

Myths and Misinformation about Working LGDs

Carolee Penner, 2014

1) Livestock Guardian Dogs should be raised hands off.

This is a common assumption that is wide spread in North America. We can trace this advice back to Raymond and Lorna Coppinger who, between 1977 and 1990, bred and placed more than 1400 LGDs on sheep farms and ranches across the US and Canada through their government funded Livestock Guarding Dog Project . Ray Coppinger is a biologist whose passion was studying dogs around the world and running sled dogs. The original dogs bred for the project were imported by the Coppingers from a variety of countries overseas where these dogs were traditionally used. Even though Ray Coppinger observed the dogs in their native lands and handpicked the ones for import, he failed to recognize how much the pastoral environment and group/family dynamic that the LGDs were raised in contributed to their success. As a consequence of this failure, he recommended that all LGDs should be raised hands off and kept solely with their charges from a very early age, with minimal human handling. The impact of this advice is still felt today in that raising with little human intervention is still seen among many farmers and ranchers as the ideal way to care for these dogs.

We know now that this approach has caused many dogs to lose their lives or to live in such a way that they are overly fearful or aggressive towards their owners. Good working dogs have to be shot or are unsafe for rehoming when the operation they work on is sold or downsized. Dogs have to be lassoed or trapped for the most basic of health care or vetting and as a consequence wounds and injuries often go untreated. Dogs are unable to discern between a viable threat or the approach of someone to care for them and behave aggressively, resulting in being shot or put to sleep. Young pups can easily become overwhelmed by aggressive stock and resort to defending themselves aggressively. Adolescent dogs may try chasing stock and are deemed unsuitable for the job instead of being open to correction from their owners. In short, raising LGDs hand off is a very bad idea and results in wasted time, money and ultimately in the loss of what could be very valuable working dogs.

2) A Livestock Guardian Dog should automatically know what to do and not to do with the stock.

As in most misinformation, there is a kernel of truth to this. LGDs have been selected and/or bred for a long time in various countries to enhance desired traits around livestock. Since the animals they protect are naturally easily frightened by predators like dogs, LGDs have developed nearly the polar opposite body structure of the prick eared, lithe wolf or coyote. LGD ears are wide set and drooping. Their eyes have a mournful, soft or relaxed expression to avoid scaring the stock. Their bodies are larger, in order to be an effective threat to predators but their heads and muzzles are round and soft , lacking in chiseled angles. Their movements are naturally slow and fluid, except in the presence of a threat. They are not triggered off by the prey movements of their charges - indeed, their reduced prey drive is evident when they are young pups and find little interest in chasing balls or playing tug. Everything about their structure and nature avoids triggering prey response in their charges and at the same time inspires confidence and security.

Raising a successful LGD is quite often dependent on guidance and input from older, more experienced dogs willing to correct inappropriate behavior and model appropriate behavior as well as input from the shepherd/owner. LGDs learn the ropes as they grow - by watching, trying things out and responding to appropriate correction. Historically, dogs with the completely wrong instinct would be culled, but as the litters were heavily culled initially, the dogs would often be set up for success due to the great amount of personal attention they received by the more experienced dogs and the shepherd. Even in our modern western approach to farming and ranching, LGDs need to be set up for success at every turn in order to understand what is expected of them and so that they don't end up in a situation they are not prepared to handle on their own.

3) Livestock Guardian Dogs need to be rehomed or killed if they hurt the livestock.

Each situation needs to be examined on its own merits, but it is true that many successful LGDs make mistakes with the stock when they are not yet mature. The reasons for this can range from being placed with stock that bully them when they are young to being bored as adolescents and finding that chasing flighty stock is a fun game. Since every behavior that is practiced becomes stronger, it is very important that any unwanted behavior be caught early and appropriate changes made in the environment in order for the dog to be successful. Alternately, the dog should be corrected and or put away when they display the behavior, but the correction must be just enough in the dog's mind to convince them to abandon the behavior. LGDs are typically very sensitive to correction from their owners, especially when they have a good respectful relationship. In order to effect these changes, supervision is necessary to catch the dog before they mess up or in the act. When the dog cannot be directly supervised, they should be retired to a pen in or directly adjacent to the stock.

