

HOW TO SELECT A LIVESTOCK GUARDIAN DOG PUPPY

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HOW TO SELECT AN LGD PUPPY

An effective livestock guardian dog (LGD) is the result of properly rearing a puppy with an inherent genetic propensity to protect livestock. Each farm and ranch should strive to source the right kind of genetics for their situation. Keep in mind that LGD behaviors are still greatly influenced by how they are managed during the first year of their life. In contrast, physical traits such as hair coat, color, mature size, etc. are preset by genetics.

1. Buy from reputable genetics that fit your need

A knowledgeable breeder will know the pedigree of the pups being offered, as well as their individual personalities and behaviors. Observation over time is generally more reliable than puppy aptitude testing, but a few simple tests and observations can be helpful if you have the hands-on opportunity. Ask to see the parents of the litter and to ensure both parents are working LGDs. It is recommended that you observe the puppies in person before committing to the purchase, yet in some circumstances, this is not possible. In this situation, quiz the breeder about traits listed below and request pictures or video of the pups if possible.

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2. Good health

Healthy pups are a combination of proper genetics and management. A healthy pup will be an appropriate weight, with a smooth coat and free of parasites. Be sure not to confuse a potbelly with good health as this may be a sign of improper feeding or internal parasites. While these things can be resolved, it will cost you time and money. If a pup has more than three of the defects listed below, you may want to reconsider your choice. Things such as having working parents, being bonded with stock from birth, and good health are more important than hair coat length in most areas.

Important things to check:

- i. Check to see if the eyes are clean and clear, the ears are clean, the nose is dark pigmented, the feet are straight forward, the gums are bright pink, the teeth are straight and aligned, and that the pup has a proper gripping bite.
- ii. The pup should look wide at the hocks with proper angulation in the legs and feet pointing forward. This will help to ensure the pup will be able to move correctly as an adult.



- iii. What type of hair coat do the parents have? Longer-haired dogs in Texas require more maintenance to keep them actively guarding your livestock.
- iv. Ectropion eyes, or saggy eyelids, are not recommended in LGDs, so be sure and check the parents' eyes. Dogs with saggy eyelids may easily get seeds and other debris caught in their eyelids.
- v. How big will the pup grow up to be? Look at parents and siblings as an indicator of the mature size of your pup. Look at feet size; big feet indicate big dogs. If you have larger predators, a bigger dog may be able to better defend itself against predators such as lions or wolves. However, larger dogs require more feed to maintain their size, which costs more money. Unusually large pups may suffer from orthopedic problems as adults.
- vi. Avoid sick, lame, or unusually lethargic pups.
- vii. Incorrect markings for its breed type may indicate the pup is crossbred with a non-LGD. Keep in mind that crosses of two or more LGD breeds can result in variations in color patterns.
- viii. Dark pigment on the pup's lips, nose, and eyelids are preferred. Unpigmented areas can lead to repeated sunburns and could result in early-onset cancers.
- ix. Ask if the pup is current on vaccinations and a parasite control program.
 1. The breeder should provide a list of the products used and dates given.
- x. Vet checked – Optional
 1. Parents are Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA) certified (hips)
 2. Veterinarian Certified Health Check



3. No prey drive

Prey drive is the instinctive inclination of a carnivore to find, pursue, and capture prey. In LGDs, this instinctive drive has been bred against for thousands of years. LGDs have been bred to guard and protect livestock instead. An LGD pup that stalks, chases, or bites livestock should be avoided; however, these traits may or may not be exhibited in younger pups. Pups over 8 months old and yearling dogs should not be exhibiting these behaviors.

To test a pup's prey drive, throw a small object past them. Dogs with low prey drive will often just watch a thrown object go by or investigate it once, but not again. LGDs are not retrievers and should not chase or bring back the object.

4. Submissive reaction to stock

If you can quietly watch the pups interact with stock, look for a pup that may be curious but is somewhat cautious. Avoiding eye contact with livestock is an excellent indicator of good instinct. Some LGDs have this instinct naturally, and others need to be trained by livestock and owners. Livestock guardian dogs need to tolerate pokes and prods by livestock, so you should avoid a pup that barks, jumps on, or bites stock even if they are accidentally stepped on. Pups with this behavior can inadvertently injure livestock or cause them to fear the guardian dog. Older pups should be submissive and calm around stock. Look for behaviors such as walking up to stock rather than running, dropping to the ground or rolling over, lowering the head and tail, licking at the mouths of stock, and choosing to sleep next to stock—even through a fence.

5. Calm temperament

Look for a pup that is interested in you but not overly aggressive, fearful, shy, or clingy. The pup that runs up to you first or insists on being “in your face” may not be the best choice for a livestock guardian dog. Full-time LGDs used on large ranch operations should be more independent-minded problem-solvers who are not dependent on human companionship. Pups that walk off by themselves after meeting you are often good choices. Ideally, pups should be calm and mild-mannered but become alert and exhibit guardian behaviors, such as barking, at new potential threats or noises. Avoid pups that chase balls, growl, bite, or struggle when you handle them. Correct human socialization before 14 weeks of age will help pups form a positive relationship with humans.

6. Male or female?

LGD research has shown that both sexes guard equally well, especially if they are spayed or neutered. If you plan on keeping more than one LGD, neutering or spaying will make it easier for you to place dogs together to work. In addition, intact bitches may be distracted from their duties when in heat or raising a litter. Intact males are usually slower to mature, distracted by female dogs in heat, and more likely to be aggressive toward other dogs when they are grown.

7. Age

Pups need to stay with their mother and siblings until at least 8 weeks of age. By weaning at 7 to 9 weeks of age, pups learn to play and interact with parents and siblings, which develops proper bite inhibition. If your



pup is receiving good livestock experience and you are a first-time owner, consider extending this time through an arrangement with your breeder. However, if your pup is not with stock, you should begin the livestock bonding and human socialization process immediately.

In general, the bonding process should be started by 8 weeks of age, or the dog may not bond properly to your livestock and may have issues later staying with your livestock.

8. Roaming

Although difficult to accomplish, LGDs trained to respect fences are much easier to manage. It is important that LGDs stay with their stock in the pasture in which the owner places them. Roaming is one of the leading causes of LGDs being replaced. Almost half of working LGDs are lost within 6 years. Make sure to ask your breeder if the puppies have ever gotten out of their pen. Do their adult dogs leave their charges on a regular basis, and if so, how far do they usually travel? Look for signs such as yokes or drag lines on the adult dogs. These are a good indicator that they are roaming. Rearing an LGD dog with livestock in a puppy-proof bonding pen will help decrease roaming behavior as an adult.

9. Questions to ask your breeder

- a. Do you offer a guarantee? If so, what does it cover?
- b. Do you offer guidance to new owners?
- c. Do you have both parents and/or siblings to see?
- d. Why do you feel these puppies would be a good fit for my operation?
- e. What makes the working parents good livestock guardian dogs?
- f. What type of livestock are the puppies raised with, and from what age?
- g. Have the puppies been able to escape their pen?
- h. Is the pup purebred? If not, is it crossed with any non-LGD breeds?
- i. Why did you cross those breeds of LGDs?
- j. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your dogs?
- k. Have you seen any health defects in older LGDs?
- l. Can you provide a reference to prior LGD clients?

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