

Understanding Livestock Guardian Dogs



by Emily Clement

Purpose

Protecting our livestock when they are most vulnerable is something we all desire to do well. Nights are long and sometimes cold and rainy, and predators are always abundant. Protection of your livestock is unrivaled with experienced livestock guardian dogs (LGDs). Primarily, LGDs are used to protect sheep, goats, and chickens. Understanding the needs, wants, and natural behaviors of these working dogs is important in building a mutually beneficial relationship. They can be invaluable by protecting your livestock when you cannot.

The purpose of LGDs is spelled out clearly in their name; they are guardians. They are not herding dogs (see comparison

diagram). They are not typical indoor/outdoor pets. The same traits that make them awesome guardians also make them unsuitable and frankly, unhappy, as a family pet. Giving a LGD more than one job (work and a pet) can be confusing and may result in unsatisfactorily performing either task.

Their protection is carried out in one or a combination of the following three strategies: confrontation, disruption, and exclusion. They may confront perceived predators and either intimidate them or, if necessary, attack to kill. They can disrupt the predator's hunting behavior with their presence (large dogs), and by their patrolling and deep, loud warning barks. LGDs also scent-mark the territory as being inhabited by a canine, thus excluding other canines, such as coyotes and wolves (Bommel, 2010).

Choosing a Breed

- Common Breeds for LGDs include:
- Great Pyrenees
- Anatolian Shepherd
- Kuvaz
- Akbash
- Maremma
- Tibetan Mastiff
- Mixes of the above
- Several others

Identify your needs and your dog handling and training abilities (be honest). Research the behavioral and working characteristics of any of the LGD breeds of interest. Each of the many breeds has their own social and aggressiveness tendencies. Just as you would look into any investment for your farm, such as a truck, fencing, or



- How experienced am I as a dog handler?
- How much work am I willing to put into this animal?
- Do I need one, two, or more LGDs for my space and threat(s)?

Training

A working LGD is not a house dog or typical family pet, nor do the same training techniques apply. In LGD relationships, the human acts as more of a facilitator for the dog's strongly ingrained natural instinct to bond and guard livestock. As mentioned in the diagram, LGDs are naturally independent thinkers. This is why we can leave them to watch over our livestock. Their independent nature can present "training" challenges. These dogs stay with "their livestock" 24/7 starting at birth. A sound LGD is raised, from birth, with the livestock species it will protect. It is where they desire to be and where they are needed, not in the house. These dogs value their livestock as social companions and will defend them, fiercely, against anything they view as a threat. Socialization with the humans they will regularly come into contact with is important for the safety of you, the dogs, and any visitors. Basic training and obedience must be established for the welfare of all parties. The socialization of LGDs differs from "pet" dogs in that you must acknowledge the dog's natural ability and strong desire to think independently. This should be respected and incorporated in training.

It is important that you are able to handle your dog (leash, brush, examine, and give medication) as well as them understand basic commands like "sit", "come", "stay". You can achieve this by reinforcing the correct behaviors with trust building rewards, such as verbal praise, petting, or a treat. Unfortunately, many LGDs are not food-motivated and training relies on the handling skills of the human, rather than a treat reward. Heavy handed, aggressive, or physically threatening (hitting, yanking, kicking, yelling) techniques will backfire with these animals because it relays to the dog that you are out of control, untrustworthy, and a possible threat.

Most LGDs are not "beginner" dogs due to their independent nature. Acquiring an older and experienced LGD is a good option for someone just beginning LGD utilization. The reason is two-fold: experienced dog (s) are already bonded to livestock and they have proven their safety and trustworthiness as a guardian. If younger dogs are acquired later,

then older, already established dogs, can be more effective than humans than training young dogs.

Feeding

"You get out what you put in" is just as true for your LGD as it is for your livestock. These dogs need to be fed high-quality food for their weight and life stage (puppy, adult, senior). Keeping dogs leaner rather than heavier is important for longevity. Check your dog's body condition score at least once a month and adjust the feed as necessary. Feeding adults once daily away from the herd (while you are present) is a great way to form a positive relationship and mold good behaviors since they must depend on you for their food. It is ill-advised to free-feed as it invites varmints as well as food guarding behaviors that are less than desirable.

