

Guarding Unconventional Livestock

by Cindy Benson - 2016

Benson Ranch is 360 acres of open fields and wooded areas, including fifteen pastures of varying sizes. One side of the property borders BLM land so we are in mountain lion country and had losses to them prior to the arrival of our incredible dogs. There are currently fourteen Maremmas at work here, primarily guarding Miniature Donkeys and mini cows. At about sixteen animals, the cow herd is relatively small and easy to manage. Guarding the donkeys is a different matter entirely!

We have approximately one hundred Miniature Donkeys at any given time and produce twenty to thirty foals a year. Donkeys are naturally untrusting of dogs. It has been a challenge to teach them to accept the dogs, while keeping my dogs safe and confident. Interestingly, the donkeys are more accepting of some dogs than others. I would have thought one white dog was like another but that does not seem to be the case. When I introduce new dogs into a field it shakes everybody up for a day or two, including dogs in surrounding fields because they are all very sensitive to change.



Over the last two years we have purchased many dogs, ranging in age from eight week old pups to young dogs, and even a couple of adults. None of these dogs had experience with the types of livestock we needed them to work with. Some of the dogs purchased were brought here as guardians only and most of them have stayed. In creating our registered Maremma breeding program eleven pups were purchased with only three of them staying on as permanent breeding dogs. We have been blessed to deal with reputable breeders who sent us very nice pups. We are adamant about requiring appropriate health

testing scores, in addition to meeting our criteria of guarding aptitude, temperament, and conformation. Based on these criteria Stoneybrook's Hannah, Stoneybrook's Milan, and Watermark Centurion will stay.

My point here is that over a relatively short space of time we have had experience with many dogs in unconventional circumstances. For the most part we have been successful but there has been a learning curve, and as our experience has increased we have found ways to make these transitions easier on the dogs and livestock. I thought I'd share some of that here just in case it might be helpful to others.

I always work my dogs in pairs. They are more effective as guardians in pairs, are more likely to survive confrontation with a predator if it comes to that, and I am absolutely sure they are happier to have a friend to play with. While I very much appreciate the job my dogs do for me I could never feel good about using them if I felt it was at their expense. I keep a small group of sheep that I employ as puppy trainers. My sheep are good at this as they are not flighty and like the dogs. I always start the young dogs with them, paired with a mature dog to mentor appropriate behavior. I think two pups in with the sheep might have a bouncy good time and have the opportunity to learn undesirable habitual behaviors. The mature dog tends to take that play behavior in an acceptable direction. Not always, but mostly. I do keep a close eye on things. They are kept close in so I am able to supervise and intervene quickly if I need to. I have found that starting the young dogs with the gentle sheep builds their confidence. I am VERY careful that the pups are not hurt and are encouraged to mature into the brave dogs they were bred to be. There are certainly ways to set them up for success, or failure.



All the pups and dogs have learned differently and on different time frames. As they have shown me they are ready to take on more responsibility they are transitioned to working with the cows, and then the donkeys, in increasingly larger and more remote areas. I have these two lovely old geriatric donkey girls that I start the dogs with when I think they are mature enough to work around the donkeys. I need the dogs to be conscious thinkers at this point in that I want them to have a sense of self preservation. I have not found any of the dogs to be species specific. They have all been willing to guard anything I put them with, be it sheep, cows, or donkeys, but they have all felt the need to touch the new livestock and thoroughly check them out. In the case of



introduction to donkeys this poses some risk to my dogs because they may be kicked at. I do believe the dogs are better guardians with livestock they have affection for, rather than just a tolerance of, so the donkeys have this opportunity for a first impression to encourage emotional bonding. I am very careful that these first few days go well. After the dogs are comfortable with the donkeys they seem able to handle a setback or two, but right at the beginning their psyche is fragile. I believe this is especially true of pups but applies to adults as well.

Not all of my dogs can work with the donkeys. For instance, my dear neutered male Hooligan became relegated to cow duty eventually, and is a solid guardian there. He had been my most trusted donkey guardian and had the most critical field to watch over, but

that changed. He was one of the first dogs to work with the donkeys, and that was often a thankless job as he was rolled a time or two. He carries a grudge and that became increasingly apparent over time. If he decides he needs to kiss a nose he will persist until he is allowed to, even if it means that donkey is on the run trying to evade him. Never mind that his intentions are pure; it's a problem. The cows aren't concerned about him, and he has never been hurt by them, so he and his partner Delilah have found their niche.



Currently, our registered male Centurion and his spayed partner Tessa guard the donkey moms and foals. Tessa was one of the first dogs here and has been hurt by the donkeys at some point I am sure but she seems to have forgiven them. I understood how to be more careful with Centurion by the time he came along, and my donkeys had been living with the dogs for a couple of years and are safer to be around, so he has had an easier time of it. Centurion loves to kiss noses but will leave off and try again later if the donkey becomes agitated, so he is a perfect balance for work in this field.

It has been a big help to have different kinds of animals to transition the dogs with based on their age and temperament, in addition to areas to transition with as their readiness to take on more responsibility increased. I stay with each pair of dogs when they eat, and I keep an eye on things through the day as much as possible. It's a wonder what I used to do with all my free time! The seven pairs of dogs work together and at night sometimes this ranch really lights up. If one pair of dogs sees something they truly think is a threat the way they bark sets off the rest. I can shine a spotlight



and usually figure out which direction the problem is coming from. It's helpful that the dogs are white and show up well in the dark! Young dogs are noisier than well seasoned guardians. My husband used to say Hooligan barked at air. If the young dogs are falling apart about something I don't think is significant I have found it helpful to go out, even late at night sometimes, to let them know they are doing a good job. This seems to build their confidence, and rather than encouraging them to bark more I think it has made them less reactionary in most cases. I do look forward to a time when the majority of dogs here are mature because I think the ranch will be much quieter at night. I know Mitch is looking forward to the same!