

Guarding Sheep: It's a Dog's World

Jean Bilodeaux

Mention Komondor, Maremma or Shar Plainetz to most people and you're apt to get a funny look. Mention these to people such as Tom Espil, Wes Cook or Pam Iveson and you've got their attention. These three are not only interested but have staked a good part of their livelihood on these dogs.

The Komondor, Maremma, the Shar Plainetz along with the Great Pyrenees are livestock guard dogs used in this area (California). They are special breeds of dogs bred to protect sheep and other livestock from predators such as the coyote and the mountain lion. They are especially attentive, trustworthy and protective of sheep.

When a puppy is six to eight weeks old it is put in with the sheep. They sleep together and eat together, until they bond with the sheep. There is minimal petting or contact with humans. The herder or trainer must first break the sheep to the dog. The sheep must trust and be willing to follow the dog, the sheep must allow the dog to sleep in the band and allow the dog free movement around the band.

Then they must break the man to the dog. Food is always brought to the dog while he is in the band. If the dog comes to the herder, the dog is discouraged from approaching and is made to go back to the sheep.

Normally it takes about three guard dogs to properly guard a band (a band is 1,000 sheep). Usually one dog will sleep in the middle of the band among the sheep, while another walks around the perimeter all night long, unless a predator comes to the scene. Then the dogs will come out of the band and approach the predator. Sometimes just their appearance will deter the predator. If not, the dogs will challenge the intruder. If that doesn't work the fight is on.

According to Espil, of Espil Sheep Company, a company that ranges sheep from Eagleville to near Susanville to Gerlach then to Lovelock and back, a good guard dog can cut your losses in half. In fact, in their Eagleville range, they normally lose 12 to 20 sheep a year; now with guard dogs, they don't lose any.

Iveson, near Cedarville, lost 15 head in a week to coyotes. With her Shar Plainetz the losses are down to two or three a year. She states her Shar will bring back baby lambs if they get separated from their mothers. They single out a sick sheep and bring it to the barn or herder. And even guard a dead sheep from predators. One day one of her Shars brought a coyote back to the house. When Iveson went outside, the coyote made a move in her

direction. The Shar interpreted the move as a potential attack, jumped in and killed the coyote. Her Shars patrol about 1,000 acres near her place.

Predators are on the rise; last year Espil had two dogs stand off a mountain lion in the Mill Creek area. In the Hackamore area, near Tulelake inspection station, one lion killed 140 to 150 lambs last year. The guard dog tried to hold them off, but being alone, couldn't do it.

For best results, three guards are needed for a band, and for now the Espils just don't have enough guard dogs to go around their four bands. On July 19 the herder discovered nine coyotes in his band and five lambs were killed. The guard dogs were put with the band and only two lambs were killed the rest of the time.

Espil has a Great Pyrenees—Komondor cross, one-year-old dog. The dog has the thick matted coat that coyotes can't bite through very well. Unfortunately, the dog was attacked by three or four coyotes the other night and chewed up. One-on-one and there isn't much of a fight.

The young dog stands about three feet high with another seven or eight inches height expected. His head is about nine inches across from ear to ear. All of the dogs seem to have huge heads. The dog is being doctored back to health.

The Komondor originated in Hungary around 1555 A.D. They were used to protect their flocks from bears, wolves and brigands. The Komondor has an unusual corded coat that takes on a natural twist and mats in that position and continues to grow from the base until the whole dog is covered with a mass of long rope-like lengths of hair. They can weigh up to 135 pounds.

The Maremma is also from Hungary. It is a large dog and naturally intelligent and protective to the point of self-sacrifice. He becomes attached to people, but only in the capacity of a guard dog and not as a house pet. They usually weigh over 100 pounds.

The Great Pyrenees is a huge and beautiful snowy white dog descended from the Tibetan Mastiff. Used in the Pyrenees for centuries, the breed was somewhat isolated until the turn of the century. They have always been used as guard dogs and typically weigh over 100 pounds.

The Shar Plainetz is from the Sarplanina Mountains in western Yugoslavia. He looks somewhat like a coyote with a full winter coat, only is about four times larger. The civil war is now making importation of these animals difficult.