Health Concerns

Exams and Vaccinations

All dogs need an annual exam by a veterinarian to ensure their health. At that time, discuss with your vet the animal's particular needs and potential exposures to determine which vaccines are needed. They are protecting the livestock from predators and sometimes getting into physical altercations. This potentially exposes LGDs to rabies, which is preventable with vaccination. Several other diseases, such as distemper, to which they may be exposed to through their contact with wild life and stray or roaming

irrigation system, you also need to research about which breed of LGD is right for your particular needs. Speak to breeders and breed associations as well as other people utilizing LGDs before you make your final decision. The least expensive or closest pup may not be the best choice for your particular situation. Putting in the work researching what is right for your situation sets you, the dog, and your livestock up for success. A LGD is an investment to protect your investments.

Questions to help you in your search for a dog that is right for your situation:

- What is my threat: People? Predators? Both?
- Will strangers come in contact with the dog frequently? Will children be unsupervised?





dogs are also preventable with appropriate vaccination.

Parasites and Prevention

Internal and external parasites affect the dog's comfort as well as health. Some of these parasites are zoonotic, such as roundworms, meaning can be spread to humans. Dogs need protection from fleas and ticks, which are not

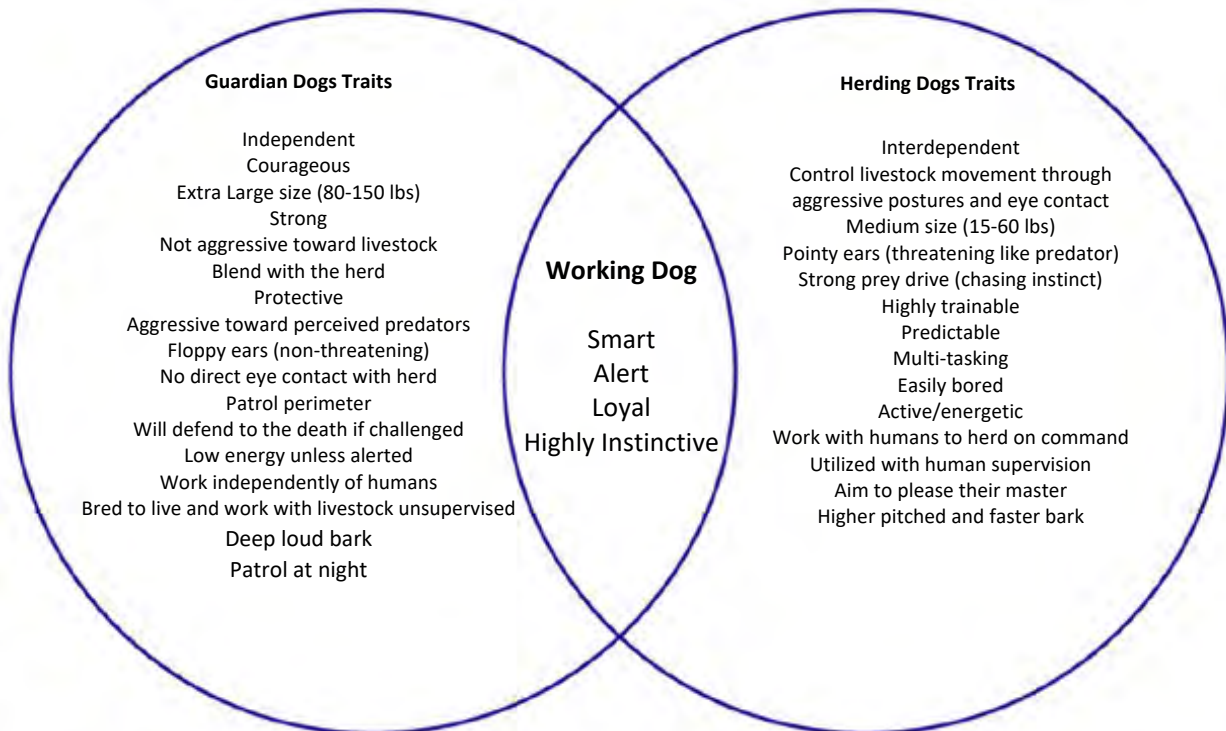
only irritating and cause skin issues, but they also carry diseases that can be debilitating. These are avoidable with regular use of preventatives (flea, tick, and heartworm) that interrupt the parasite's lifecycle. Dogs are highly susceptible to heartworm disease, which is acquired through a mosquito bite. Since mosquitos are everywhere, LGDs are constantly at risk. To prevent this deadly

disease, the dog must first be tested through a simple blood test from the veterinarian to be sure they are free of heartworms. Then, if the results indicate the dog is not infected with heartworm, the vet will prescribe medication that can be administered at regular intervals (monthly or every 6 months) to prevent heartworm infection in your dog. The added bonus to monthly heartworm preventatives is that they also cover a wide range of gastrointestinal parasites, some of which are transmissible to humans. In our climate, year-round protection against parasites is needed.

