

## Livestock Guardian Dogs: Myths Dispelled

When most visitors enter the driveway at Red Gate Farm, the first thing they notice are the intimidatingly large, white dogs running around the pastures. Most visitors are surprised to learn that these dogs have a very important job protecting the livestock, gardens, and orchards. When I first began raising livestock almost 20 years ago, I experienced high losses to predation. After I married and my husband and I decided to farm, we researched options that would help protect our livestock and poultry from predators in our area.

There are 3 basic options to protect livestock from predation: physical barriers like good fencing, psychological barriers such as electric fencing, and livestock guardian animals. Some might argue in favor of a 4th method, but since most of us don't have time to sit with our .22 at the ready, the first 3 methods tend to be preferable. We actually tried each option over the years, searching for the perfect protector of our livestock. We tried field fence, 2x4 perimeter fence, electric netting and wire, installing fencing below ground, a guard donkey, and even a .22 on occasion. Every option has its advantages and disadvantages, but once we experienced the amazing skill of a good livestock guardian dog, our search ended!

Dogs are predators, and large dogs have little risk of being attacked or killed by other predators. Because dogs are carnivores, most have a high prey drive. Over the centuries, selective breeding has allowed livestock raisers to capitalize on dogs' strengths and cull out undesirable traits. Such breeding has produced dogs that thrive in their native climates, with a lower prey drive, while maintaining a fierce devotion to its pack. While there are differences between breeds of livestock guardian dogs (LGDs), they all have a common purpose—to bond with and protect livestock and their assigned territories. They must be of independent mind, able to think for themselves, be somewhat self-sufficient, possess the skills required to guard, and protect with little to no instruction or supervision from the human master. The most well known breed is the Great Pyrenees, but others include the Akbash, Anatolian Shepherd, Komondor, Kuvasz, Maremma, Colorado Mountain Dog, and roughly 30 other lesser known breeds around the world. Information about any of these breeds can be found in several livestock guardian dog books, AKC publications, and internet searches.

Unfortunately, livestock guardian dogs often develop a bad reputation, most often due to misinformed owners. There are a few myths and "half-truths" we have encountered numerous times over the years, which are the focus of this article.

***Myth #1: A young livestock guardian puppy should be turned out with livestock and never handled, or it won't guard.*** This myth has absolutely no truth. I have trained dogs for many years, and have yet to find a dog that was ruined by positive, early human interaction. Certainly, many pups have matured into successful guardians without human handling. However, I have encountered far more situations where the lack of interaction became the reason the dog was later despised. There will come a time when an injury may require treatment, the dog will need vaccines, or perhaps the dog will need to be moved to a different pasture. A dog will only be receptive to handling if it was taught to accept handling. If the dog doesn't view you as an accepted member of his herd, then you will not be trusted. Interaction can be a regular pat on the head, an irresistible treat, a belly rub, or a periodic grooming. These short moments of time can go a long way to helping the dog tolerate handling when required.

***Myth #2: A young puppy should be raised in the house, or at least brought in at night.***

I've heard many variations of this myth, but you get the idea. Mind you, I have had an indoor companion dog my whole life. Individual breeds of dogs were bred for a purpose—some to be companions, others to do a specific job. Livestock guardian dogs were bred to thrive outdoors. The dog cannot guard livestock if doesn't live with the livestock. A caveat to Myth #1 is that, although interaction is important, you do want to avoid turning the dog into a companion for humans. If the pup is raised indoors, even at night, and bonds closely to his human handlers, then the bond with the livestock can be affected. When forced outside, it may mourn the absence of his humans and not guard. There must be a balance between no interaction and turning it into a needy pet.

***Myth #3: A livestock guardian puppy can be turned out with livestock, and its instincts will tell it what to do.*** Although partly true, such a belief sets many pups up for failure. LGD pups grow very quickly, and are often instinctually guarding livestock by the time they are 8 months of age. They are slower to mature mentally though, and don't develop confidence in their skills until much later. This confidence can be destroyed if a pup is expected to guard aggressive animals too early. A common mistake we have encountered is when a newly weaned pup is put with a herd of goats. There are often dominant "bully" goats in the herd that will charge and head-butt a young pup and potentially even injure it. I have seen potentially great guardian dogs that learn to fear larger livestock for the rest of their lives. This problem can be easily prevented by giving the pup a safe area inaccessible to the livestock. Even the youngest pup can then explore and mingle with the herd as it feels comfortable.

***Myth #4: You don't have to feed a LGD. It can fend for itself.*** Much like #3, this is partly true, and has worked for many ranchers. Again, though, this method can backfire. The LGD must eat, and will favor self-preservation. They will protect the livestock and focus their diet on wild prey as much as possible, but if wild prey is limited, it is not unheard of for a LGD to kill and eat a weaker member of the livestock herd—typically a newborn. A factor worth noting is the instinct of a LGD—even a well-fed one—to clean up its territory from any carrion that might attract predators. As a result, if one of the livestock dies naturally or a birth results in a still-born fetus, then the LGD may instinctively eat as much of the carcass as it can. An owner must be careful at these times to avoid assuming the LGD killed the animal. Sadly, it's not unheard of for a great LGD to be shot on the spot when caught eating a livestock carcass, with little thought or investigation into the actual cause of death.

