

PROPER GROOMING OF LIVESTOCK GUARDIAN DOGS

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All livestock guardian dogs (LGDs) need regular grooming of their coats to remain healthy. LGDs have three hair coat lengths: long, medium, and short. Longer-haired breeds, such as Great Pyrenees, need regular grooming, while medium- and short-haired breeds, such as Akbash or Maremmas, require less frequent maintenance and are less prone to matting. Initially bred to be working dogs, LGDs have developed double-haired and even triple-haired coats that, in many ways, take care of themselves, while protecting the dogs from environmental allergens, predators, and the elements. This factsheet applies to all livestock guardian dog breeds except for Komondors, which have a unique curly hair coat that requires special grooming methods.

An LGD's stiffer outer coat, or guard hair, helps to protect the dog from extreme weather. This coat repels most snow and light rain while protecting the skin from the sun's rays. An LGD's softer undercoat helps to keep it warm in the winter and cool in the summer by trapping the cool morning air. It is particularly important not to shave an LGD's entire coat, as its skin will not be protected from rain, snow, or hot sun. Trimming the fur to 1 to 2 inches in sticker season can help the dog stay comfortable and collect less debris without risking damage to the hair follicles or coat texture.

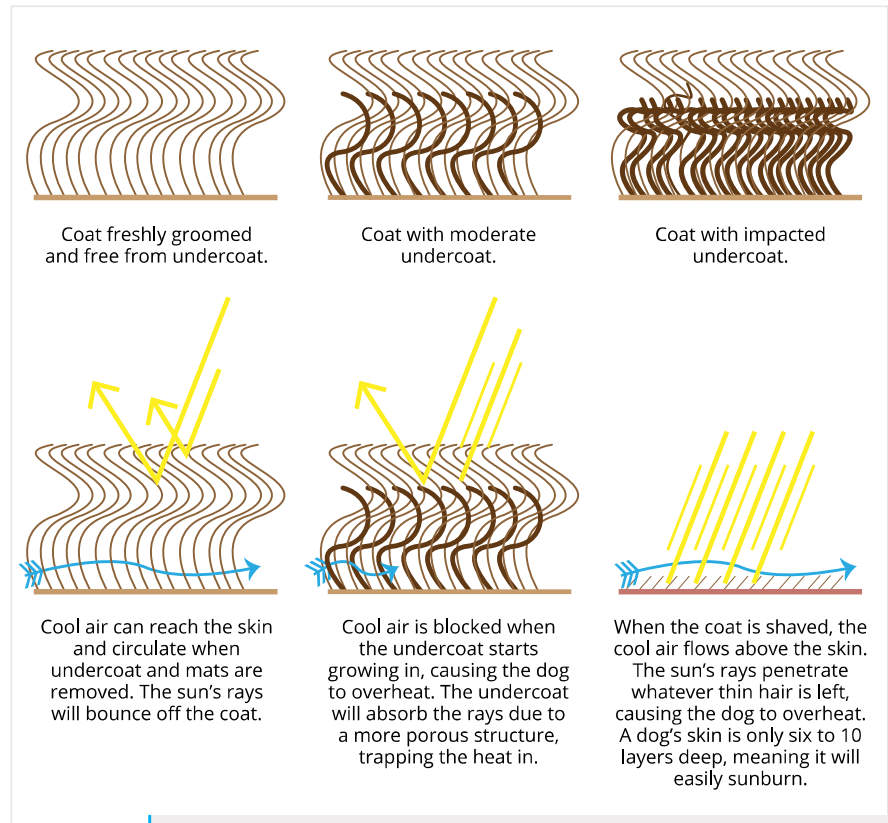


Figure 1. Double-haired dog coat in response to clipping and regrowth.

Livestock guardian dogs need regular grooming, especially during the spring and fall when their coats shed massive amounts of hair. Proper grooming includes brushing, nail clipping, ear cleaning, and the occasional bath. Depending on the breed of dog, ranch location, and time of year, the needed frequency of grooming may change.

A typical recommended house pet grooming schedule is every 4 to 6 weeks. However, four baths a year will prevent fungal and bacterial skin infections in the body's largest organ, the epidermis, and keep matting to a minimum. Matted, pelted, and impacted coats can trap moisture and breed bacteria, leading to skin lesions/infections that may eventually affect mobility circulation and even lead to loss of limbs or hematomas. LGDs need more grooming during their spring and fall shedding, or blowout, seasons. "Blowing coat" is when a dog sheds its winter coat in the spring in preparation for hot weather and its summer coat in the fall to grow a winter coat.

