

Protecting the Flock

By: Linda Coffey, Sustainable Agriculture Specialist – Sheep and Goats, NCAT

You walk out to check your sheep, and find the best lamb is missing. Your dairy goats go out to graze with their kids, and come home later without your daughter's best show prospect. One day you come home to find a dog has ravaged your animals, and the carnage is sickening. How do you make sure this doesn't happen on your farm? If this is your concern, you are not alone. The American Sheep Industry Association (ASI) notes that predation is the leading cause of death in American sheep flocks. All of the above situations happened in our own flock, before we took actions to prevent predation.

A good fence can help and is an essential first step. Having at least some electrified wires that are powerful enough to get attention may deter dogs and coyotes. However, in areas with a lot of predator pressure, savvy predators may figure out how to avoid shocks. Once they do, the fence will not be sufficient protection. Also, a fence cannot protect from avian predators, such as eagles or turkey vultures.

Penning the livestock near the house at night can help if predators are wary of humans. That strategy may leave the animals more prone to "little predators," however, as internal parasites become a serious problem where animals camp and manure builds up. Also, the manure left in the lot is not helping the pastures. It's much better to keep the animals on pasture when possible, so that their fertility can build soil. This is where livestock guardians can show their value. By using livestock guardian animals, you can give your animals 24-hour-a-day bodyguards, and allow the animals to stay out grazing and spreading manure on the land. Effective guardians prevent injuries and deaths, and give the farmer peace of mind. They are well worth the cost.

On the other hand, not all livestock guardian animals are effective, and when they are not, they can cause losses and strain neighbor relations. So, how can you increase the odds of getting a good protector and not another problem?

Here are ways that you can help set up a good situation.

- Choose the right animal for the terrain, predator pressure, size of pasture, proximity to neighbors, budget, availability of animals, and your personal preference. (more on this later)
- Have the animal neutered or spayed to cut down on behavior issues. The exception would be if you are planning to breed the animals, of course, but you should never use an intact male donkey or intact male llama as a guardian because they are often aggressive to the stock and perhaps to humans. Intact male dogs will be prone to wander, which leads to trouble with the neighbors. An intact female dog may allow a wandering male canine in to the pasture if she is in heat.
- Only use animals that have been bonded to the species they will be protecting. Bonding happens in the first weeks of life: for dogs, before they are 16 weeks old.
- Test a prospective guard donkey or guard llama by putting a dog in the pen with them. If they don't seem to notice, they are likely not a good prospect. You want a guardian that is antagonistic toward strange canines. A donkey will show this by braying and moving toward the dog and attempting to stomp or kick it. Our donkey behaved like this to strange dogs but was accepting of our own dogs.
- Do not expect to get a good dog (or donkey or llama) for free; the animals that you want have been raised on a farm with sheep (or goats, if that is what you raise). The dog you want should

have been vaccinated, and those essential shots come with a cost. An animal that is not bonded to the stock may avoid associating with the stock and may injure or kill the stock rather than protecting them.

- Plan to spend what it takes to keep healthy guardian animals. Vaccinations for dogs, hoof care for donkeys and llamas, shearing for llamas (and perhaps for Great Pyrenees dogs), dental care for donkeys and perhaps llamas, and food for dogs should all be estimated and figured into the budget. These are legitimate farm expenses and should be included in your farm records.
- Use the right number of animals. Using more than required is expensive and counter-productive. For example, one donkey that is bonded will associate with the sheep or goats. Three donkeys may choose to associate with each other instead.
- It is okay to combine different species of guardians. Llamas or donkeys can work well with guardian dogs, and this can be a kind of hedging. Llamas and donkeys live a long time, eat what the sheep or goats eat, and stay in the pasture where you put them. Dogs need special food, do not live as long, and are more mobile. If they are roamers, they may be shot or run over; that leaves your animals unprotected unless they have a llama or donkey on the job.
- Dogs must be taught their territory and taught to stay with the flock or herd. This should be done when they first arrive at your farm.
- Supervise any guardians during lambing or kidding, especially when they are young. Sometimes they have problems with “protecting” the babies from the mothers. Sometimes the dogs may want to help clean the babies, which is upsetting to the mothers and may result in accidental chewing (of ears or tails, for instance). You must correct any bad behaviors and may have to separate the guardians to the other side of the fence until they gain maturity. We have had two dogs that were problems their first kidding season; they were fine the next year and became very good guardians.
- Count your animals so you will know immediately if you are missing any.
- Feed your dogs properly so that they are not tempted to snack on baby animals. Do not allow them to feed on dead lambs or kids; the small savings in dog food is not worth you teaching them bad habits.
- If you are getting a livestock guardian dog, be sure to choose a dog that is “all guardian”—both parents are the type of dog with the proper instincts. For example, a Great Pyrenees/Anatolian Shepherd cross may make a wonderful guardian. A Great Pyrenees/Pitbull cross most likely will not.
- Choose a guardian animal that you enjoy. If you have never liked horses, then a donkey may not be the best choice for you.
- Dogs that are guardians must be kept with the animals. It is OK to pet them; you need to be able to catch them, take them on a leash, get their yearly vaccinations, and feel safe with them. Having a dog that is friendly to you will not prevent them doing their job. Keeping them on the porch will.
- Talk to your neighbors about the guardian dogs. Be sure your dogs are identified so that if they do roam, someone can let you know. A roaming dog is a liability and in many situations will not be tolerated.

This all may seem like a lot to think about, but once these basics are in place, livestock guardians can be fairly trouble-free and real assets to the farm. They make it possible to raise small ruminants in a wildlife-friendly way, and to protect the livestock (and profits) from harm. We no longer lose animals (or sleep) to predators.

To learn more about livestock guardians, see:

Predator Control for Sustainable and Organic Livestock Production

<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=189>

Livestock Guarding Dogs: Protecting Sheep from Predators, USDA Bulletin 588 by Roger Woodruff and Jeffrey Green, is 32 pages of excellent information from the two researchers who worked extensively with dogs at the US Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho. This publication has excellent information about livestock guarding dogs and how to train them and work with them, includes discussion of the breeds that are most common, and is useful to producers in all parts of the country. Find it at bit.ly/1nbBY4J.

Langston University's Web-Based Training Course includes two units relevant to this subject: Predator Control, by Ken Cearley, is about figuring out what predators are the problems:

<http://www2.luresext.edu/goats/training/predator.html>

Access the entire course at: <http://www2.luresext.edu/goats/training/qa.html>

For more information about sheep and goats and other agricultural topics, visit www.attra.ncat.org. Specialists can be reached by calling 800-346-9140.

Livestock Guarding Dogs, by Dan and Paula Lane, addresses the use and care of livestock guardian dogs:

<http://www2.luresext.edu/goats/training/lgd.html>