

## Living with a Livestock Guardian Dog

### What is a Livestock Guardian Dog (LGD)?

These highly intelligent, independent thinking dogs were bred to be protective over livestock and territory, and to make decisions for themselves. They have different tolerance and aggression levels than other types of dogs, and when threatened, are more likely to engage in a fight than run away. They have a low prey-drive and do not herd livestock. They stay with their charges 24/7 and form strong bonds. They are loyal and can form very strong bonds with their owners and family, but being separated from those they are bonded with can cause great stress. Their independent thinking means they are not as biddable, and if asked to do something they may “think about it and get back to you”. *These dogs are not for everyone.*

### Some common breeds of LGD:

- Great Pyrenees
- Akbash
- Kuvasz
- Komondor
- Tibetan Mastiff
- Maremma Sheepdog
- Anatolian Shepherd
- Pyrenean Mastiff



Komondor



Great Pyrenees



Anatolian Shepherd

### Physical Characteristics:

- Floppy ears (predators have pointy ears)
- Large frame and skull
- Powerful neck and jaw
- Powerful musculature, which allows them to spring into action immediately
- Double coat that keeps them insulated in the cold and heat
  - Never shave this coat!
- Loose skin around the throat/dewlap, to protect their neck
- Dewclaws (sometimes)

### What differentiates them from other breeds?

- Like to dig large holes (to get out of the heat)
- Play rough (body slamming)
- Mouthing as a way to communicate (may put your arm in their mouth and lead you somewhere)
- Pawing is a way of showing affection, but they may scratch you by accident
- Nocturnal barking (most predators are active at night, therefore, so are these dogs)

- Less tolerant of inappropriate body language
  - Lifting arms, jumping out in front of them, people advancing towards them when they are warning you to stay away, visitors hugging their people
- Very focused on the environment and people at all times
- A loose LGD should not threaten you or attack if they are not provoked
- If they are loose, they are difficult to approach, so it's hard to catch them if you don't have a good relationship with them

### Understanding LGD aggression

These types of dogs were bred to respond to a threat quickly and nip it in the bud. They will stand their ground and look threatening, as this is critical to them being successful; the scarier they look and act, the less likely the threat will engage in a fight, meaning the dog has a higher chance of survival.

Threatening displays are not the same as being aggressive. These are displays that the dog uses to try and prevent the issue from escalating. These displays are all *distance increasing signals*, and encourage the threat to move away! Some examples are:

- Barking
- Running the fence
- Standing one's ground
- Posturing
- Fixed eye contact
- Fagged tail
- Growling
- Snarling
- Snapping
- Chasing



A Tibetan Mastiff showing aggressive displays

If the threat moves away, then the dog will calm down. Aggression, however, occurs when the threat does not move away, and so the dog has to escalate to making contact. Some examples of aggression are:

- Closing of distance
- Chasing down
- Biting and attacking
- Injuring or killing



A Komondor showing aggression

If your LGD is from a working line, you may see more threatening and aggressive behaviors towards perceived threats. It's important to remember that aggressiveness is for survival; when working out in the fields, there's no back up, so the dogs have to learn to defend themselves well!

Problems can arise from this type of behavioral trait when your dog thinks your neighbors or their pets are threats. There are ways to decrease and prevent these behaviors from showing, though.

## **What causes aggression in LGDs in the home environment?**

Stress! These dogs are sensitive to being stressed. Things that may cause them stress are:

- Not enough space
- Confinement (being crated for a long time, being cooped up in a backyard or apartment)
- Separation from family (being left home all day while owner is at work)
- Absence of choice
- Stressed family or pets
- Visitors
- Barriers (fences, tethers)
- Unfamiliar surroundings
- Being petted by strangers on walks
- Dog parks (though some individuals enjoy them)
- Aversive training/handling, physically forcing them to do something (these dogs do not respond well to force –they are programmed to fight back when they feel threatened!)

## **Helping LGDs be successful in your home**

- Always introduce strangers and visitors.
- When they bark to alert you to something, like an animal in the distance, praise them for a job well done. This usually gets them to quiet down, whereas trying to force them to be quiet will just not work.
- Remove items that cause resource guarding (if you have multiple dogs in the home and are seeing concerning behaviors between them over food, space, etc.)
- Unrealistic expectations from owners lead to many of these dogs being re-homed or abandoned.
- These dogs get a bad rap, but their behaviors are NORMAL for their breed.

## **Accommodating their needs in a non-working context**

- They need a job to do, but you need to understand their motivations first.
- Give them enrichment based on their motivation (do they like to explore? To dig? Climb? Swim?)
- Must have good environmental management (these dogs can see and smell predators from a long way off, meaning they will bark and exhibit aggressive displays even when you don't think there's a reason for it. Make sure they are unable to wander off your property.)
- Training and socialization using reward based methods.
- Let them make their own choices (to meet or not meet someone, to stay inside or outside, etc.)
- Space, and a separate quiet area if visitors are coming (good for teaching alone time too).
- They don't need to go to the dog park.



## Training and Enrichment

These types of dogs will always be more focused on the environment. It's good to allow them to check out situations that interest them, such as a person approaching the yard, or to sniff around the training room before other students arrive. They are quick to lose focus in repetitive requests, so training has to have lots of novelty, such as games and opportunities to sniff, as well as lots of breaks.

Enrichment should be based on what your individual dog wants and likes. Some rewarding behaviors you can incorporate into an enrichment program are:

- Opportunities to explore
- Protection roles of family or pets and spending time with their charges
- Patrolling, scenting, marking
- Praise them when they do things you like
- Again, give them choice! These dogs love being outside, so don't force them to come in if you don't have to. Make coming inside fun for them!

## Great Pyrenees Tricks