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HOW OFTEN SHOULD AN LGD BE BRUSHED?

Brushing daily to weekly is ideal. Learning to line brush dogs with longer coats is essential, as is finding a slicker brush, pin brush, rake, and comb that are enjoyable (or tolerable) for the LGD. Look over the dog frequently, checking for embedded foxtails, grass spears, insect bites, skin redness, hotspots, or irritations. Catching these issues early on prevents severity.

Dogs with longer coats living in warmer climates may need more grooming than dogs living in cooler temperatures. Their thicker coats will shed more in the spring. Their fur may look patchy, dirty, and unhealthy around this time. It is entirely normal, and regular baths, brushing, and combing can help remove the old coat.



Figure 2. An undercoat rake is an excellent tool for grooming LGDs.
Photo courtesy of Katherine Saldana, 2023

THE PROPER WAY TO BRUSH AN LGD

Correct Tools are Essential

Undercoat rake – This brush (Fig. 2) removes the lifeless hair from the undercoat, which is helpful during the spring and fall. Depending on the length of the LGD's coat, use a ½-inch to 1-inch-long undercoat rake with rounded tips so that it does not harm the skin (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Double-sided undercoat rake with rotating pins.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

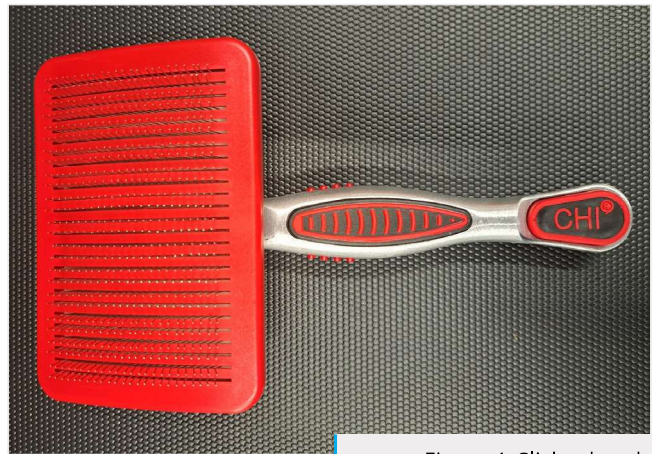


Figure 4. Slicker brush.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

Slicker brush – This brush (Fig. 4) works well for cleaning the outer hair coat. The brush removes dirt, stickers, burrs, and loose hair. The brush does not get very deep into the hair coat and must be used with other tools. However, it is excellent for use as a first step to remove debris and surface tangles before a rake, pin brush, or steel comb. Use either a hard or soft slicker brush or both, and there are both short and long wire pin options.



Figure 5. Double-sided brush.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

Double-sided brush – This brush (Fig. 5) should also be used in conjunction with other tools. The pin and bristle brushes polish the fur and make the coat look shiny and healthy. They are also helpful in areas like the face that need a gentler touch.



Figure 6. Double-sided comb.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

Double-sided comb – Combs ensure the coat is completely clear of any remaining tangles after other tools have done the heavy lifting. After brushing with the direction of the coat with other devices, run the comb through all the dog’s hair, all the way to the skin, without hitting any obstacles. If tangles or mats are found, gently work them out with the comb and detangling spray, starting at the ends of the hair and working toward the skin.



Figure 7. Detangling comb.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

Detangling comb – Following the slicker brush, a detangling comb (Fig. 7) works great for dogs that get many tangles in finer-hair areas, like behind the ears. Some people prefer a detangling comb with fine and coarse tines on it.

Spray-on detangler – If a dog has tangles or mats, spray the hair liberally with detangling spray, massage it into the hair, and gently comb it through to work out the mats. Detangling spray works great when used with the tools mentioned above. No matter how big a dog’s mats get, it is best to put in the time to use the combs and the detangling solution. There are always exceptions that validate cutting out mats versus de-matting, such as mats on aging or disabled dogs, aging or disabled owners, mats that are painfully close to the skin, or mats that are severe enough to require a shave with veterinary assistance. A humane and kind choice wins every time.

