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Livestock Guarding Dogs

In America, coyote and dog control will cost taxpayers more than thirty million dollars this year, but producers still lose a million and a half sheep every year to canines. Poisons, traps, fences, chemicals, and special guns keep some of these predators away, but many of these methods are environmentally unacceptable and dangerous. Most technological solutions to the predator problem are too expensive for the small-scale or family farmer.

In much of Europe, Asia Minor, and southern parts of the former USSR into Tibet where predators still exist, many breeds of dogs, such as the Great Pyrenees, Maremma, Russian Ovcharka, Shar Planinetz, Anatolian Shepherd, Komondor, Kuvasz, and Tibetan mastiff, still work guarding sheep today. In 1976, Dr. Raymond Coppinger began research on the use of these dogs for guarding livestock in the U.S., and imported several of these breeds for study.

Research showed that there was no great mystery in raising and training guarding dogs. You simply isolate and raise the pup with the livestock you want them to guard, minimizing social interaction with the pup so it will not bond with humans, and it will grow up treating the flock, or herd, as part of its pack. However, not all guarding dogs are good guarding dogs, and finding a good one can be tricky. If you have a herding dog that won't herd, or a retriever that won't retrieve, no real harm is done. However, if you buy a guarding dog that turns out to be a predator, you have a serious problem on your hands.

True sheep guarding dogs are just about the opposite of herding dogs. Herders are quick, responsive, energetic dogs which have seemingly infinite drive to show modified predatory behavior — i.e., to herd. (A full predatory sequence is: give eye, stalk, chase, catch, kill and eat; herding is modified such that the dog will give eye, stalk, chase, and then loop back to eye.) Guarding dogs are placid, reserved, and work alone without supervision. They do not respond well to commands, or do so slowly. They do not control the flock, they simply guard it. Guarding dogs are also much larger than herders. However, in most situations their resounding bark is more than enough to drive off any trespassers.

One behavior seen in guarding dogs which is rare in other breeds is “following” — staying close to the livestock wherever the herd goes, a juvenile characteristic similar to the way a puppy stays near its master. Typically used with sheep, these dogs just meander with the flock, at a distance, looking just like another sheep. When predators approach the herd the dogs respond with a barrage of barks and threats, driving the predator away. Good guarding dogs don't chase after the intruder, but remain close to their flock.

A good guarding dog must:

- not chase or kill sheep
- follow the sheep around, unsupervised, 24 hours a day
- protect the flock from predators

Testimonials for the usefulness of these dogs run high. In New Hampshire, two Pyrenees guard a variety of sheep, goats and cows. Farms all around had large losses due to domestic dogs and the Eastern coyote, but no losses occurred where the Pyrenees lived. They even kept the raccoons out of the corn! A rancher in Arkansas with a thousand sheep had been losing several lambs a night. With a Shar and a Maremma on guard, there were no more losses from coyotes and the sheep did not even have to be driven in at night.

Daphne, Wolf Park's Italian Maremma, was used between 1987 and 1997 to protect a flock of sheep which lived on the grounds. Her accomplishments included protecting her flock from Wild Bill the coyote, Kuro, a lone male wolf, and Sierra — all of whom accidentally got in with the sheep at one time or another. In no instance were any animals seriously hurt. Daphne's barks and threats were more than sufficient to drive the predator safely away. In Sierra's case, she did bite one of the sheep and was bitten, we think, by Dieter, Daphne's son.