

# It's a Dog's life at Drover's Way Farm!



Pyrenees dogs guarding the flock in autumn. Photo credit: Sarah Loten

by Sarah Loten

I was very concerned, one day in late fall, as I looked for Joe. I had looked everywhere. Normally, he would be waiting for me to bring his food, the daily dollop of dry kibble that was payment for his work. Old Joe, as he came to be known long before he acquired that age in years, was one of the most loyal of livestock guardian dogs. He lived day and night with his family, which were his flock of 700-1000 sheep. He saw us as co-managers of the Drover's Way Farm flock, here in eastern Ontario. We all knew that his presence and devotion was critical to keeping these sheep alive — more than anything we could do as mere humans.

Old Joe would bark, urging the sheep away from predators when he sensed

them about. He led the sheep to areas of safety ahead of bad storms. Joe would always pick a high point in the field where he was able to see, clearly, any threat coming into his fold. He always sat beside the sickest of animals when he knew they needed our attention. He would stay behind with a ewe who was lambing, and her newborn lambs. As gentle as he was with newborn lambs, he could be a streak of fury when a coyote came into his field. Old Joe was constantly fending off predators looking for a lamb dinner. When he wasn't with the sheep on that crisp autumn day, I knew that something was very wrong.

Livestock guardian dogs (LGD's) have been taking care of flocks for thousands of years. Arguably, with evidence of

canine remains in archeological sites of herding societies, LGD's have been used as livestock guardians since sheep were domesticated around 8000 BCE, in the areas of the world that are now called Turkey, Iraq and Syria. There are archeological findings of guardian dogs and sheep remains from 3685 BCE. Their use was recorded by Aristotle in 150 BCE. And images of guardian dogs are found in art from 2,500 years ago.

For much of our farming lives, we have used Pyrenees and Maremma dogs to guard our sheep. Old Joe was a cross between these two livestock guardian breeds. Typically, these dogs (of European heritage) are mostly white. They are large, lithe, athletic and calm. Their colour and demeanor help them

blend with the flock, only becoming visible when necessary. Primarily, they are meant to deter predators, through barking, chasing and territorial marking, rather than fighting or killing. They work well, because they tend to stay with the flock, which they consider their family, full time.

A few years ago, despite all the work that our Pyrenees/ Maremma's were doing, we were seeing a lot of kills, primarily from coyotes. Weaker lambs were also being attacked by ravens as they had little defense in the first few days of life. At one point, we were losing up to 100 lambs/ewes in a grazing season. We increased electric fencing, used lighting to illuminate areas where predators might lurk, increased grazing movement, and yarded them in heavily fenced areas at night, but the losses were still increasing. It became clear that we had to get a more aggressive livestock guardian or house sheep full time, which we did not want to do, for ecological reasons. We graze 600+ sheep and their lambs on 300 acres of permanent pasture land, for around 7 months of every year.

We were told about a breed of guardian dog from Armenia, called the Armenian Gampr. I was intrigued, since Armenia and Turkey are the birthplace of

livestock guardian dogs. We discovered a breeder near us who had imported Armenian Gamprs a number of years ago. She was breeding selectively for farmers and homesteaders who wanted an aggressive guardian against predators that was also able to live within a family farm environment without being aggressive to humans.

The Gampr fits this role very well. In Armenia, they typically live in semi-nomadic camps with shepherds and their families during the grazing seasons. They have to be gentle with even the youngest family members, yet intelligent enough to deter unwanted human interference. They also have to have a strong instinct for aggression towards animal predators who could threaten large flocks which, in semi-arid regions, are often dispersed over larger areas.

When we brought our first Armenian Gampr pup home, we were amazed by his nurturing and protective instincts. By six months, Hayk would nose younger weak lambs, staying with them until they got on their feet and were nursing well. If they lost track of their mother, he would gather them in a warm spot in the yard, staying with them until we noticed that there was a problem. Subsequently, we bought another Gampr, Tig. Within six months, we had fewer

losses to predators. After about 12-18 months, we stopped having coyote kills altogether.

The combination of the Pyrenees dogs we have now, who live full time with the flock, and the Armenian Gamprs that are on guard, using our house (camp?!) as the headquarters to guard from, works remarkably well. The Pyrs sound the alarm if coyote activity is sensed or heard. They bark and defend, staying close to the flock and moving the sheep away from the predator. The Armenian Gamprs hear the alarm barks and the coyote calls, and rush to the scene with a powerful stride, covering 100 acres in minutes. The Gamprs then go on the attack, chasing the predator away from their territory which extends from the house/camp to the fence lines. If the predator continues to threaten and doesn't leave, they will attack and kill, which isn't as typical for the Pyrenees. But the Gamprs are bigger and more powerful dogs than the Pyrs, so usually the threat of their attack is enough to send a predator on its way. When the threat subsides, the Gamprs will work the perimeter of the farm, covering the edges of the pasture, trotting, marking, and checking for risk. The Pyrs will settle back within the flock and the Gamprs will settle either on high ground just outside the flock, or they might come back to the house to await further alarms by the Pyrs.

The guarding process between the two breeds is so effective on our farm that we recently imported Hova, a female Armenian Gampr, from an isolated herding community near the Armenian/Turkish border. We want to encourage greater genetic diversity in Canada for this relatively rare breed as we think it has great potential for farms like ours. Hova, like her Canadian-born mates, loves people. At 15 months of age, she is venturing out into the fields to take her place in the pack of dogs who keep our flock safe.

Old Joe, the dog who began this story, was with us for many years. He was a sentient presence, a protector, a nurturer, and a work partner. He was 'just a farm dog,' but like all his compatriots, he was

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An Armenian Gampr tolerating a Border Collie pup. Photo credit: Sarah Loten



A livestock guardian dog stays with a ewe and her newborns until they can rejoin the main flock. The ewes keep their lambs separate in a sheltered spot (often a hedgerow) until they are ready to follow the grazing sheep, usually within a few hours. Photo credit: Sarah Loten

so much more. LGD's are the cornerstone of sheep grazing operations. When Old Joe went missing that day, and we couldn't find him, I knew he had done his last shift at Drover's Way Farm. I found him on a high knoll in our orchard field, an area that was an easy coyote trap for ewes that came to graze apples. Joe had died of old age while protecting his flock, doing the work that he was meant to do. ■

**Sarah Loten** is a farmer and shepherd (sheep-herder?) at Drover's Way Farm in Perth, Ontario, where she has been tending her flock for over 25 years, with the help of an ever-changing crew of canine companions.

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