Brush an LGD with the Undercoat Rake

Remember to deal with mats first so that brushing does not hurt the LGD. Use high-value rewards and positive associations if a dog is afraid of grooming tools and sessions. Using the undercoat rake, brush in the direction of hair growth after tangles and matting are removed so as not to cause pain or discomfort. The undercoat rake may take work during the main shedding seasons. It removes substantial amounts of lifeless hair (Fig. 8). Certain areas of the skin are soft and can be sensitive. Make sure to be gentle and pay special attention to the backs of the ears, tail, armpits, and feet, as they are prone to mats.



Figure 8. Amount of hair an undercoat rake can remove from an LGD.
Photo courtesy Pfeiffer Ranch, 2022

Use a Slicker Brush

The slicker brush will remove loose hair quickly. Brush the dog in the direction of fur growth from head to tail. Brushing the LGD with hard and soft slicker brushes simultaneously will do the job much faster.

Use a Pin and Bristle (Double-sided) Brush

To keep the dog’s coat shiny and healthy, use a double-sided brush to complete the grooming session. Always brush with the growth of the fur from head to tail. This tool helps to detangle and distribute natural oils to keep the hair coat supple. Use the slicker or pin brush against the grain in spots to work out matting and lift it away from the skin.

Use a Double-sided Comb

Use the double-sided comb with the coarse side in which the pins are farther apart. Comb the dog's hair coat to check for missed mats or tangles. Gently work through any mats found, and then use the side with the finer tines to go through the coat again. If more extensive mats or tangles are discovered, return to the slicker and detangling spray before using the detangling comb. Make sure to be gentle and pay special attention to the backs of the ears, tail, armpits, and feet, as they are prone to mats.

When Needed, Use a Detangling Solution

If the dog has a lot of tangles or mats that are hard to comb out, use a detangling solution to help loosen the coat in these areas. The solution also helps speed up the process of detangling the matted hair. Use the solution liberally and massage it into the fur. Most pet and livestock stores carry a variety of these products.

WATCH OUT FOR TICKS ON LGDs

Livestock guardian dogs are prone to tick bites since they live out in pastures and run around in the brush all day. When grooming dogs, always check for ticks and remove them immediately with tick removal tweezers (Fig. 9). It is best not to use bare hands to remove ticks, as some tick-borne canine diseases can be transmitted to humans. Regular flea and tick medication is vital to keep LGDs from getting tick-borne diseases like Lyme disease and Ehrlichiosis. Check with a veterinarian for a flea and tick control product appropriate for the geographic area and ranching operation.



Figure 9.
An example of tick tweezers.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

PROTECTING LGDs FROM GRASS SEEDS, BURRS, AND FOXTAILS

Cheatgrass and foxtails create significant problems for dogs in certain regions of the United States. Regularly examine LGDs in the dry season. It is crucial that pieces of plants do not get into the dogs' feet, ears, eyes, noses, and mouths, causing infections. Sensitive areas like the armpits should also be examined. Use tweezers if a piece of grass has already started to penetrate the dog's skin. If a seed, burr, or foxtail has already penetrated deeply, the dog may need to go to the vet to get it removed.



Figure 10. Leg injury on a mature LGD from grass seeds.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2021

Infections from these items can happen rapidly and cause lameness in LGDs. These grasses can cause a dog severe pain and infections (Fig. 10).

LGD BREED NAIL CLIPPING

It is best to regularly manipulate LGDs' feet when they are puppies in the bonding pen so that trimming their nails as adults is effortless. Begin clipping/filing nails at week four to introduce them to the process of using small cat nail scissors. Even if the dogs protect livestock daily, their nails, especially the dew claws, may still need trimming (Fig. 11). Certain LGD breeds have double dew claws, which rarely wear down independently. Ensure they are checked weekly during grooming, skin, and tick checks. A dog's nails should not touch the ground when they walk to maintain good posture and allow the foot to roll correctly. Use large, heavy-duty clippers for large dogs (Fig. 12). Make sure to use a quality pair of trimmers that are sharp. Dull trimmers crush the nail, causing pain instead of cutting it. Some people prefer to use a nail grinder (Fig. 13) to file LGD nails, and some models come with an LED light for safety. Diamond bits are available in fine and coarse grits.

Start at the tip of the nail and cut it off a little at a time. Be careful not to cut nails too short, or the quick may be cut, which is painful. If a dog has light-colored nails, the quick can be easily seen. If the dog has some light nails and some dark, estimate where the quick is and cut them all the same length. If the dog's nails are dark, use a small flashlight to shine through the nail. Apply styptic powder and pressure to stop the bleeding if the quick is cut.

