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EUP Farm Inspires Research on Dogs as Wolf Deterrent

Flock of 1,000 Sheep Guarded by Great Pyrenees on Rudyard Land

By Amy Polk



Central Michigan University Professor Tom Gehring holds up two Great Pyrenees puppies, Clifford and Malachi, one of which remains at Mr. Gehring's Farwell farm and now weighs more than 150 pounds. The other is from the Eric and Penny Wallis farm in Rudyard. (Photograph by Joelle Gehring)

Tom Gehring sees tremendous potential in a big white dog that has been used for centuries to protect livestock.

In his search for non-lethal ways to defend property from predators, the Central Michigan University professor encountered Great Pyrenees dogs at Eric and Penny Wallis' farm in Rudyard. Mr. Gehring was at the Wallis sheep farm testing fladry, another ancient but little used method of scaring wolves away from fields, when he learned that the Wallises were successfully using Great Pyrenees guard dogs to help guard their flock of more than 1,000 sheep from local predators. He has now created a research project around the dog's potential and is testing their effectiveness on six farms in the western Upper Peninsula.

"I think guard dogs have one of the lowest costs of all the control methods," Mr. Gehring said. "I think it's an even more farmerfriendly tool (than other methods), and there's quite a bit of interest out there from farmers."

He sees guard dogs as a real solution to living and farming in wolf country. Wolves now number anywhere from 400 to 500 animals in Michigan, are seen as a growing threat to livestock farms. Some farmers think the ability to shoot and kill wolves is the solution to potential attacks. Removing wolves from protected status may allow more lethal control, but won't necessarily solve the problem.

"If wolves are de-listed, the probwon't go away," Mr. Gehring said. When nuisance wolves are killed, others tend to hit the same farm. "Within a year, there may be more attacks."

Coyotes also attack livestock, and bears have been known to lurk around fields. Guard dogs not only scare predators away by their presence, but also actively chase predators away and patrol farms.



Anna Cellar, a Central Michigan University research student from Ohio, and Megan Provost, an Iron Mountain graduate student, walk two Great Pyrenees in the guard dog research project around an Upper Peninsula pasture to introduce the dogs to an electric fence. (Photograph by Tom Gehring, Central Michigan University)



Central Michigan University professor Tom Gehring and graduate student Anna Cellar delivered these Great Pyrenees puppies to farmers in the Upper Peninsula a year ago. (Photograph by Tom Gehring, Central Michigan University)

Great Pyrenees, which weigh between 100 to 150 pound each, will patrol the perimeter of pasture at night, bark at predator noises, and scent mark the perimeter of the pasture. They do not herd and have a calm and placid temperament, although are rare cases where they have harassed or attacked livestock, or strayed from the herd. Those cases are usually blamed on poor training.

"They are innately very protective of the livestock they are raised with," Mr. Gehring said.

Raising guard dogs with sheep or cattle creates a bond between the dog and the livestock. As the dog matures, it spends much of its time near the sheep and repels other animals that enter its personal space.

In Mr. Gehring's study, six farms in six different wolf pack ranges were each given two Great Pyrenees puppies last year. The dogs have spent the past year attaching themselves to the cattle herds on those farms and have been trained to guard, rather than play with livestock. This year will be the real test of the dogs' effectiveness, and Mr. Gehring and a CMU graduate student will monitor the farms that have dogs and three other farms without dogs. The incidence of predator attacks on all the farms will be compared. Anna Cellar, a CMU graduate student, will be working on the project for her master's research.

If the dogs work the way they are supposed to, Mr. Gehring hopes to expand the number of test farms using the dogs from six to 24. The project, which started as a two-year study, has already been expanded to four years. The dogs were provided free to the farmers, and Mr. Gehring hopes to secure enough funding to cover the dog maintenance expenses over the four years of the study. Food and veterinary expenses can cost up to \$500 for each dog.

Compared to additional fencing, wolf shock collars, fladry, and lethal control, however, the cost of dogs is minimal, Mr. Gehring insists. And the benefits include an active, living protector that should work for up to eight to 10 years. They also guard against coyotes, bears, and deer, something Mr. Gehring sees as a bonus. Guard dogs may aid in preventing the spread of bovine tuberculosis between cattle and deer by scaring deer from livestock feed. Mr. Gehring uses Great Pyrenees on his own sheep farm in Farwell and said they have been an effective coyote deterrent.

Finding a solution to the farmer-wolf conflict has particular significance to Mr. Gehring, since his roots are on a Wisconsin dairy farm.

"It's important to me and it's something I care about, as well as wolf conservation," he said. "Farmers really have a chance to become active in this and to become self-reliant in protecting their farms."

Mr. Gehring hopes to eventually develop a research and education program that provides dog training, breeder contacts, and possible government assistance for farmers who utilize guard dogs.

Anyone interested in the project should call Tom Gehring at (989) 774-2484, or send him e-mail at Tom.Gehring@cmich.edu.



A Great Pyrenees dog on one of the Upper Peninsula farms greets a cow in the pasture. (Photograph by Anna Cellar)