

7 Ways to Protect Livestock from Predators

Your livestock are a crucial part of your agriculture business and life, which makes knowing how to protect them from predators so important. Here are seven tips you can use to protect your investment and keep your livestock safe.

1. Get a Guardian Animal

Not only do guardian animals — most commonly dogs, llamas and donkeys — protect your livestock, they can also help relieve the stress that the herd feels. Less stress typically leads to weight gain, so while you're protecting the animals you're also padding your bottom line.

The correct guardian animal depends on your livestock, your layout and the farm predators you are struggling with. There are also non-guardian animals that help protect your livestock in indirect ways. Barn cats, for example, keep rodent populations down, which protects eggs that the rodents might otherwise eat. Roosters help alert you to danger in your chicken coop. Do some research for your specific needs to ensure the guardians you decide on will work well with your livestock.

When you are ready to introduce guardian animals to the herd, start them young and raise them with the herd they will protect. While livestock guard dogs are the most common guardian animals, they often follow the working and sleeping schedule of the main house. Llamas and donkeys live with the livestock at all times, and their keen senses and aggressive nature toward intruders make them excellent 24/7 protection from predators. But do not put donkey defenders in the same herd with dogs — it's the donkey's dislike of dogs that makes them so aggressive against coyotes and wolves.

2. Implement a Buddy System

If you have multiple types of grazing animals, such as goats and cows, let them graze together. The cows' size can be a deterrent to predators that would target the smaller goats. Herd animals have a natural tendency to "bunch." This defense mechanism is how cows and goats protect themselves from predators, which prefer a moving target to animals that stand their ground.

3. Invest in Fencing Solutions Keeping your livestock in areas that have predator-proof fencing is incredibly difficult. Many predators — such as coyotes — can squeeze through small gaps or go over fences. Birds of prey attack from above. However, there are alternative fencing methods that may help protect your livestock. Consider mesh wire electric fencing, which typically requires less maintenance and provides a better barrier than single- or multi-strand electric fencing. Living fences provide a solid barrier to predators, as well as windbreaks, and prevent soil erosion. To deter birds of prey from getting to your chickens, create a web of fishing line over the top of the coop and hang reflectors (such as old CDs). Also consider motion-activated lights and alarms around the edges of your property to help scare away ground predators.

4. Switch Up Your Agricultural Practices

Changes to the way you run your agriculture business can help protect your livestock. For example, the smell of pigs reminds predators of wild boar and can scare them away. Consider moving your

pig pens to the edge of your property as a first line of defense. Changing up your grazing schedule or moving livestock to new areas can also throw predators off, keeping your animals safe. And getting to know a farm predator's patterns can help you make pivots to protect livestock. For instance, coyote attacks are most prolific in spring and summer, when they are having pups and searching for food to feed their pups. Try to time livestock births that do not coincide with when a farm predator will be feeding its own young.

5. Provide Housing

Most predators are nocturnal, so having a safe, secure location for your animals at night is critical. It can be especially helpful if your animals roam a large area during the day that makes predator-proof fencing too costly or difficult to install. Bringing your goats, sheep and cows to an area that has electrified fencing at night can help protect them when they are most at risk. Young and weak animals are prime targets of predators, so keep these animals close to the house or in a building when possible.

6. Disrupt the Predator's Schedule

If you've experienced an attack, move your livestock and keep them safely locked up for a few days after the attack. The predator may move on after a series of unsuccessful hunts. If you can, find and block entry points predators are using to get onto your farm or ranch. For example, repair any holes in the fencing (coyotes can squeeze into a hole that's just 4x6 inches!) so they have to find a new way to reach your livestock. Even if they do, every hole you block off can keep them out for a few days.

7. Maintain Healthy Prey Population

If there is abundant wild game in your area, predators are less likely to prey on your livestock. You can help maintain a healthy prey population by creating an area away from your livestock that is great for rabbits by planting food plants, letting grass grow tall and creating brush piles. If a predator can feed itself and its young without coming onto your farm or ranch, it will likely do that. The ultimate goal is to make predators think eating your animals is so difficult that it's not worth it, steering them toward wild game, rabbits and rodents instead.

Credit: Farm Bureau Financial Services