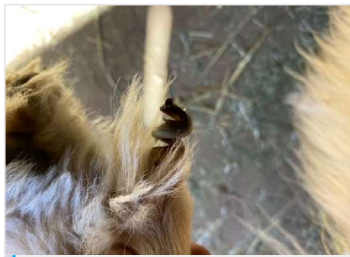


Figure 11. Overgrown dew claw.
Photo courtesy of Pfeiffer Ranch, 2022



Figure 12. Heavy-duty nail clippers.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023



Figure 13. Electric dog nail grinder.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

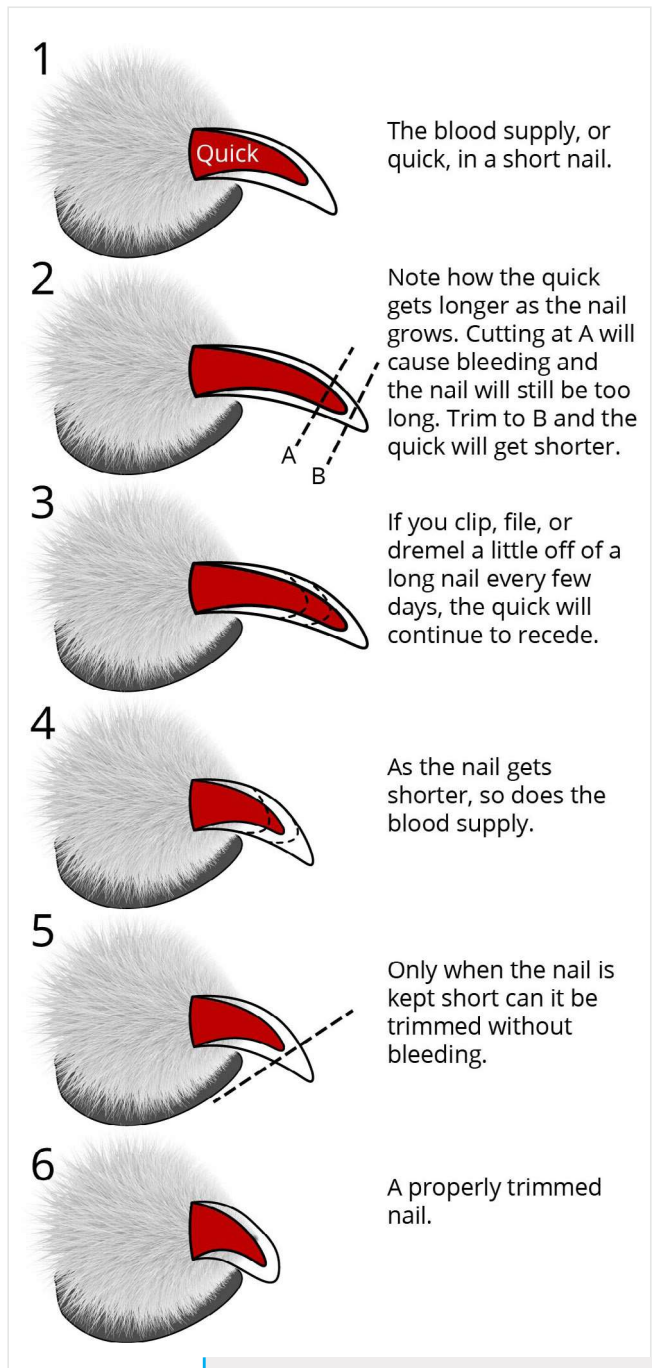


Figure 14. Properly trimming dog toenails.

SHOULD LGDs BE BATHED?

Livestock guardian dogs have natural oils that help keep the fur free from tangles and mats. The oils keep the dog's coat smooth and free from strong odors. Bathing a dog removes these oils from the skin and hair. It is necessary to repair the skin's moisture barrier and coat by using conditioner, just as humans use lotion to prevent dry, itchy skin. Conditioner protects the skin from environmental allergens and keeps the coat supple and healthy, collecting less debris. Baths and the use of conditioner will assist the coat to blow naturally. Dead, impacted undercoat hairs release with the slip from a conditioning product and through the use of a wet/dry brush in the bath before rinsing.



Figure 15. Recycled chemical tote made into a dog grooming station.
Photo courtesy Saldana, 2023

If you do not want to bathe a livestock guardian dog in a shower or tub, kiddie pools or old water troughs work great, too (Fig. 15). A shower or bath may be simpler because the dog is confined, and warm water can be used on the dog, which may be more comfortable in cooler weather. Pet stores often have bathing stations that can be reserved for a minimal fee to bathe an LGD during the year. Portable outdoor water heating solutions are also available and easy to hook up.