Another scenario where LGDs can be susceptible to unintentional harming of the stock is during birthing time. All LGDs should be strictly supervised or separated from birthing stock unless they have proven themselves previously and are mature. Maturity does not occur with LGDs until closer to 3 years of age. Since there is a lot of blood and bodily fluids in the birthing process and the new babies are covered in the same, LGDs being dogs, their predatory instincts can be triggered even when trying to help the mother clean the babies. Many instances of owners coming across partially eaten newborn babies have been reported. Since both mothers and babies are the most vulnerable at birthing time, it is imperative that proper supervision or separation is enacted until the LGD has proven themselves and is fully mature. If a dog takes up going after newborn stock when they were previously reliable, they should be removed and the possibility of a dietary imbalance or other health issue should be explored.

Finally, LGDs are very orderly dogs. Much of their success as guardians relies on knowing the routine and what is normal and not normal in the environment. Therefore, introducing new stock or rehoming the dog to another operation can result in confusion about what is acceptable and not acceptable for them. Introduce new stock slowly and introduce the dog to his new environment slowly and carefully so that he has a chance to acclimate to what is expected and what is normal. Injuries may happen if this process is rushed without allowing the dog to accept and understand the new stock or environment.

4) Livestock Guardian dogs are just tools and don't need the same care as pet dogs .

LGDs provide a very needed service on farming and ranching operations, but they ARE animals and not objects. They, like the stock on the farm/ranch, need good input (food, water, vaccinations, deworming) and regular care in order to produce good output for the farmer or rancher. Their structure is just as important as they are just as susceptible to chronic pain from badly formed bodies as any other animal. LGDs do have a naturally high tolerance for discomfort and pain, in other words, they are very stoic. This does not mean that they don't suffer, just that owners may have to look a little harder to find evidence of the suffering and it often displays as aberrant behavior

5) Anyone who has been running these dogs for a while on their operation will understand them well.

Due to their substantial independence, farmers and ranchers can have and work LGDs for years and still not understand them or care for them very well. A good indicator of an owner's understanding of their LGD is the relationship the dog has with them. Evident fear of or aggression towards their owner are not signs of a good relationship. Another indicator is if the dog is in good shape and easily approachable. No one who respects or understands their LGDs well will keep them in poor condition or be unable to put their hands on them. Heavy chains or feral behavior are both warning signs to look for on a visit.

6) Since Livestock Guardian Dogs are popular, you should be able to find a good pup anywhere.

Like any other purchase, buying a LGD is very much a 'buyer beware' process. Price is not a clear indicator of workability as some breeders like to pretend that their dogs are more valuable due to a special color, claims of increased aggression or because they choose to breed for an overly large dog. Others import dogs from questionable sources overseas and claim that the dogs are worth much more than local dogs. The most important and effective time to do your research is before you purchase a pup. Look for some health testing on the parents

with verifiable results (OFA for example) and insist on meeting them and observing them work. A responsible seller will offer a contract with provisions for health problems and a guarantee of working ability. The contract should be easily understood and ideally request that you take your new pup to a vet for an examination within a short time frame. Compensation for health problems or lack of working ability should also be clearly outlined.

7) *LGDs cannot be trained to listen to their owners.*

A common misconception, this belief leads to dogs who are not able to be walked on leash, tied for any period of time or who do not sit, wait or let off threat displays when requested to. LGDs *are* different than most other dogs in that they are meant to be independently thinking and as a result they don't often find relevance in traditional obedience training. It is, however, very possible to have a well mannered and well trained LGD as long as you are a fair and generous handler. Positive training methods work well with these dogs if demands are kept to a minimum, and rewarding them with life rewards works very well. For example, asking for the dog to sit at thresholds or to receive their bowl of food can be very effective. If corrections must be made, they must be fair and understood by the dog to relate to the behavior. In other words, removing the dog to isolation, yelling at or scruffing (grabbing both sides of their neck and shaking) must never be done after time has elapsed from the behavior you intend to correct. Verbal and visual expressions of disapproval often go much further with these dogs than physical corrections, especially when a respectful relationship is maintained between the owners and the dogs.

8) *If you spend too much time with your Livestock Guardian Dog, they will refuse to guard anymore.*

Ideally all positive interactions and affection sharing on the farm or ranch should be done in the area where you intend for the dog to remain and to guard in. If the operation requires moving the stock to different areas outside of a permanent pasture, then all affection and interaction should be done in the presence of the stock, but without allowing the dog to "mug" for affection to the detriment of the stock. All interactions outside of the pasture or away from the stock or pasture on the farm should be kept business like and low key in order to not give the impression that fun things happen out of the pasture or away from the stock. If you have to travel away from the farm with your dog, affection can be shared without fear of compromising guardian ability.

