



Keith T. Weber, LadyHawke Great Pyrenees

At first glance a title as mundane as “Guardian Dogs” may seem effortless and even uninspired. However, I assure you the title of this paper was deliberately and carefully selected. The single word that I struggled with was “guardian”. In much of the literature available today, LGD refers to either a livestock guardian dog or a livestock guarding dog. There is a difference and it is more than purely semantic. The term guarding in today’s lexicon conjures pictures of a sentry whereas the term guardian (cf. guardian angel) brings to mind something different. A sentinel maybe, but more so a custodian whose role it is to ensure the welfare of its charges. In reality, this is hardly the same as a guard whose role is focused upon security and loss of assets.

Over the years of conducting and directing research I have come to learn the value of critically choosing words. While I certainly do not always succeed in selecting the correct word for each occasion –just ask my wife—the lesson is nonetheless clear. This same lesson is very applicable to dog fanciers, especially those involved with one of the many LGD breeds. I am involved with Great Pyrenees. Being primarily interested in Pys as companions and show dogs has certainly limited my contact with the LGD world, but my research in rangeland science has offered the opportunity to fuse vocation and avocation on more than one occasion. Indeed, this paper is the direct result of a brief conversation I had with a sheep producer at a recent range conference. The conversation went something like this; “you raise sheep?” asked I. “Yes” answered the rancher. “Do you use livestock guardian dogs?” “Yes, they are pretty helpful” was the reply. “Do you use Great Pyrenees?” I continued. “No, we found the Great Pyrenees were not as aggressive as we would like and they simply do not want to get out there and fight the coyotes.”

Not being as quick-witted as I used to be I did not respond to that statement but rather allowed the conversation to take a new direction. Upon later reflection however, I reconsidered the conversation searching for the reason why I felt uncomfortable with this rancher’s response. It had nothing to do with the fact that the rancher preferred another breed over Great Pyrenees. Rather it had everything to do with guarding versus guardian.

If we study transhumant cultures we clearly see that all the old world dogs kept by shepherds were livestock guardian dogs not guarding dogs. Somewhere in the translation we have

come to expect LGD’s to constantly battle predators and somehow clear the country-side of all these dangers. This is an unrealistic expectation for two very important reasons.

- 1) Wolves have a distinct advantage over dogs in a fight. However, this rule has not been tested as much as one would imagine because neither the big bad wolf nor our beloved LGD’s are really looking for a fight. Both parties seem to realize that no matter the final outcome of the battle, all combatants stand a very good chance of serious injury. And serious injury doesn’t mean a trip to the vet for the wolf, but ultimately an early death.
- 2) Over the centuries, LGD’s were selected to reliably exhibit certain behaviors.
 - a. First --and probably foremost-- was a complete lack of predatory drive.
 - b. Next was the extension of normal protective instincts to include members of another species (sheep). If you think about it, this is truly a paradoxical adaptation. Here we have one *Canis* species protecting the prey of another *Canis* species with no intention of eating it themselves!
 - c. Heightened alertness and the warning bark (meaning “come out here...I think something is up”).
 - d. The instinct to stand fast and stay with the flock – indeed to bond to them— even when confronted by predators.

Nowhere in this list is “the instinct to seek out and kill predators”. It just does not exist because it’s dangerous (cf. #1) and counter-productive. However, at this point in the article it’s probably a moot point no longer necessary to point out.

For additional reading

Dogs by Raymond and Lorna Coppinger
Livestock Guarding Dogs: Protecting Sheep from Predators,
USDA Bulletin no. 588.