



Tibetan Mastiffs Bark: That's What They Do

As long ago as the 1600's, John Donne made the observation, "No man is an island, entire of itself", poignantly reminding us that we all live in connection with others, and must, in order to survive. This is true not only of man, but of the animal kingdom as well. The key to this interconnectedness is communication: It is the tie that binds and the foundation of any relationship, including our relationship with our pets. While humans rely primarily on speech, animals communicate using various means. For dogs, this may include body language (wagging tail, for example.), posturing, barking, and marking, among others. While few people would complain about a dog wagging its tail, complaints about barking dogs are quite common and one of the most frequently cited concerns with Tibetan Mastiffs (TMs). Barking is a natural behavior for dogs, and when strategically employed, it becomes a powerful tool in the arsenal of guardian dog breeds that allows them to successfully perform the job for which they have been bred. The purpose of this article is to explore the issue of barking, specifically with a guardian breed such as the Tibetan Mastiff, and how to address concerns which may arise.

Let's start with the "whys" of barking: A Tibetan Mastiff does not mindlessly bark just to hear the sound of his own voice. Barking is always done for a reason and serves a specific purpose. It is up to us to learn to distinguish between the varying types and tones of the bark and decide what that purpose is.

1). To alert: Barking alerts the owner and all within earshot of a potential threat. Tibetan Mastiffs are always vigilant, seeing and hearing things that we, as humans, may not. Dogs can detect sounds that are out of the human range: Softer sounds, higher frequency sounds such as squeaks and squeals, even the rustling of grass in the night, and can hear sounds from four times further away than humans. A dog's eyesight also assists in early threat detection. Dogs have a wider field of vision, a higher flicker fusion frequency resulting in better motion detection, and superior night vision. In addition, a dog's sense of smell is significantly more acute than a human's. They possess up to 300 million olfactory receptors in their noses, compared to about six million in humans, and the part of the dog's brain that is devoted to analyzing smells is about 40 times larger than a human's. As a result, scientists estimate that dogs can smell 10,000 to 100,000 times better than people. Combined, these enhanced senses make your dog a formidable threat detector. Just because you don't see, hear, or smell anything doesn't mean your dog doesn't, and barking is his way of letting you know about it.

2). To communicate pain or discomfort: Whether expressing physical pain or discomfort, hunger, anxiety, fear, alarm, or a host of other issues, barking can be a way of communicating that your dog is not comfortable with his environment. Addressing the source of your dog's concern and discomfort will result in a more secure and more confident dog that can rest easy knowing his needs will be met and not ignored.

3). To announce their presence as a deterrence: The sound of a barking dog can be a deterrent to both people and predators. Police will tell you that the best way to avoid a break-in is to have a good guard dog that barks. Most intruders will avoid a property with a barking dog. Barking draws attention and increases the risk of detection. In the same way, other animals will avoid a property with an actively barking dog. Guardian breeds, by nature, are territorial. Barking is a way for them to establish and defend their territory by warning off potential trespassers or predators. Tibetan Mastiffs are known for utilizing barking to announce to the world **"I'm here, stay clear, don't come near"**. This behavior can be especially pronounced at the boundaries of their property.

4). To share information. Sharing information about food sources goes hand in hand with survival instincts, and can also serve to alert team members, human or canine, when an urgent situation arises. A classic example from my childhood is the image of Lassie alerting her owners when "Timmy" was in danger. In our own experience, our TMs have alerted us when one of ours got her collar entangled and was choking or when a

puppy got his head caught in the gate, events that could have ended very badly if we had not been made aware of what was happening. Not only did we run to help in each instance, but our other TMs recognized the tone of the bark and were doing their best to assist.

5). To find a mate. Just like other members of the animal kingdom, dogs will use vocalization to find partners. Both males and females will utilize barking, as well as whining, moaning, and howling during mating season. The thing about Tibetan Mastiffs is that they aren't content with restricting their search to the immediate neighborhood. They think they need to make their search known to the furthest reaches of the earth, and put every ounce of energy they have into barking and howling loud enough to be heard all the way to the top of the highest mountain in Tibet.

So, we have established that barking is normal behavior for any dog. Read that again: Barking is normal. For a guardian breed, such as the Tibetan Mastiff, it is first nature: Instinctual. Barking only becomes a problem when someone, i.e., a human, deems it a problem.

Barking complaints generally reflect a number of misconceptions. Most people consider dogs as pets or “fur babies”, not as the sentinels that Tibetan Mastiffs are meant to be. Barking is essential for them to do their job. As mentioned above, a TM's first response to a perceived threat is to bark. Barking is not only meant to alert, but is also their first line of defense. Only if the threat is not deterred by barking and continues to advance should a TM aggressively challenge the threat. This is a good thing. Confrontation often results in injury or death, and a smart dog will only engage in a physical confrontation as a last resort. Discouraging your dog from barking, or even worse, scolding or punishing him for barking, robs the dog of not only a critical working tool, but a potentially life-saving defense mechanism, and encourages him to “up the game” to physical confrontation when it may not be necessary.

