

Large Guard Dog or LGD 101

By Janet Fahey

Most of you are familiar with the Livestock Guardian Dog, whether you already own one or know someone who does. The most common breeds now working on Ontario farms are the Great Pyrenees, Maremma, Akbash, Anatolian Shepherd, as well as cross-breeds of those. There are many other LGD breeds, but most are not as readily available in Ontario.



Anatolian Shepherd – origin: Turkey



Akbash – origin: Turkey



Kuvasz – origin: Hungary



Maremma – origin: Italy



Pyrenees – origin: France & Spain

The first rule of thumb, particularly if you are new to LGDs, is to make sure you buy from a reputable breeder who is willing to provide on-going advice and support. Training a LGD from puppy hood is a long-term project that requires both a supervisory and training commitment from you until the dog is mature enough to perform its job independently. Make sure the pup or adult is clear of hip and elbow problems by requesting to see either University of Guelph or equivalent certification papers from at least the parents, and ideally, the grand parents as well.

The most popular LGD breeds share common physical traits; generally white or light in colouring with medium to heavy double coats. The adults generally weigh between 75 and 110 pounds, however, Anatolians vary much more in both coat length and colour, and are considered less 'barky' than the other LGD breeds.

To get the best out of your LGD, it is recommended that you invest time in training basic manners, such as *come*, *stay*, *wait*, and *quiet*. It is also important that you handle your LGD regularly, so that when a trip to the vet becomes necessary, it will not add further stress or possible injury to either you or the dog. Many people fear that by handling the LGD, it will become too 'people friendly.' However, in these days of urban expansion, including subdivisions on the outskirts of small towns, having a more 'people tolerant' LGD is not necessarily a bad thing. It is also helpful that your guardian dog does not chase away farm gate business!



Anatolian Shepherd greeting visitors calmly

Historically, the LGDs' job has been an isolated one, where contact with people was limited or where thieving humans were often part of the 'predator' problem. Conversely, the Maremma and Pyrenees often worked in populated areas, and thus were selected for those people-friendly traits. Likely, this contributes to their current popularity amongst both commercial farmers and hobbyists. The Pyrenees in particular, has a reputation for family-friendliness.

You need to be mindful of the recent changes to the OSPCA legislation, and the perceptions of well-intentioned animal lovers. What you see as a LGD in training, others may see as a puppy abandoned in a field.

This is particularly important to the farm-gate operation. Though well meaning, many folks—both city and country--are naïve about the job LGDs perform, and unwittingly interfere. To draw a parallel, I often see service dogs in the city sporting signs asking people not to pet the dog because it is 'working.' Unfortunately, some people choose to ignore those requests, often justifying themselves by saying, "oh, but we just wanted to pet him."

Things to consider

After identifying the existing predator problem in your area (type and numbers), many breeders suggest that 1-3 dogs guarding 200 sheep on up to 200 acres is appropriate. Three dogs can be beneficial when the coyotes try their divide-and-conquer routine. It also keeps your guard dog numbers up year-round, if one is ill, on heat or whelping. If you are not planning on breeding your LGDs, consider spaying and neutering. This eliminates potential for accidental breedings and limits the wanderlust of unneutered males. Physically, it is often beneficial to alter your large breed dog 'late' (after 8 months of age), as well as allowing the desired territorial behaviour to develop fully.

Other things to consider are the type of fencing in place, the terrain of your pastures in all seasons--especially if pasturing year-round--and whether your pastures are adjacent to a forest or a crop that predators may use as cover.

Depending on where you live and your relationship with your vet, care and upkeep of a single LGD can range anywhere from \$500 to \$1000 per year. If buying a mature animal, count on paying between \$500 to \$2,000, and \$300 to \$1,200 for a puppy. Based on the price of market lambs recently, if the dog saves even 2 or 3 sheep, that will go a long way towards earning its keep!

An LGD needs the traits of 'responsibility' (a tendency to remain with the livestock) and 'reportability' (regular check-ins with the human caretaker) as well as reliability in its family watchdog role. It is important to spend time observing and understanding how your LGD works, and their individual styles as well. For example, a LGD stands at the gate at midday, barking in

the direction of the sheep grazing in the woods. The sheep appear, marching single file back to the barn. The dog quits barking and takes a nap. Initially, you think he has called the sheep in due to a threat in the woods, but after observation, realize he is doing this every day at approximately the same time. Conclusion; there was likely no predator threat in the woods, but he simply wanted the sheep nearby in a safe spot so he could take a nap. A smart move for a dog who works nights! If you have multiple dogs, it is also important to observe their pack order and how they allocate guarding responsibilities among themselves.

Taking your newly arrived LGD adult or puppy on regular perimeter walks of your property or pastures will help it adjust to its new home and teach it to respect your boundary fences. Sheep will eat dog food, so feeding the dog with the sheep and supervising will discourage the sheep from stampeding the dog's food and will make sure you know your dog is getting proper nutrition. Some people choose to free feed their LGDs and set up feeding areas that prevent sheep access. However, this does not guarantee the dog is actually consuming the food, as raccoons, squirrels and other small rodents are just as likely to steal the food. Also, leaving food out may attract the very predators you are trying to keep at bay, so assigned feeding times are preferable.

Behaviours to discourage

If left unsupervised, LGD pups will sometimes develop habits that can range from nuisance, to grounds for dismissal. Things like roosting by the stock tank and blocking the sheep from drinking, nonsense barking (like at its own echo), and over-the-top aggressive barking at visitors should be actively discouraged. More serious behaviours such as using lambs as toys, claiming newborn lambs as their own, or pulling the placenta out of a ewe definitely requires a scolding! Also, if you feed your dogs raw off the farm, never allow them to 'eat through wool' or you may find your dog preparing its own lunch one day. Further to this, any deadstock should be removed immediately and properly disposed of.

Last Word

Remember your LGD, although independent, is still a dog. They are happy working but need bonding time with you and your family, however brief. This does not mean lying on your couch. They are intelligent dogs, and can differentiate between 'on duty' and 'off duty' just as most other farm dogs know the difference between work and play. Learn to read your dogs' behaviour—you'll be surprised how much they can tell you about your stock and farm environment.