Introducing Livestock-Guarding Dogs

J. R. Lorenz

Livestock-guarding dogs are one of a variety of tools that sheep and goat producers are finding effective for preventing livestock losses to predators. Guarding dogs are used alone or in combination with other controls to keep predators out of flocks and herds. Producers are attracted to this system because it allows them to take charge of what happens on their farms. Dogs are a good alternative to consider where there are liabilities associated with lethal control methods.

These floppy-eared, sheep-sized, sheep-shaped dogs live with the flock day and night. Rarely will a coyote challenge the presence of a dog three times its own size.

For centuries, dogs have been a method of choice for guarding flocks from wolves, bears, and other pests in southern Europe and the United States. Now, this Old World concept for predator control is being adopted by livestock growers across the United States. In the United States, guarding dogs are used effectively with flocks that have high rates of predation—sheep and goats in the West, and sheep and goats, cattle, and pigs in the East and Midwest.

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The behavior of two-thirds of their guardians as excellent or good. High ratings translated into fewer losses. Researchers at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts, tabulated reductions in losses from 1,157 reports of guarding dog usage in field trials.

Positive results in field trials

Controlled field-testing of traditional guarding breeds dates from the late 1970s. Results of several studies were impressive as sheep and goat producers rated the behavior of two-thirds of their guardians as excellent or good. High ratings translated into fewer losses.

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Jay R. Lorenz, former Extension wildlife specialist, Oregon State University.
from 1980 to 1986. For that 7-year period, 64% of dogs were at farms with
reduced predation; 20% were at farms with no predation; and 16% were
at farms with no change or increased predation.

Livestock growers in at least 37 states are using these dogs, and they report
them to be working equally well with large flocks (1,000 or more) and small
ones (100 or less). They work in range
operations and within fenced pastures.

Researchers at the USDA Sheep
Experiment Station reported benefits in
adding to reducing predator losses. In
a survey of 40 producers, 39 said their
dog brought them peace of mind; 24
said they relied less on other forms of
predator control; and 21 said the dog
eliminated the need for night
confinement.

Choosing a dog

Producers in the United States can
select dogs from several Old World
breeds, including Anatolian Shepherd
(Turkey), Castro Laboreiro (Portugal),
Great Pyrenees (Spain, France),
Komondor and Kuvasz (Hungary),
Maremma (Italy), Polish Tatra (Po-
land), Shari Planinetz (Yugoslavia),
and Tibetan Mastiff (Tibet).

Good dogs can be found within any
of these breeds because basic behaviors
are the same among them. However,
differences in temperament can be
found between individuals of the same
breed—and these differences are
greater than those between dogs of
different breeds.

When you choose a dog, it’s better to
ask about bloodlines than to rely on the
general reputation of any particular
breed. Purchasing a dog from a
working line is preferred to selecting
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In the United States, guarding dogs are used primarily with livestock that have high rates of predation—sheep and goats. Field-testing results group sheep and goats together, and examples that refer to sheep also apply to goats.

A new application is the use of dogs to guard cattle from the endangering timber wolf in northern Minnesota. The potential of this technique with cattle and other livestock appears positive.

Positive results in field trials

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