If the dogs are working more general farm duties, keeping the lines clear regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior in and around the house will help the dog understand what is required. Typically, if the dog is meant to live outside full time, allowing them to sleep in the bed with the owner will be counterproductive. Many dogs with working ability will still prefer to be outside the majority of the time as they mature.

9) *A Livestock Guardian Dog must be raised with livestock to be a successful working LGD.*

There have been many cases of dogs who were raised in urban environments or apart from stock who have done well transitioning to work as full time LGDs. Since instinct is largely innate, being raised with livestock will result in a dog who is solidly a successful working LGD, but it is not an absolute necessity. Rescues and rehomed dogs have become successful guardians despite never having spent time with stock previously.

10) *A dog of any breed can be a successful Livestock Guardian Dog. Crossing a LGD with a dog of a non-LGD breed will result in a successful guardian*

This is probably one of the most dangerous assumptions that can be made. Most, if not all other breeds of dogs have a higher prey drive and less appropriate guardian instincts than the LGD breeds. Crossing non LGD breeds with LGDs does not mean that the resulting pups will have the required LGD instincts as breeding is always a roll of the dice as to what traits will be prominent in the offspring. Since many traits do not fully show themselves until adolescence or adulthood, owners can be lulled into a false sense of safety with their dogs only to find out that they were very wrong. This gamble can be very costly and quite devastating.

11) *Only a Livestock Guardian Dog who lives with stock 24/7 is considered to be a working LGD.*

Jan Dohner, in her article "What Is The Difference Between A Livestock Guardian and a Family Companion?" (found here: <http://www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/livestock-guardian-and-family-companion-zbcz1402.aspx#axzz2w3S6lQ3q>) outlines two appropriate common roles for LGDs as full time working dogs. It's a very good read and also talks about some of the common issues that come along with trying to keep dog with working ability as suburban or urban pets.

A full-time livestock guardian is just that, living with the stock 24/7 year round. These dogs eat, sleep and do everything in the pastures, corrals, barns and ranges where the stock are. This type of job still requires training and supervision, handling and care on the part of the owner.

A general farm guardian, or yard and home guardian, patrols the yard and keeps predators off of the land and away from any free ranging house pets or stock that is put up at night (typically poultry). In order for these dogs to do their job successfully, they need to sleep outside at night (even on the porch) in order to alert to and chase off any potential intruders. They may be brought inside more often than a full-time livestock guardian for rest or to protect the members of the household.

Urban/Suburban pet life can be quite challenging for LGDs, especially those with strong working ability or who are from the harder/sharper breeds who typically have less tolerance for strangers and perceived threats. It is not typically recommended, especially for dogs with significant working ability.

12) One Livestock Guardian Dog should be enough for any operation.

Much depends on the size of the land, the number of stock, and the predator load. If you have a small hobby farm with few stock, on a small parcel of land and a light predator load (a few more timid coyotes and smaller predators for example) one LGD might be just enough. For larger operations on bigger parcels of land, more dogs will be needed simply to patrol and watch the environment and stock. A smaller operation with fewer stock and land but a more bold/heavy predator load (bears, big cats, bold coyotes, wolves) will need to run more dogs and possibly different types. It's important to understand that even though these dogs appear to be doing little the majority of the time, they are in fact either in light sleep ready to spring into action if a threat appears or scanning the environment for potential threats and checking the stock for problems. Due to this, and due to the fact that predators are most active at night and therefore the dog's job is typically heavier through the night, having the appropriate number of dogs allows for each to gain proper rest while another guards.

If you choose to keep intact dogs, it is important to remember that LGDs are very serious about mating when the females are in heat or when males discover a female is in heat. Only the most significant barriers will keep them apart. Males may have trouble concentrating on their job if a female in season is close by, which is another important consideration. Females in heat may choose to wander as well. For this reason, intact females are often rotated away from intact males when they come into heat or are put up in confinement for the duration. Keeping intact dogs will also increase the likelihood of status conflicts between dogs of the same sex, although it is not the only reason that status conflicts occur. Such conflicts are to be expected as normal unless serious injury occurs to either the dogs or the stock.

13) All Livestock Guardian Dog breeds behave in the same way.

