It is a good sign when the pup stays behind with the sheep when you leave. A young, four to six month old pup left in a distant pasture can easily become a target for predators and is defenseless against them. The pup could also feel





abandoned, encouraging it to look for a way to escape back to the farm, yard or even to other dogs.

Teach the pup to respect electric fencing when it is about six months old. Place the sheep and dog in a small pasture surrounded by electric sheep fencing, walk away (keeping an eye on things) and leave the pup to learn that the fence can hurt. You do not want the pup to associate the fence with you.

Teach the pup not to barge through gates, but to wait until invited to leave or to follow the stock out. It is vitally important that your dog stays on your farm, for your neighbour's sake and your own, so learning to respect fences is important. The dog must never figure out that it can escape. If you have other dogs that roam, they will teach the pup to in half feral guardian dogs that cannot be handled. However, all the interaction with the dog has to take place at the sheep. Its life is centered on the livestock. Do not bring the pup to the house for playtime as this will encourage it to leave the sheep to look for a good time away from the stock. Take it for walks, but only in the sheep and stock pastures so that it knows the boundaries. go roaming and together they could become problematic. Should the pup escape or wander too far away, reprimand it and send it back to the stock. Once it is back where it should be, calm down—then go and fix the fence!

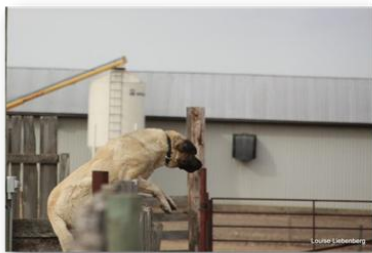
Remember, the pup is allowed to patrol the pasture perimeter as part of its guarding duties. However, the perimeter of the pasture is not two miles away at the neighbor's farm.

Warn people and sign post your property that you have a guardian dog on patrol.



The adolescent (anywhere from eight months to 18 months old)

The pup (like a human child) will go through puberty. This can happen any time from eight months old until two years of age. During this phase you can expect a whole range of unwanted behaviors', as he often stops being a reliable dog and becomes rough with the stock— wool pulling, chasing, chewing ears, escaping, and so on. Go back to placing the teenager under close supervision and chaining him (in the pasture with the stock) when you are not around. He may need a drag or dangle stick for a while until this phase passes. Try to be understanding of this pubescent behavior but be firm and consistent. Secure him at night, and work with him during the day. While barking is the first line of defense—guardian dogs bark at everything they regard as unusual, new or out of place—nuisance barking does need correcting. Through learning and experience, the dog will come to know what and what not to bark at. The adult If all has gone well you now have a reliable, balanced and calm guardian dog. Remember that most guardian dogs take about two years to mature, so consider starting another pup in good time.



Other training considerations

Feeding

Always feed the pup in its own area away from the stock. Sheep and goats seem to love dog food and will bully the pup away from his feed, resulting in unwanted food aggression behavior. The dog needs its own space to rest and eat. I like to feed my dogs a large portion of their diet in the form of raw meaty bones and offal, but I do supplement with commercial dog food a number of days in the week.



Lambing



Your young guardian dog is not ready to be around newborns, baby lambs and kids. Interaction with these babies should only be allowed once it is reliable with the stock and has matured, normally after two years. The sight and smell of blood and afterbirths could encourage inappropriate behavior, so only mature and trustworthy dogs should be around during birthing. Introduce the young dog to lambs, but under supervision. **NO BABIES WITH BABIES**

Handy things your guardian dog should know

- Travelling and going to various places with the flock
- Staying behind electric nets
- Being moved between groups of sheep and other stock
- Working with other dogs in different groups
- Allowing herding dogs to work the stock



Warning signs

No dog escalates from nothing to killing in a moment; there are always warning signs.

Watch for these signs:

- Dog being rude
- Barging through stock
- Snapping or growling at stock
- Tufts of wool on the sheep
- Stock panting, cornered
- Staring, stalking, or “eyeing” stock



- Paws on stock
- Leg nipping
- Barking at stock
- Play bowing at the stock
- Over-interest in a certain animal—staring, stalking, keeping it separated from flock

What behavior does the dog display when reprimanded? Is it silly, goofy, playful, disrespectful of you, fearful? Does it barge into you or nip you? How your dog treats you is also often a hint of what he will do with the stock.

Injuring or killing stock most often happens during rough play. The animals most often injured are young, sick, old or new animals. It is always good stock management to remove such animals from the herd and away from the young dog.

Good signs

These include:

- Soft eyes
- Respect to the stock
- Politeness
- Walking quietly through the flock
- Submissiveness (licking mouth, moving out the way)
- Lying close to the stock
- Calmness
- Butt smelling
- Following sheep out to the pastures
- Interest but not over-interest
- Stops unwanted behaviour immediately and shows “remorse” when reprimanded



Economics

A well raised LGD is an investment in your ranching business. LDGs provide 24 hour surveillance and are regarded as one of the best predation deterrents. The Alberta government manual “Coyote Predation Control Manual and Study Guide” states: *“The first consideration, when conflict exists between livestock and coyotes, is the management of livestock to prevent situations that induce or invite predation. Sound husbandry practices reduce interactions between livestock and coyotes. Land use practices must be analyzed and the best use patterns considered before coyote conflicts arise.”*

It goes on to describe other ways to reduce coyote predation, but concludes that: *“Guard dogs are the most useful tool for reducing livestock losses to predators.”*



The cheapest option is often to buy a pup and raise it yourself. Buying a well started dog will cost you more, but will require less immediate input from you. If you opt to buy an adult dog, remember that, as is the case with a good stock dog, good LDGs don't come cheap. Be careful where you buy it from. Most good guardian dogs do not get sold unless the rancher is quitting, moving or giving up the sheep business. Older dogs are offered on sites like Kijiji because they were either not raised well or have become problem dogs.



Beware

A last piece of advice: if you do use other forms of lethal predator control please consider that poisons like 1080 and snares are deadly to dogs. Anyone using guardian dogs should not consider using these options. The well trained and good working guard dog is too valuable to be lost in such a way.

Your expectations

May need to be adjusted, you cannot expect:

- A LGD to be fully working under 2 years of age
- A pup to work the lambing/kidding shift
- To respect fences, if it has never been taught
- To not go roaming
- To be efficient in protecting the herd if there is only one dog working
- To guard a huge pasture, or large numbers of animals alone
- To be the only predator control implemented on the ranch
- To work with poor feeding, health issues, pain
- To not bark
- To like the neighbors dog and then have to hunt down coyotes
- To stay out in the pastures, when as a pup it was allowed to hang out on the deck
- To do a job is was not bred to do



More predator control options:

Guardian dogs are not the only form predator control you can utilize. In fact, the best approach to predator control is to use an integrated approach. Being proactive about predator management is the best solution to predation issues. Having a predator management plan in place (that is, another topic for another time) and looking at various other options would greatly reduce the chance of predation.

Some options could include:

Aversion	Exclusion	Management	Human Activity	Guardian Animals	Terrain
Bangers Rag Boxes Fox Lights Taste aversion	Fencing Electric Fencing Flady Turbo Fladry	Birthing times Night Corralling Removal of sick and weak Breeding Hay predation Rodent control Elk Carcass Disposal	Range riders Shepherding Hunting Text messages	Dogs Donkeys Llamas Multi species grazing Mixed age groups	Removal of brushy piles Sub dividing water courses Proximity to dump Pasture rotation

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