

PREDATOR CONTROL WITH GUARD DOGS

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Predator control with guard dogs is an ancient practice in the mountainous areas of Eurasia but is relatively new in North America. Special breeds of dogs were developed over time to protect the flocks. Guard dogs were introduced into the US during the late 1970's with research being done at the US Sheep Experiment Station at Dubois, Idaho and at Hampshire College at Amherst, Massachusetts. An excellent publication "Livestock Guarding Dogs: Protecting Sheep from Predators" USDA Agriculture Information Bulletin Number 588 is available and contains a wealth of information on the use of guard dogs. I strongly encourage anyone interested in using guard dogs to read this bulletin. I will give you one producer's experiences and observations on our use of guard dogs.

We entered the guard dog business out of desperation. We experienced possible predation and definite scaring of animals by black bear and lived in an area of increasing coyote population. Our farm is located in western Polk County roughly midway between the Ricebeds wildlife area and the Joel Marsh wildlife area, an area with growing populations of both black bear and coyotes, as well as the domestic dogs common throughout agricultural areas with a significant number of non-farm rural residents.

We purchased two 10-month-old female Maremma pups in January 1990. During the first season we were pleased with the calmness of our flock and the absence of any predation. Since the first guard dogs joined the operation we have not seen a black bear on our side of the county highway although they are still prevalent in the area. We have sighted only one coyote on the farm in these past five and one half years. We have had only two incidents with domestic dogs during this time. In both of these cases the

dogs were driven from the premises by our guard dogs.

We expanded our sheep flock in 1969 and 1970. We had some predation by coyotes in the early 70's but high fur prices and extensive coyote hunting by friends and neighbors gave us nearly 20 years of relative freedom from predation except for the occasional domestic dog. In days past the sound of a dog barking in the night would bring me stumbling downstairs with my Remington in my hand looking for a light. With the Maremmas on the premise, we now hear their deep barking in the night and are assured that all is well.

Training of guard dogs needs to be addressed. The guarding is instinctive, the individual dog will or will not guard, this cannot be taught. Pups must be with sheep so that bonding can occur. The literature suggests that the pup be separated from the mother and litter and placed in a pen with lambs so that the pup bonds with the sheep.

The dog must be taught what NO means and whom is in charge. The dog must be tame enough so that you can handle it to check for injury, give shots and treat injuries as needed. The dog must not be so tame that it stays near the house. We have erred on both sides as far as tameness of dogs.

Some pups we raised were difficult to catch but are doing a good job of guarding for their new owners. We have one female who is often near the house.

Use of a handful of small stones and a loud no can be used to cure pups of chasing or bothering cats, cars, chickens, cattle and horses.

The interaction of guard dogs and herd dogs has been interesting and not uneventful.

When the first Maremmas joined us, they and our Heeler formed an uneasy truce. The Heeler ruled the yard, and the Maremmas ruled the fields and pastures.

Since the first days we have added two Maremma males and a Border collie, these three dogs were all young when acquired and were accepted by the Maremma females. We also brought in a mature Heeler who has never been fully accepted and who has been attacked by the Maremmas on two occasions. My suggestion is that if you have mature dogs of either herd dogs or guard dogs, bring in only puppies. It is also important to keep the herd dogs contained while the guard dogs remain with the flocks.

How many dogs to use depends on the size flock, topography, pasture size and predator pressure. One guard dog will be adequate for most farm flocks where the main threats are domestic dogs. Since coyotes will learn to divert the dogs attention while another coyote can attack a sheep, more dogs will be needed with high coyote populations and large packs. This will be more common in extremely hilly and brushy pastures. For our operation two dogs seem to be able to adequately protect the flock. When we have four dogs and only one flock, the subordinate dog is excluded from the pasture and spends too much time in the yard. When the flock is separated into several breeding flocks spaced across the farm, four dogs seem to have enough space to share.

There are some potential problems with guard dogs. These must be watched for and corrected with a new young dog. Unnecessary roughness by the dog can cause injury or death to sheep. The dog must be taught to tolerate the sheep. Use of low protein dog food seems to help prevent wool pulling by the dogs. I didn't believe this either but it does seem to be the case. We have experienced problems following deer season when the woods are full of offal which the dogs feed on.

Roaming is another potential problem with guard dogs. A dog too far from the flock is ineffective and is at risk itself. It must be returned to the flock. The tendency of these

dogs is to establish a territory and guard the perimeters.

The pet guard dog will be near the house too much of the time and will be ineffective. The dog must learn to stay with the sheep. Ideally the dog can be inspected daily. We accomplish this by feeding the dogs in the yard. They usually come in to eat at dawn or dusk.

Fighting among the dogs can be a problem as they establish their social order. This is more of a problem during the estrous season. We have had dogs severely injured at this time. This problem escalated with increasing dog numbers. With one guard dog and one contained herd dog the problem is minimized.

Dogs which will not guard are a potential problem. The grower should guarantee that his dogs will work. While we have not experienced dogs not guarding, a 1986 survey by University of Idaho researchers found 8% of dogs not effective and 21% to be only somewhat effective.

The puppy business seemed a natural to go along with having guard dogs. It is not without cost. The bitch will be out for about six weeks rearing each litter of pups. As I write, we have one bitch with 6 week old pups. She will be back with the flock soon. We have one bitch who whelped last night, she is in the barn and will not be with the flock for at least 6 weeks. The third bitch is out of sight, she is probably in a den with a litter of pups. With pups being born at a site picked by the bitch, mortality can be higher than if they were born in a kennel. With the mature dogs all out with the flocks, we have limited control of breeding dates.

We have had pups when low lamb prices make shepherds reluctant to buy dogs. An aggressive marketing effort is required to sell the pups. Since most flocks require only one guard dog, repeat business is slow. While ram customers will be back in a year or two, satisfied dog customers have had our pups for over three years and expect to get over five more years service from their dogs.

Obtaining an unrelated male can be a challenge in a small breed such as the Maremma and less a problem with the Great Pyrenees. While I can advise most flock owners to consider a guard dog, the puppy business will not be profitable for most would be dog owners.

The use of guard dogs or other guard animals such as donkeys, cows or llamas must depend on owner preference, type of predator and predator pressure. Overall we have been pleased with our guard dogs. They have solved our predator problems. This is not a low cost solution. The dogs require feed and health care. The guard dogs are quite inactive although alert. They eat relatively little compared to other

dogs of the same size. Additionally we need to confine some of our dogs during hunting season. Guard dogs cannot be viewed as an absolute solution to predation but as a part of a control program.

Predator problems will increase for many of us due to woodlots no longer being grazed so that they provide habitat to game animals and predators. The increase in rural non-farm residences contributes to increased numbers of domestic dogs, our traditional predator problem in the midwest. The increase in grey wolf numbers causes some concern. The announcement of packs in Clark and Jackson counties indicates that wolves will not be limited to the Chequamegon National Forest.