

4 The Warning Bark

The warning bark is a vocal expression you will not hear as often as other types of barking. But you will hear **some dogs use it in situations where they perceive others in the pack (dog or human) need some sort of warning.**

How it sounds. One short, sharp “woof,” meaning simply: “Get away, the enemy is coming.”

Activity involved. Flight from the threat is common. In pack animals, in **some cases, one of the pack will stay back** and take the “responsibility” to defend the rest.

The warning bark was probably the first type of bark that **people recognized**—and found useful. Our ancestors needed to be very aware of their natural surroundings and presence of nearby wild animals. They were able to take advantage of the warning barks that wild dogs—who often were attracted to human camp sites to search for food scraps—would give each other. (I have no doubt that dogs were just as good at finding food then as they are now!) They would sneak around the bonfire waiting for leftovers—and then warn the others when enemies or predators were approaching. That helped people defend themselves. Of course nobody can prove this was the case, but I find it very believable.

Recently I had the pleasure of helping to watch over a litter of seven Leonberger puppies. At six weeks of age, they were allowed to go in and out of the house as they wanted. So they were often out in the garden where they had lots of fun in an enriched environment. One day a stranger approached them without me being around, and the mother of the puppies spotted the stranger and gave one sharp bark. Immediately all of the puppies ran directly into the house. No question about it—they

knew exactly what the bark meant. The mother stayed out to keep an eye on things. Eventually things went back to normal.

In many cases I have seen dogs give this warning bark to their human families. Often the people do not understand it, so they do not react in any way, or maybe even tell the dog to be quiet. The dogs then get stressed and frustrated, and might start to bark more, trying to make the people "listen." After having experienced this over time, the dog will learn that it doesn't help to give a single warning bark, so he might start to bark in a more constant fashion when facing a perceived threat. All of a sudden you have a barking problem.



A typical warning bark situation.

What can we do about it? Since a dog might think his job is to warn the pack about danger and since this is a natural thing to for a dog to do, we humans should react in some way to show we understand what the dog is expressing. Of course, you cannot run away and hide like the puppies did. But it is important to communicate to the dog that you have got the message,

DEMAND
BARKING

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and that you will now take over responsibility for dealing with the threat. Just like another dog or a wolf might do.

The simplest thing to do is to calmly place yourself between the dog and what appears to be the threat. This could be a person, an animal, a machine, or the sound of something unseen. Dogs do this, horses do this. They split up—or go in between—the threat and the other animal. This is one of the simplest and most efficient techniques to use to inform the dog you heard him and are in charge. It works because dogs understand it and they do it themselves.

The scenario will look something like this:


- A sound or something is heard or seen. The dog barks to warn.
- Get up calmly up without looking at or talking to the dog.
- Place yourself in front of the dog, between him and the sight or sound, with your back to the dog (this is non-threatening). Hold your hands a little out from your body (not stretching them towards the dog!) with the palms of your hands visible.
- Stand still. Wait till the dog is quiet or turns around and goes the other way, which he will do after awhile, because you are so clearly signaling "I am going to take care of this."

Later on when the dog has become a little more experienced, you do not need to move, you can use the hand signal alone.

Splitting up in action.
The owner is using
a hand signal and
placing himself
between the "threat"
and the dog to
reassure him there is
nothing to fear.




Warning Bark Cases

 I live in the forest way out in the countryside where there are wild animals around me all the time. One winter a moose was causing problems, getting into the garden every night, eating the branches off the fruit trees. The dogs warned me every time he got close—several times each night. I got very tired of being woken up all the time. I decided to put a stop to it, so for a couple of nights I got up every time the dogs warned about the moose and got in front of them to show I was going to deal with the moose myself.




The third night they stopped warning me. They had reached the point where they knew I would take responsibility. I slept the whole night after that, but of course every one of my apple trees was eaten! The technique was effective, but maybe not the smartest thing to do in that case!

 When people approached the farm, my dog Saga usually ran to the gate and “welcomed” them, giving me a warning bark that they were there. I would go to the gate, place myself in front of her and say hello to the person before letting him in.

Whenever I was away, no one else could be bothered to do it, and so that left the job to Saga. She started to be very intense in her barking. When I returned from a trip, I had to do the job of training her all over again. Then we were back to normal.

Frankly I enjoy having my dogs warn me about strangers because I live so far out into the woods—and so they always do it.

 A colleague of mine had adopted a sweet and friendly dog with one little problem: at night she barked at everything that moved, from leaves falling to cars passing by. The colleague knew very well the basic principles of taking over the responsibility for protection from the dog, and had placed the dog on the other side of her bed, so she was closest to the window herself. It did not help.

My colleague just couldn't force herself to get up at night. She was very tired and just couldn't do it. So she asked me if I had any ideas of other things to do. I asked if she could try a compromise—such as just lifting herself up a little on one elbow, and stretching out one arm/hand toward the dog. She said she would try, and it worked. After two nights, the dog stopped barking, and the problem was solved.

Sometimes it takes very little in the way of visual signals before the dog gets the point. Dogs are visual by nature, and they pick up much quicker on things they see than things they hear—like being talked to.

Summing Up the Warning Bark

The warning bark is meant to warn the pack about possible danger.

It is a short, sharp "woof."

Respond to it by showing the dog that you have heard the warning and you are taking over the responsibility to act against the threat.