Figure 16. High-velocity blower.
Photo courtesy of Saldana, 2023.

How to Bathe a Long-haired LGD

Step 1: Brush thoroughly as described above and use a high-velocity blower (like for show cattle) on the dog to remove loose hair and dirt (Fig. 16). **Important:** If choosing this method to loosen the coat before the bath, protect the eyes, nose, and mouth from breathing in unhealthy sebum, dirt, and dander. Also, be sure not to blow air into the dog's eyes and ears.

Step 2: Next, get the dog's entire body wet, preferably with warm water, to help loosen any dirt.

Step 3: Apply canine shampoo across the dog's whole body, starting at the head and face, working a lather toward the rear and then downward. Canine shampoo is specially formulated for a dog's skin coat and can often be mixed with a specific product ratio to water. Check the bottle for dilution instructions. If fleas or ticks are a problem, check with a vet to see if a product can be purchased to kill the live fleas and ticks. Then, shampoo/condition the LGD as usual. A Zoom Groom (Fig. 18) can help exfoliate and move the surfactant shampoo down to the skin, even on an exceptionally thick or dense coat.



Figure 17. Foaming sprayer for shampooing dogs.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023



Figure 18. Zoom Groom for washing dogs.
Photo courtesy of Bill Costanzo, 2023

Step 4: Rinse well with warm water, if possible, to remove all the shampoo residue and dirt. Repeat if needed for extra-dirty dogs.

Step 5: Condition the dog's body with a superior canine hair conditioner. It will help keep the coat from quickly tangling again and prevent dry, itchy skin because the moisture barrier is restored.

Step 6: Rinse well again to remove any leftover conditioner.

Step 7: Towel dry or use a blower to dry the LGD completely. This is essential whether the weather is cool or hot. The dog's coat will not correctly insulate while it is wet. Blow drying is also crucial if the sun is shining brightly because the dog's damp fur will not protect its skin from the sun, which may lead to sunburn.

EAR CLEANING FOR LGDs

A clean dog ear should be pink, odorless, and free from dirt and debris (Fig. 19). Dogs with long hair and floppy ears should be cleaned often, as they are prone to ear infections. Certain livestock guardian dogs, such as Komondors, may need their ears cleaned more often than other LGD breeds. Floppy ears usually protect bacteria in the ears, which may lead to ear infections. Clean the dog's ears anytime they smell or drainage appears and regularly if they are prone to ear infections.



Figure 19. Clean, healthy dog ear.
Photo courtesy Bill Costanzo, 2023

If the dog has its head tilted to one side, has drainage on its head near the ear, is scratching at its ear, or is shaking its head, it may have an ear infection (Fig. 20). If the dog has an ear infection, do not clean its ears, which may cause the dog additional pain. See a veterinarian to treat the condition.

To clean a dog's ears, get a veterinarian-approved ear-cleaning solution from any pet grooming retailer. Tether or leash the dog so it cannot move away. High-value rewards are a tremendous help. Next, try to warm the bottle against the skin before using it.



Figure 20. LGD with an ear infection.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Reid Redden, 2021

Putting cold fluid into the ear canal is an unusual sensation for dogs and may cause them to squirm. Squirt some of the cleaner into the dog's ear while holding the ear upright, and then massage it into the base of the ear for about 30 seconds. A squishy noise means the solution is rubbing against the insides of the dog's ear, cleaning and removing buildup. Lastly, let the dog shake its head to remove the excess cleaner.

If the dog does not like the solution placed directly into the ear, use cotton balls or pads dampened with the solution to clean the inside of the ear and wipe off any excess fluid. Do not put cotton swabs in or around the dog's ear, as they can shove dirt and debris farther into the ear canal. Cotton balls or pads are much safer to clean the dog's ear, as most dogs wriggle or squirm during ear cleanings.

CONCLUSION

Many LGDs are poorly socialized, making proper care for these dogs difficult. While LGD owners often overlook coat and skin care for their dogs, it is an essential part of the appropriate care and maintenance of the overall health of a livestock guardian dog. Investing in the dog's well-being is an investment in their charges, and good stewardship results in happy, healthy, efficient working dogs and an owner bond that improves communication and relationships. The better care provided for the LGDs, the better they can keep predators away from livestock!

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