



The Tibetan Mastiff as a Livestock Guardian Dog

Whether guarding the tents and herd of the nomads, the homes in the villages, or the temples and monasteries in Tibet, the Tibetan Mastiff (TM) has always been a working dog. The breed still retains both the physical and mental traits required of a guardian breed:

Intelligent; independent; loyal; alert; fearless; large; strong; and imposing. There is no doubt that a TM can take on the job of protecting flocks and herds, but is the breed a Livestock Guardian Dog (LGD) as most westerners define it? This is what we will address here in the second of a two-part series looking at the history and function of the Tibetan Mastiff as a working dog.

In order to properly address the issue of TMs as Livestock Guardian Dogs, first we need to define the purpose and intent of LGDs and how the concept has changed over the years and differs in perception between countries and cultures. A LGD is one that is purposefully bred to protect livestock from predators. Historically, “All the livestock guard dog (LGD) breeds descend from dogs that have been working alongside shepherds and goat herders in Europe or Asia for centuries. Each breed in the group can be traced back to a specific area of origin.” (1) As noted in our last article, Tibetan nomads and farmers have used TMs to protect their herds for centuries, and it would have been impossible to raise their animals without their dogs. LGDs guard and protect in three distinct ways: 1) Scent marking the perimeter of their property to define territorial boundaries. All canids, whether domestic or wild, recognize these boundaries, and tend to stay away from an occupied territory. 2) Barking to warn and ward off predators and posturing when a predator is detected in order to avoid direct confrontation. 3) Fearless confrontation only when necessary, if a predator has ignored boundaries and warnings and breached the perimeter of the dog’s territory. Even then, the goal is to ward off the predator, not to kill. “Ultimately, predators avoid protected pastures and keep safely away from flocks to avoid being detected or confronted by the guard dog.” (2) This pattern of behavior perfectly describes the Tibetan Mastiff, so why is there a question as to whether they are LGDs?

The Tibetan Mastiff’s traditional role in Tibet has been a protector of his master, his master’s tent and animals, and of the caravans in which they traveled. They defended what they considered theirs against marauders and predators such as wolves, mustelidae, and snow leopards. Let’s recall Primož Peer’s observations that “These dogs are living with people” (3) and note above the phrase “working alongside shepherds”. In Tibet, people are with the animals even in high pasture; the animals are not left alone for the dogs to tend. Flocks/herds are taken to the fields to graze during the day and corralled at night to secure them from predators. While a few TMs may accompany the shepherds during the day, their primary purpose is to stay behind and guard the camp. When the flocks or herds return at night, the TMs keep guard around the camps or corrals, or take up sentry duty on higher ground nearby. Describing his observations of working LGDs in Romania, Paul White notes “This system, which has taken many generations to perfect, only works well with the shepherds present.” (4) This is not the definition of a LGD as typically used in western cultures. A critical component to the team is missing: The shepherds. Somehow, western farmers and ranchers have lost the concept of working alongside their dogs and have adopted the mindset that LGDs should not bond or interact with their people, but be left to work alone in the pastures. As White so adeptly put it, “Many farmers in the west do not want the discomfort of living with their sheep in unfenced predator country and often rely too heavily on their dogs working alone and hoping they make the right decisions.” (4) This change in the definition of a LGD, from one that works with its people to one that is left completely on its own, is the demarcation between the Tibetan Mastiff and other LGD breeds. While they are perfect for the job as carried out in Tibet, Tibetan Mastiffs are not suitable as LGDs as we currently define them in the U.S.

Tibetan Mastiffs are property and perimeter guardians, and will protect anything within their borders, including their home, their people, and their animals. While there are exceptions, as a general rule, TMs do not show a particular affinity or bond with livestock, but rather protect them as part of their territory. They also tend to expand their territory to include anything they can see and watch over. For this reason, boundaries are critical, and in a situation where there is no defined perimeter, such as on a large, open ranch, the tendency is to wander further and further away from the livestock as they enlarge their territory, leaving the animals unprotected. In addition, TMs form lifelong bonds with their people, and seek out human companionship over that of their charges. Even if socialized well as a puppy, a TM needs daily human interaction, or they very quickly turn feral: A TM that is left with livestock with only minimal socialization can become a very dangerous dog. In addition, some can have a strong prey drive, and it is not always possible to discern this as a puppy. Martha Feltenstein, of the American Tibetan Mastiff Association, noted “We have gotten many into rescue because they have killed their charges.” (5) Keeping TMs in a separate fenced area surrounding the livestock area where they can still patrol the perimeter but not have direct access to the animals is a workable solution.

Critical points are that the livestock area needs to be fully fenced; the dogs need to be part of a working team with their owner; and Tibetan Mastiffs should not be left in the pasture unattended with livestock. On a small family farm, where there are fenced perimeters and they are part of the family and a working team, they are an excellent choice to protect livestock along with their people and property. Working as a partner with their people makes for the perfect small farm guardian that can transition from a loving family companion to a working dog almost in the blink of an eye: But keep in mind that *partnership* is the key.

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References

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