

# Livestock-guarding dogs help keep sheep safe

DUBOIS, Idaho — American sheep ranching may be going to the dogs.

Not just any dogs, but special livestock-guarding breeds that have been helping Old World shepherds look after flocks for centuries.

And by thwarting predators, the dogs may help ranchers and consumers save money.

"In some cases, the dogs work very well. For many people they're often the difference between having sheep and not having them," says Jeffrey Green, a research wildlife biologist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He cites a Montana rancher who last summer lost 33 sheep to predators in 37 days.

"Then we put one of the dogs, a Great Pyrenees, with the sheep," says Green. "For the next 18 days there were no losses."

Green is in charge of predator research at the USDA Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho—a project that focuses on the coyote. These tough, wily animals eat anything rabbits, rodents, and carrion form most of their diet.

The USDA says coyotes are responsible for most of the million or so sheep and lamb losses to predators each year.

Based on last year's U.S. sheep population of 12.5 million, that's an eight percent average loss.

Dan Murphy of the National Wool Growers Association says coyote predation is costing the industry about \$100 million a year.

And, adds the USDA, consumers also pay—with higher prices and reduced supply.

Ranchers used to fight coyotes by leaving out bait laced with a poison called Compound 1080, sodium monofluoroacetate. Since 1972, however, the federal government has restricted the use of Compound 1080 after deciding it endangered other animals. The coyote population seems to be rising, although shooting and trapping continue.

Enter the livestock-guarding dogs of Europe and Central Asia, dogs like the Great Pyrenees from France, the komondor and the Kuvasz from Hungary, the Maremma of Italy, the Anatolian akbash from Turkey, and the Shar Planinets from Yugoslavia.

They're big dogs; a male akbash, for instance, can weight 150 pounds. Some are white, like the flocks they guard. And, says Green, they seem to want to stay with sheep, they don't harm the sheep, as many dogs might, but they're aggressive with potential predators.

For one test, Green puts together unguarded sheep and a coyote in a 160-acre, steeply fenced enclosure. Once the coyote has established a killing pattern, a dog is placed with the sheep.

Would the dogs kill the coyotes? "We've not had that happen," says Green, who has tested komondor, Pyrenees, and akbash dogs.

"In fact, there usually weren't

any physical encounters between the dog and the coyote. More often the coyote would hear the dog or smell it or see it and flee, because one of these dogs is over four times heavier and bigger than the coyote. And the coyote is not stupid."

From the USDA's research to date, no one breed of livestock-guarding dog is thought to be best, Green indicates. But the sheep station does advise getting pups from "working parentage" when possible, and starting the dogs with sheep by the time they're about eight weeks old.

The breeds generally take two or three years to mature.

Sheep raisers aren't limited to the West, and neither are sheep predators, says Raymond Coppinger of Hampshire College's New England Farm Center.

Since 1977 he and colleagues at the Amherst, Mass., farm center have been breeding and training Old World livestock-guarding dogs in a cooperative research program. They have placed nearly 200 dogs on farms in states from Maine to California, guarding against coyotes, bears, mountain lions, and even domestic dogs.

They have learned the guard dogs work better in fenced pastures or with breeds of sheep that don't scatter on open range.

Another important consideration, says Coppinger, is the owner's involvement: "It's not just a matter of dumping the dog out a

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This big, shaggy komondor dog at the USDA Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho, is on friendly terms with Roger Woodruff, predator control project worker, but it can get tough when guarding sheep against enemies such as coyotes. Some Old World breeds have been looking after flocks for centuries.

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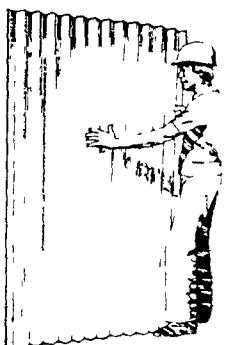


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