***Myth #5: LGD's don't need any training.*** If you are turning the dog out with a herd of cattle, in open range with room to roam, where it won't see many human visitors, then the instincts of the dog will often allow it to mature into a good protector of the herd. Farms and homesteads have gotten smaller in recent decades, though, meaning we now expect more of LGD's. A common scenario today would be a small farm, often less than 20 acres, with maybe a few cattle, some horses, a flock of chickens, some dairy goats, close neighbors, a few children, or frequent visitors to the farm. This is a very different situation than open range, and requires a very different approach for the LGD to be successful. Every farm is different in its needs, but to give you an example, our dogs are taught basic commands such as "Sit," "Stay," and "Come." They are also taught to walk on a leash, allow me to touch and handle them all over, to not jump on people, and to remain within their fenced boundary. These are very basic expectations, and the dogs tend to learn quickly. It makes the LGD more enjoyable to work with on a smaller farm. In small farm situations, it is advisable to do some training to prevent problems and reduce liability.

**Myth #6: LGDs bark all the time, and never do well on a small farm.** To simplify the facts, LGD's protect through aggression (fighting) or by warning (barking). Many LGD owners choose their breed based primarily on which protection method they value more. On a thousand-acre mountain ranch, it would be impossible for the LGD to patrol the entire perimeter of the ranch, so instead, it stays with the herd and protects if intruders come near the herd. On the other hand, on a smaller acreage, a more aggressive dog might be a liability. Thus, barking would be the preferred method of protection, to prevent the predator from ever coming in the pasture to begin with. Unlike bored, "yappy" pets, however, LGDs that are actively guarding only bark with a purpose, and that is to warn away a perceived threat. The "annoyed-neighbor" factor can become an issue when the perceived threat is every bird, squirrel, and leaf blowing in the forest! Thus, some training will help guide and direct the dog's barking to times that are most appropriate. There are also differences among individual dogs, so a small farm can seek a less-vocal puppy to help decrease the chance of excessive barking later. We've also "bought" our neighbor's tolerance with eggs from our free-range hens or plowing their lane in the winter.

**Myth #7: LGD's kill poultry.** Because LGD's have a low prey drive and killing is not something they enjoy, LGD's rarely kill poultry intentionally—especially when they are young and learning. More often, a pup goes through a playful phase and discovers that birds are "fun" if chased and pounced on. I have watched adolescent pups and inexperienced dogs catch a chicken, and then have no idea what to do with it. Often, they will begin to lick or chew on it like any dog toy, but of course, this results in the chicken's demise. Once the chicken dies, the dog's instincts take over, and it may eat the carcass to clean up its territory. Of course, the dog is a carnivore, so if this behavior is allowed to continue, the chicken will eventually be viewed as a food source. Once that happens, it will become very difficult to change the behavior. Fortunately, this is usually an easy issue to prevent or correct, as long as the owner is observant and doesn't allow it to become a habit. There are several training techniques people have used successfully, and countless dogs have proven themselves to be excellent poultry guardians. In fact, most of the LGD pups we place go to small farms that desire to free-range poultry, and because of the guidance we offer the new owners, the pups are set up for success from the very beginning. It is worth noting, too, that older dogs can also be taught to guard poultry quite easily. In my experience, they often learn faster, assuming they haven't developed bad habits to begin with.

**Myth #8: You really need more than one LGD.** This belief is accurate when the farm or ranch contains many acres or for farms that have an existing problem with very large predators. In the event a large predator such as a bear, cougar, or pack of wolves were to attack, then more than one dog would be required to win a physical altercation. However, on smaller farms or areas where small predators are the concern, one dog is usually sufficient. Predators tend to seek out the easiest prey. If your livestock are protected by a large, threatening dog, then most predators will seek out another farm with less protection or an area more populated with wildlife. When we farmed in the high plains of Colorado, we started with a single dog. Our neighbors, less than 1/4 mile away lost livestock to raccoon, coyote, fox, and even bear. We never lost a single animal within our LGD's perimeter. In addition, one night, her intimidating, alerting bark prevented the theft of our goat herd by a small group of trouble-seeking humans (they confessed after being arrested). That all being said, certainly every dog enjoys another dog for companionship. However, you should be prepared for some serious fights between the dogs as time passes, as they occasionally remind each other of their position in the pack. Note that they are only fighting for dominance, and these altercations rarely result in serious injury.

LGD's are truly amazing animals. I always enjoy walking into my pasture and watching them. They usually greet me when I enter the gate, then return to their work, communicating silently, with each knowing what its duty entails. I rest easier at night knowing my dogs are on duty, protecting my livestock from predation and my crops from thieving critters. It is important to remember, however, that even the best LGD is still a dog. Too many new owners have unrealistic expectations for these animals, which sets the dog up to fail from the start. Furthermore, just because a dog is of a LGD breed, doesn't necessarily guarantee it will mature into a successful guardian. The sad fact is, there are some that are just too aggressive, too rough, or too lazy. Thankfully, these are the exception rather than the rule. When looking for a LGD, you will increase your chance of finding a good one if you purchase from a responsible breeder. That doesn't necessarily mean registered, purebred dogs or show-dog genetics. Rather, the owner needs to know the genetic history of their breeding dogs. The lineage should have many proven, working dogs—including the dam and sire. The breeder should follow the pups they sell to keep track of successes and failures. They should be available to help you resolve issues as they arise. Most new owners start with a newly weaned pup, though on rare occasion, you can find a mature, proven LGD. I urge you to use caution with the latter, as it is rare that a livestock raiser will part with a truly great LGD. Be prepared to pay a hefty price for any pup or dog with proven genetics. When the dog grows up to be a successful LGD, he will be worth far more than you paid, and save you more money than you will ever spend on his initial purchase.

About the author:

Danielle Londrigan lives with her husband and 5 children. They own Red Gate Farm, LLC in central IL, where they produce a variety of natural meats, eggs, and produce, as well as offer homesteading classes and farm tours. They currently own 3 Colorado Mountain Dogs.