

SHANNON BROOK FARM

ORGANIC • PASTURE-RAISED • LOCALICIOUS
CHICKEN & LAMB

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Shannon Brook Farm Newsletter

March 8, 2014

We've gone to the dogs!

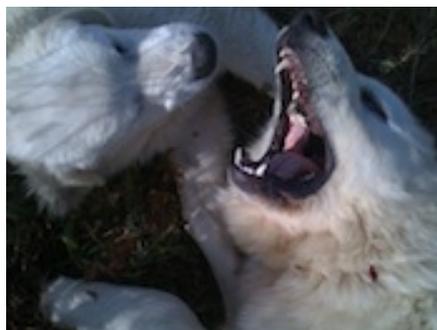
This past Sunday, our lead livestock guardian dog whelped a litter of 6 healthy puppies. It's always a thrill to have baby animals born on the farm. Even though it's expected it's still a great event to see what comes of our efforts and to work with the babies to start to form the behavior of the next generation of farm animals whether it be dogs or sheep.

You might wonder why we make things more complicated for ourselves by breeding dogs as well as sheep. Although livestock guardian dogs have been around for thousands of years working with flocks all over the world, it's not always easy to get a good working dog. For every story we hear about a good guardian dog there are four stories about unfortunate situations.

The Great Pyrenees and Maremmas, both livestock guardian dogs, are large, curious dogs that have evolved with livestock to protect herds and flocks. The dogs' nature is to be bold, aggressive when need be, to roam at lightening speed over large tracts of land, including rough acreage, and to attack and kill predators. It doesn't take much imagination to see how these behaviors can go awry in a farm setting with dogs inadvertently killing barn cats, ewes and lambs, poultry and pigs. Another worry is that they might attack people instead of coyotes or simply run away while tracking the scent of a bear or coyote. All of these things happen every year on farms. At a minimum it's upsetting. It's also not a particularly profitable way to run a farm.



Our Canine Team



Billy Buttonwood teaching his son to be gentle and what to do at the dentist's

When we started with our two female livestock guardian dogs we trained them on to the ewes and lambs, then poultry followed by pigs and people all along. With each new introduction we had to trust that our dogs would do the right thing. That's not easy when the dog is young, you don't really know each other and something, anything, might set the dog off to respond inappropriately. Fortunately our dogs responded to each and every new experience with wide eyes and an openness that allowed us to continue moving forward. When we introduced our Great Pyrenees male to the farm we had a very similar experience with all interactions flowing smoothly.

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We initially put Billy Buttonwood out in the pasture with the to older females. It was late February and still snowy. The girls would look at him and run off. They ditched him! Just like on the playground...“when Billy’s not looking we’re gonna run and hide behind that hill over there and watch to see what he does.” Poor Billy was dazed and confused. He would sit and wait and wander and try to return to the house over and over again. Finally, the girls let him into the fold and now we have a strong pack of three guardians who are steady, reliable and keep our farm running smoothly.

Imagine if we went out every other week to find the aftermath of predation. We would be spending vast amounts of time dealing with injured livestock and animals in distress. It’s something to be avoided!

Upon the arrival of the litter we placed ads on the Cornell Small Ruminant Listserv and on the Beginning Women Farmers Listserv. Within a few hours two things happened – we received many emails inquiring about the pups and, even more interestingly, we got a number of emails from experienced shepherds saying they were impressed by the methodology we have developed to raise the pups in a manner that will yield highly effective guardian dogs. This was evident from the description of our rearing methods that we put in our advertisements. That made our day. We are pleased to get such positive feedback as well as to be part of a community of sheep and goat farms that have the presence of mind to praise another farm’s efforts whether they need a new pup or not. We feel that we are working well with our canine team but it was a great confirmation to hear it from others.

So, on that note, happy spring! We’re in the countdown now...12 days until the vernal equinox and about 2 months to go for the final anticipated spring frosts. And most importantly, about 3 weeks until the pups make their first trip to the great outdoors, where we hope they will thrive and enjoy their lives with the livestock.



Two of our 2013 pups



Pup born this week



Frankie with her brood of six