It is also an exaggeration to say that Tibetan Mastiffs bark more than other breeds. Barking varies more by individual dogs than by breed. The difference is often the how, why, and when they bark. Dogs have different types of barks, each conveying a specific message. A guard dog's alert bark may differ from its play bark or territorial bark. Understanding these nuances helps discern the nature of the perceived threat. This is the “how” a dog barks. The pitch, cadence, frequency, time between barks, and so forth, vary depending on the reason for barking. Any dog owner can distinguish between light, high-pitched, excited yips when their dog is greeting them, and the loud, low, oftentimes guttural bark, when a stranger or strange animal encroaches on their territory (1). Not only can we, as humans, distinguish between different types of barks and their meaning, but research has shown that other dogs can, too, in even greater detail, forming the basis of canine communication. (2). Although humans often do not understand this and view barking as a nuisance, barking is never done just for attention or just so the dog can hear itself bark. To understand why a Tibetan Mastiff (TM) barks, we need to acknowledge their role as protectors and guardians.

I won't go into the all the different types of barks and what they mean, as that is not relevant to this article. What is relevant, and what evokes the most concern with owners, is the Tibetan Mastiff's serious warning bark. TMs have a low, deep, resonating bark or roar that can be heard from a great distance. While it is wholly appropriate for protecting shepherds and flocks on the Tibetan plateaus, this can be especially disturbing to neighbors in a tight knit neighborhood, where it seems to shake the windows, and is one reason a TM is not a great choice for an urban home. Personally, I would prefer the deep tones of a TM bark to those of a high-pitched yapper any day. We owned a Shetland Sheepdog at one time, and she drove me crazy chasing planes through the sky and barking the whole way across the yard. I loved that dog, but never learned to love her barking! I spent much of my days trying to tune it out. I can honestly say that when my TMs bark, I listen. There is something, readily apparent to us humans or not, that is not right with his world.

We have already addressed the “why” and “how” of their bark. Moving on to the “when”, this is probably a good time to reiterate that TMs think, act, and work like most other guardian breeds, specifically Livestock

Guardian Breeds, and all LGD breeds are inclined to bark as a first line of protection. It's the wise choice, or in this case, the choice of the wise. But like most LGD breeds, the "when" can become an issue. Tibetan Mastiffs are nocturnal, more like a big cat than a dog. They will gladly sleep all day, only to wake up when the sun goes down and start their property patrol. This is a combination of instinct and learned behavior: Nighttime is when most predators prowl, so it is the time they need to be most alert and vigilant. Daytime noise dissipates, creatures come out to hunt for food, and sounds carry further in the still night air. "To limit the dog's barking to only the daylight hours is vastly reducing their ability to "own" their territory. Predators are clever & they are quick to pick up when the dogs are kept up in the barn or the house or in kennels & they choose their attack times very carefully. Predators also tend to be more active at night, when most prey species are at a distinct disadvantage, so naturally the dogs are going to bark more at night!" (3)

"When" also refers to age. Young dogs tend to bark more than adults, while older, more mature and experienced dogs tend to bark less. Puppies may lack the knowledge, skills, confidence, or experience to assume guard duties, and may look to their person to take the lead when threatened. I always tell my puppy owners that it is their job to protect their puppy until their puppy is ready to protect them. That transition starts to happen sometime between 6 and 9 months. They have to get to the age where they have enough confidence to take on their job, and that will vary from dog to dog. It will also vary depending on the other dogs in the family, their age, experience, and breed. A pup that has an older guardian dog to follow and mimic learns quicker than a pup who assumes guard patrol solo.

Yearlings push the limits and challenge everything. As they enter adolescence, they start to realize that life is not all fun and games. The world can be a dangerous place, and there are threats to their safety and the safety of their people and property. Instinct kicks in, and the barking begins. Unfortunately, they do not yet have a good grasp on what is, and what is not, a real threat. Until they figure it out, barking is a safe bet. Much of their barking at this time is to get your attention: "Hey, Mom, something's out here, you need to come see this!" Because of this, barking seems to be most frequent and intense between the ages of 9 months and 2 years. If someone is going to get frustrated and give up on the breed, this is usually when it happens. Fortunately, by asking for your help and discernment, you have the opportunity to offer input and teach your pup when it is appropriate to bark, and at what. There is no quick path through this phase. Only time and experience, paired with patience and training, will help both of you successfully navigate this stage.