This is also one of the more damaging misconceptions about LGDs. Livestock Guardian Dog breeds were selectively developed to address the terrain and predators of their native land, which results in different guardian styles and different tolerance levels. A dog breed intended to go head to head with bears or big cats will be more serious and less tolerant than one developed in a land with fewer bold and large predators. Some are more comfortable patrolling the boundaries and others prefer to stick very close to their charges.

Doing your research before you commit to a breed or breeds is one of the most important things any farmer/rancher/owner can do to set themselves up for success. Check out what breeds are most popular in your area and find out why that is. Find out what kinds of predators are common to your area and if any new ones are moving in. Consider what your expectations are for the dogs you will buy. Will they be expected to be close to the house with their charges and deal with many visitors? If so, a more stranger tolerant breed like the Great

Pyrenees, Maremma or Anatolian may be best. Will they be ranging in bush with the stock far from home or expected to deal with bears or wolves? A harder breed like the Central Asian Shepherd or Sarplaninac may be the right choice. If you are in an area where there is a very large predator population, you may need to run dogs of different types - some who patrol the perimeters and others who stay close to the stock.

14) Livestock Guardian Dogs are meant to be aggressive. This means that the owner shouldn't question or control when a LGD decides to show severe aggression. All aggression is normal and expected.

LGDs *are* meant to display aggression as it is a vital part of their ability to protect their charges successfully. However, what sets LGDs apart from other breeds is their innate ability to think independently of handler instruction and judiciously. Both of these traits are integral to their historical success in protecting vulnerable prey animals against predators who would like to eat them, even far away from their homestead away from direct supervision. LGDs need to make decisions on their own about what is a threat and not a threat and act accordingly, even with no human there to guide them. The lives of their charges hang in the balance.

That being said, good LGDs *should* both defer to their owner and use their aggressive behavior with the primary goal of driving off a predator as opposed to killing it. The first requires a relationship of respect between the farmer/rancher/owner and the dog. If the dog feels that something or someone is a threat, they will respond, but should be willing to stand down when asked by their handler. Standing down means that the dog will refrain from driving off the perceived threat at that time, but typically stand watch. It is not uncommon for LGDs to follow strangers around the yard or pasture when they are in the company of their owners, watching them from a distance. Some LGDs will 'deliver' an intruder to their owner or off the property, taking them by the sleeve and walking them up to the house or to the perimeter. As expected, the tolerance displayed by LGDs does depend heavily on their breed and whether they are a harder/sharper breed or a softer/more tolerant breed. The former will be more likely to interpret even benign actions on the part of a stranger as a threat and the latter will be less likely to take offense. More tolerant breeds are subsequently often better choices for operations with frequent different visitors. If a harder breed is needed on the operation for other reasons, the dogs must be directly supervised or put away when visitors come by or the children of the family play with their friends (they can easily misinterpret normal play as a threat against their children).

The second consideration - having a primary goal of driving off a threat as opposed to eliminating it - requires self control on the part of the dog. Both considerations require a dog that is stable in nature and structure (chronic pain can cause a dog to lose appropriate judgment), but the first can be rectified through relationship and respect building whereas the second is an innate quality that often resists modification. Softer breeds of LGDs will typically use longer threat displays towards the intruder, consisting of posturing, growling, teeth baring, dominating (standing over) and loud vocalizations before resorting to biting or inflicting actual injury. If at any time during these behaviors the threat leaves or submits, they will leave off or escort them off the property. They will often put up with an intruder multiple times, choosing to drive them off each time. Harder breeds will trip into aggressive behavior more quickly, and their threat displays may be distilled into a short display that moves into injury much sooner. They will often not put up with multiple breaches by a predator, choosing instead to eliminate them. All LGDs, however, regardless of breed, should still be in "thinking" mode when they are addressing threats. They should not be blindly aggressive and if needed, the owner/farmer/rancher should be able to intervene. Livestock Guardian Dogs are not known for redirecting to their handlers for this reason - they are constantly thinking and calculating and under great self control. Some of the harder breeds have lines that were/are bred for fighting each other which has greatly compromised the dogs from those lines. Great care should be taken when importing or buying members of these breeds domestically to avoid such unstable dogs.

A good guardian dog should NEVER bite or aggress against their owners unless provoked. For this reason, it is important to ensure that the owner/farmer/rancher cultivates a respectful relationship with their dog(s) and ensures that their dogs are used to routine handling. Hitting, rolling and screaming at LGDs is not recommended as a regular course of treatment for these dogs for the same reason.

[Index](#)