

Predator Control

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There is no part of the world other than Antarctica that does not have natural predators. Although adult llamas (llamas and alpacas are referred to as “llamas”...with one “L”) may not be threatened by some (like coyote), cria are always at risk. Every region has its own complement of predators (almost all areas have to deal with one of the worst—feral or loose dogs as they chase anything) and good predator control will vary for each farm.

We like to view predator control with a “layered approach.” The more predators and types of predators, your aversion to risk, and your pocket book all determine how many layers to use. Your first step is to contact your local Agricultural Extension agent, Fish and Game office, and nearby livestock breeders to find out what you are protecting against. All good predator control begins with quality fencing properly designed and installed. More details can be found in the article on Fencing, but basically no-climb field fencing or electrified fencing are the best. Wood fencing and barbed wire fencing are designed more to keep animals in than predators out and are not suitable for camelids. Fence height will vary depending upon your predator load but 4–5 feet is usually sufficient.

Let’s talk a little about predators themselves. First, loose and feral dogs are pack animals (like wolves) so where there’s one, there are usually more. Most have highly developed chase instincts, so anything that moves is prey or something with which to play. Even if the intent is not to kill, chasing causes extreme stress in llamas which can cause miscarriage in pregnant females. Dogs are generally not as intelligent as coyote or wolves and consequently may run right through electrified fencing which I’ve personally witnessed. This is why “no climb” fencing is superior to high tensile fencing. Dogs, like coyote will dig under fencing if hungry or interested enough. Measures like burying mesh underground can be used but are expensive and of minimal help—they’ll just dig deeper!

Coyote are found virtually everywhere in North America. They are quiet, highly intelligent, and usually are solitary hunters. Weighing 35–40 lbs., they are not a threat to adult llamas but a cria is no match. Bear are herbivorous but if hungry enough will eat whatever meat is available including adult llamas. Wolves are found in only very isolated areas but are a formidable threat if present. Like dogs, they will dig under fencing and hunt in packs. Mountain lion are the single most dangerous threat. Even more stealthy and quiet than coyote, they can clear a 10’ fence from a sitting position. If a tree is available that overhangs a fence line, they will quietly sit on a branch until an unsuspecting animal is underneath and then drop down for the kill. Other animals like deer, elk, and moose although not predators do pose a parasitic vector threat, or, in the case of moose, they can breach the fence line itself.

Now that you’re sufficiently afraid of what’s out there, what do you do? You already have good fencing but we’ve seen the best fence has limitations. Some people have success hanging noisemakers or radios on the fence or in trees near likely intrusion points. These devices will usually scare off coyote

and some dogs but will not deter bear, wolves, or mountain lion. Geese and guinea fowl are known for their amazing hearing and can be pastured free range (which have parasitic control value as well) and can alert you to the presence of a threat. It’s then you and/or your gun vs. the predator. Personally, we would not want to try and take down a bear or mountain lion unless we were a superb shot and knew what we were doing. The prospect of a wounded dangerous animal is not attractive. Plus, what if it’s the middle of the night and you don’t wake up?

Many llama breeders employ llamas or donkeys as guard animals. Both have great eyesight, good hearing, and have little natural fear of predators which is both a plus and a minus. We’ve heard many stories of brave llamas or donkeys stomping coyote to death (which we mostly attribute to “alpaca/llama/donkey urban myths” and actually know one llama breeder who watched this happen. Most honest and caring llama breeders don’t recommend the use of llamas as guard animals unless used in conjunction with Livestock Guard Dogs (LGDs). A llama or donkey will rush a bear or mountain lion out of lack of experience and is no match for either. Used solely on their own, we’ve heard of far too many mutilations and deaths. Basically, llamas and donkeys are sitting ducks if dog packs, wolf packs, bear, or mountain lion are on your predator list.

That brings us to one of our favorite topics—livestock guardian dogs. LGDs were, like herding dogs, among the first animals domesticated by man when he changed from mobile hunting/gathering tribes to settled agricultural communities. Sheep were the first mammals domesticated after we settled down because they were small, easy to catch, and provided milk, meat, and fiber. Wild dogs and wolves had been coming around our campfires for a long time and at some point people started noticing that some were more apt to chase (which led to herding dogs who have the most keenly developed chase instinct) while others were less so. Somebody eventually got the idea to try mating the ones less likely to chase and found some of their offspring had even a less developed chase instinct. Selective breeding over many generations eventually produced the 28 or so acknowledged livestock guard dog breeds.

