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Livestock Guarding Dogs

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"Livestock Guarding Dogs" (2002). *USDA-APHIS Fact Sheets on Wildlife Damage Management*. Paper 11.
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Livestock Guarding Dogs

Livestock guarding breeds originated in Europe and Asia, where they have been used for centuries to protect sheep from wolves and bears. Americans have used guarding dogs since the mid-1970s. They are large animals (80-120 pounds) and are usually all white or fawn colored with dark muzzles. Some of the more common breeds are Great Pyrenees (France), Komondor (Hungary), Akbash dog and Anatolian shepherd (Turkey), and Maremma (Italy).

Unlike herding dogs, guard dogs do not usually herd sheep. Acting independently of humans, guarding dogs stay with or near sheep most of the time and aggressively repel predators. Genetics and proper rearing both contribute to the makeup of a successful guarding dog.

Some guarding dogs do not adequately carry out their protective role. Failures can generally be attributed to improper rearing or acquiring the dog after it is too old for training. Some dogs, however, don't work well despite having been reared properly. Research and surveys indicate that about three-fourths of trained dogs become good guardians. Knowing what a good guarding dog is and how to raise one correctly can help producers be sure they get the best possible service from their dogs.

Key Points in Successfully Rearing a Guarding Dog

- Select a suitable breed and reputable breeder.
- Rear pups singly from 8 weeks of age with sheep, minimizing human contact. This is probably the most critical ingredient for success.
- Monitor the dog and correct undesirable behaviors.
- Encourage the dog to remain with or near the live stock.
- Ensure the dog's health and safety.
- Manage the livestock in accordance with the dog's age and experience (e.g., use smaller pastures while the dog is young and inexperienced).
- Be patient and allow plenty of time to train your dog. Remember that a guarding dog may take 2 years or more to mature.

Potential Benefits and Problems with Using Dogs

An Oregon sheep producer nearly eliminated coyote predation in her pasture flock of 50 ewes by adding a single guarding dog. In 6 years of using the dog, she lost only one lamb to coyotes. In contrast, coyotes and bobcats killed several sheep on neighboring farms each year.

Effective guarding dogs help livestock owners by:

- reducing predation on sheep
- reducing labor (lessening the need for night corralling)
- alerting the owners to disturbances in the flock
- protecting the family and ranch property
- allowing for more efficient use of pastures and potential expansion of the flock.

However, guarding dogs require an investment with no guarantee of a positive result. The dogs can become ill, be injured, or die prematurely. Some dogs roam away from the flock. Guarding dogs are potentially aggressive; some dogs injure the stock or other animals, including pets, or confront unfamiliar people (e.g., hikers) who approach the sheep. Producers who use the dogs should post signs to alert passers-by and escort visitors when near sheep.

Guarding Dogs and Other Control Tools

The use of a guarding dog does not prevent the use of other predation-control methods. However, the other techniques must be compatible. The use of toxicants is not recommended where guarding dogs are working. Traps and snares can kill dogs if they are caught and not released in a reasonable period of time. As a precaution, dogs should be restrained, confined, or closely monitored if these methods are being used in close proximity.

An Idaho sheep producer reduced coyote predation in his pasture flock of 200 ewes by adding a guarding dog to his operation. Prior to obtaining the dog, the producer lost an average of 12 lambs per year to coyotes. The use of the guarding dog, combined with other predation-control methods, resulted in a loss of only four lambs over the next 5 years.

Guarding dogs can also be helpful in range sheep operations. However, many factors influence dog effectiveness. A Wyoming sheep rancher noted a significant reduction in coyote predation in his range flocks for the first 3 years he used guarding dogs. During that time, the coyote population continued to increase. In the fourth year, the producer began to see a decrease in his dogs' effectiveness. Coyotes had become so numerous they were simply overwhelming the dogs. By the fifth year, his predation losses had returned to previous levels.

Recommendations for Producers

Guarding dogs will not solve all predation problems for most producers, but in many situations they are a useful tool. They can aid in reducing occasional predation and have worked well in both fenced pasture and herded range operations. Their effectiveness can be enhanced by good livestock management and by eliminating persistent predators.

Guarding dogs may not be suitable in very large pastures (several sections or larger) where sheep are widely scattered. At least two dogs are recommended for range operations or in large areas with more than several hundred sheep.

Additional Information

Sources of pups and additional information about livestock guarding dogs can be obtained from the nearest WS office. You may also contact WS' guard dog specialists: Roger A. Woodruff, 720 O'Leary Street, NW, Olympia, WA 98502, (360) 753-9884; Jim Luchsinger, 5940 S. 58th Street, P.O. Box 81866, Lincoln NE 65801, 402-434-2340; or Jeffrey S. Green, 12345 W. Alameda Parkway, Suite 204, Lakewood, CO 80228, (303) 969-6565, extension 233.

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