Spay/Neuter

A LGD can roam, especially if hormonally driven. A male's roaming instinct as well as their risk for serious medical conditions is diminished with neutering. Unspayed females will continue to cycle, which may attract other canines to your property. These other canines may not only possibly impregnate your female LGD, but they also put your livestock at risk. Breeding animals should be a purposeful act of two sound genetic lines to either carry on or improve characteristics. Unplanned or accidental breeding of intact LGDs is irresponsible and only adds to pet overpopulation problem in our country. Intact/unspayed females are at risk of life threatening diseases such as reproductive tissue cancers and infections, which are preventable with

Comparison of Typical Traits of Livestock Guardian Dogs and Herding Dogs Traits



spaying. In addition, spayed/neutered animals can focus on their job since they are not battling their own hormonal triggers or raising puppies. If LGDs are kept intact for breeding purposes, their movements must be controlled and restricted to avoid unplanned or accidental litters.

Grooming

Most LGDs have double coats consisting of the top, longer “guard” hairs that protect them from the sun, insect bites, and the environment and the undercoat, which is shorter, thicker, and woolier and insulates and protects them in cooler weather. The shorter- and flatter- (less woolly) coated dogs need less time commitment from you to groom them. Breeds that have longer fur and/or are double-coated will require regular brushing and grooming to avoid underlying skin problems, like rashes and infection, due to matting.

Dewclaws

LGDs, especially Great Pyrenees and Pyrenees mixes, have double dewclaws. Dewclaws are either firmly attached to the limb or are floppy. Unlike the other nails, since they do not touch the ground as much, if at all, the nails on dewclaws continue to grow without being worn down from ground contact. Often, they cause no problem to the animal, but care must be taken to check them on a regular basis (monthly is ideal) and trim them, if necessary, to avoid problems.

Ears

LGDs have floppy ears, which can make them prone to ear infections. Ear infections have numerous causes ranging from trapped moisture to allergies and even mites. Signs such as head shaking, pawing at the ear, and even a slight head tilt can alert you to a possible ear infection. Mites, yeast, or bacterial infections each have different treatments and need to be diagnosed by your veterinarian by microscopic examination to ensure proper treatment. If any of these signs or symptoms are noted, a diagnosis by a veterinarian will ensure the correct treatment, saving you time, money, and the animal's discomfort.

Food and Shelter

Although LGDs do not typically utilize a dog house since they prefer to stay with their stock, they need protection from the elements should they choose to seek it. Food is usually fed once a day. Feeding time is an opportunity for consistent training and conditioning. It is time the animal is focused on you and the food. Use this time to observe any abnormalities (appetite, demeanor, obvious lumps, bumps or limping). Water must be provided at all times for the guardian dogs as well as their livestock. They are unable to function optimally without consuming adequate water. Self-feeders can be a source of problems ranging from food aggression to attracting varmints and mold.

Containment and Safety

Dogs need good fences to keep them contained. LGDs are large dogs with the ability to jump over, climb under, and find weaknesses in fences. They can be trained to respect electric fencing. Because fencing will occasionally fail, due to electricity shorting out or power failures, and dogs will be dogs, it is imperative for the safety of your LGD as well as your livestock and for the safe return of your pet that your dogs have identification on them (collar and tag) and, ideally, a microchip implanted (with your updated phone number on record).

We will provide in-depth information on the following topics in future issues: Healthcare; Feeding, Vaccines, Maintenance, and Training and Behavior of LGDs.

Reference

Bommel, L. V. (2010). *Guardian Dogs: Best Practice Manual for the Use of Livestock Guardian Dogs*. Retrieved Feb 8, 2019 from PestSmart: <https://www.invasiveanimals.com/research/goals/goal-1/1t5e/>

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