LGDs have been used by herdsman for at least 6000 years. Throughout most of the Middle East (where sheep and these dogs were first domesticated) and later throughout Asia, Europe and beyond, LGDs have been the primary guardians of flocks. They, like herding dogs, are among, if not the most, intelligent dog breeds. In many areas, sheep are taken up to mountain pastures in the spring and left alone with their herd and guard companions. Herd dogs keep the flock together while the LGDs maintain a watchful perimeter. In the fall the flock is brought down for winter pasturing. In areas like Europe where sheep were bred to be primarily white, so are the LGD breeds (Great Pyrenees, Kuvasz, etc.) so they blend in with the flock and thus indistinguishable to predators. In areas where sheep are multicolored, so are the LGDs (Anatolian, Akbash, Tibetan Mastiffs, etc.).

LGDs bond with the herd and live with them 24 hours a day. The herd members quickly learn that they are not a threat—but are always obeyed. The LGDs become the “alphas” in the herd. When a cria is born, after mom and the other females bond, the alpha LGD (if there is more than one) bonds next. Most LGD breeders who raise livestock recommend letting the dogs eat the placenta to complete the bonding—after you inspect it for normalcy, of course.

LGDs are fearless and will protect their herd, you, your children/family, other animals pastured with them, and your pets if you go through the proper introduction, to the death. There is a misconception among North American sheep breeders that LGDs will kill young animals particularly if not properly fed. We are unaware of any instance of this occurring; they would sooner die. In some areas where the only threats are an occasional stray dog or coyote, a single LGD is enough. Multiple LGDs work as a team with the “alpha” directing traffic. LGD’s primary instinct is to protect their herd. Instead of immediately charging aggressively towards the threat, they begin by barking in the direction of the threat if it is outside the pasture. If it is already inside, they usually will herd the animals inside the barn or to a location they perceive as safe and then place themselves between the threat and the herd. If the threat persists approaching the herd, the LGD will begin making fake assaults, barking all the way, teeth bared, and hair fluffed to make themselves look as big as possible. These fake assaults usually drive the predator away. If the threat gets too close, they will attack.

A coyote or single dog (even traditional guard dogs like Dobermans etc.) is no match. LGDs have thick hair and fat layers around their necks to help protect their most vulnerable area as well as being tremendously powerful pound for pound. Bears naturally fear dogs (they equate them with wolves) and usually avoid any area where barking occurs. If you have mountain lion or wolves as a serious threat, multiple dogs are necessary. Two or three LGDs will attack from multiple directions driving them off. A large wolf pack will rarely approach signs or the scent of humans. Colorado State University, one of the key LGD research institutions, has noted that unprotected spring lamb losses due to predation in Colorado was near 50%; when LGDs are added to the herd, the loss drops to under 3%.

LGDs are most effective when used in conjunction with good fencing and other alert animals like geese and guinea fowl. They often hear the intruder first and alert the other guard animals like llamas (which given their height and eyesight may see the predator first and alert the dogs). This is a truly layered approach, natural and the most effective means of predator control available.

And then there's the dirty wee beastie.....the mouse!

Avoid mousebait which can be lethal to not only alpacas but harmful to other animals if it finds its way to unsafe locations. The best and most effective, natural control is a good mouser...the cat!

Before introducing a new cat or kitten to the herd it is smart to have them tested for Feline Leukemia and Feline Aids Virus. In themselves these diseases cannot be contracted by alpacas, however, should a cat or kitten prove positive for either or both it is symptomatic of a compromised immune system in your wee feline which could translate into them possibly shedding the very dangerous toxoplasmosis which can definitely be contracted by alpacas.

After dining on the mouse for several weeks at a time, it is also recommended to de-worm your cat at least every 3 months. This eliminates tapeworm and other parasites to not only keep your cat healthy but to avoid parasites being picked up by the alpacas.