I use the term training because it is what people expect to hear, but for a Tibetan Mastiff, training in the traditional sense is not the answer here. When a TM is actively engaged in pursuing a perceived threat, they become totally focused on doing their job, almost to the point of obsession, and they will totally ignore you and every way you try to get their attention. These dogs have been bred for thousands of years to think and act independently of humans, and guess what? That is exactly what they do. They believe that they know better than you what needs to be done, and perhaps they do. Respect that. Work with that. You cannot train or command a TM to stop barking. It is probably more accurate to say that a TM will train you to respond to their barking, but your response is what trains your TM, not your commands. Just as a pup will look to an older guardian dog for guidance and follow his/her lead, your TM will also look to you and follow your lead. This gives you a unique opportunity to partner with your dog to help them protect you and your home.

The Tibetan Mastiff is not an armchair breed. You can't kick back in your recliner in front of the TV or computer screen, yell out a command, and expect your TM to comply. If your TM is barking, get up, go out, put yourself between the dog and the fence line, and patrol the perimeter of the property with your dog. Talk to your TM. Let him know you have heard the alarm, you are aware of a potential threat, and together you will take care of it. Once you acknowledge his bark and concern, let him know you are in charge and he can calm down. We use the words "settle down" or simply "settle". If he can't calm down, take a leash and walk him back inside with you. Provide a distraction and redirect his attention. We never leave our dogs out to bark for long periods. It is unnecessary once we have identified the threat or a lack thereof, it's disturbing to us and others, it creates

anxiety in the dog, and indeed, every dog within earshot, and it establishes a bad habit that I would rather prevent than try to correct.

Tibetan Mastiffs and barking are a common complaint and frequent topic of conversation among TM owners on social media. The answer consistently seems to be what I just described in the previous paragraphs: Don't ignore it, don't punish it, but rather work through it with your TM with reassurance and redirection. Margo Posner made the following observation in the Tibetan Mastiff Breeders and Owners International group on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/325691887610861>) (4): "They tend to feed off of each other and the other dogs down the road. They need something to interrupt the cycle, and once mine stop, the others usually do, too, and then everyone is quiet. The best advice I can give you is to spend the time and deal with the barking from the beginning, as a puppy. Don't make excuses and say, 'Oh, he's a TM, he is going to bark, it's their nature': He can be taught." I could not agree with this more! I have heard too many people excuse bad behavior or temperament problems in Tibetan Mastiffs as "It's just their nature; it's what they do". Yes, it is what they do IF you don't teach them to do things differently! Sandy Hughes-Rose describes how she interrupts the cycle and redirects: "My TM feels the need to protect us from anyone walking on the road in back of our property and seems to literally lose her mind in the frenzy of barking. The only thing that has worked is to bring her in and put her in her "place" to chill out. It's her disconnect, and her breathing will return to normal again." Kim Pitts reiterated the need to communicate with and validate your dog: "If I am in close proximity to my dog when she starts barking at something outside ... I validate her. I pet her, tell her she is doing a good job, and thank her for protecting me. It helps sometimes to get her to stop barking." Tom Rose posted similar advice: "One thing we found that worked very well for Dave (our TM) was, we told him "Thanks" when he barked. Think about it, they bark to alert us; disciplining them might confuse them, although they're very smart. We'd just tell him thanks, we've got this, and most times he was cool with that. As you already know, if he/she thinks you might be in harm's way, all bets are off".

The good news is that like with all challenges, this, too, shall pass. With consistent barking and other means of defense, a Tibetan Mastiff will convince all the predators in the area that this territory is his, and there will be far fewer challenges and less barking over time. Your Tibetan Mastiff will grow in confidence and skill and his barking will become less frequent, more selective, and more controlled. Going hand in hand with that, somewhere around 2 ½-3 years of age, you will find that you have an (almost!) perfect dog. They don't stop barking, but they do learn what is important enough to bark at, how to let their bark do the work without further anxiety and escalation, and to trust that their owner is a capable partner who will support their work and have their backs.

I'm going to end this article on the same note on which it began: Communication is key to any relationship, including your relationship with your Tibetan Mastiff. Talk to your TM, and allow your TM to talk to you. Barking is a Tibetan Mastiff's love language for those he cares about and wants to protect.

References:

- 1) <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/news/meaning-dogs-barks/>, **Learning to Speak Dog – The Meaning of Your Dog's Barks**, Stephanie Gibeault, Oct 10, 2024, AKC
- 2) <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-97002-2>, **R., Matějka, O., Benediktová, K. et al. Hunting dogs bark differently when they encounter different animal species. *Sci Rep* 11, 17407 (2021).** <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-97002-2>
- 3) Learning About Livestock Guardian Dogs. <https://learningaboutlgds.weebly.com/barking.html>.

- 4) Tibetan Mastiff Breeders and Owners International, Facebook.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/325691887610861>.

Deborah Mayer
Noble Legacy Tibetan Mastiffs
May 2025