



Who's the top dog now?

Wild dogs in Australia are a huge threat to livestock operations

By Alison J Beaty

Wild dogs in Australia are a huge threat to livestock operations, and along with causing stock/financial losses they cause stress to livestock generally, and anxiety and frustration to producers.

When stock losses to wild dogs become so severe it puts the grazing enterprise at serious financial risk it's time to take action. One solution that fits well with organic farming methods is the use of Livestock Guardian Animals (LGA).

Rob Fenton, from Riverina TAFE in NSW, has been working with LGA for more than 16 years now with great results.

"We use our Maremma [dogs] to protect our free range chickens, and the alpacas and a donkey work with the sheep. The alpacas are great for protection from foxes and wild dogs, but if you get a pack of dogs that keep working away at the sheep sometimes the alpacas will give up, but the donkey doesn't," Rob said.

Despite the fact that Rob came by the alpacas when they were adult animals, he said they have not needed any specific training as their natural instinct is to herd and take care of other animals they consider part of their herd. If the sheep leave their lambs for any length of time, the alpacas will lie down with the lambs and care for them till the sheep return.

"The role of the male alpacas in the herd is to protect, and if you have only two alpacas in with your livestock they herd with the other animals, but you do need to castrate the male alpacas."

Rob says the alpacas need to be sheared, just like the sheep, and that generally they are easy to handle; but if they take a dislike to you they will spit with deadly accuracy.

Before Rob had the alpacas shepherding his sheep the losses to wild dogs was high and he didn't know what to do to improve the situation. Once the alpacas were introduced to the sheep things improved, but there were still some problems with stock losses.

"I'd heard that donkeys were being used in the States to manage coyotes. There was a female donkey being given away, so I thought we'd give it a try. I put it in the paddock and it was 'problem solved'," Rob said.

Rob's property is 400 acres in size and is broken up into small paddocks for rotational grazing, so for larger properties he says more LGAs would be required.

Rob says working with Maremma dogs requires time and patience. The pups need to be bonded to the livestock rather than humans, and this means feeding and caring for the dogs needs to be done with minimal interaction.

"We use the Maremma with our chickens, so when we are training a pup they are put in a small pen with about 20 chickens. The dogs try to bond to people, but after a





Previous page Nunzio (LGD) in the paddock with his flock; L Feeding Station for LGDs; R Rob Fenton and his livestock guardian donkey caring for sheep at Riverina TAFE, NSW

time they give up when they don't get any response and just ignore you, which is a good sign. The next problem with the pups is that they start to recognise the chickens as playmates and the chickens can get hurt, even killed, but the dogs usually grow out of it and you just have to manage it."

Choosing a good LGD is similar to picking a good sheepdog, Rob says. Take a look at the pup's parents and see what traits they have, then take a close look at the puppies themselves. For small livestock like chickens a more docile pup is likely to be more suitable, while for larger livestock a more outgoing dog would be a better choice.

In Rob's experience the female Maremma are more suitable for working with chickens as they are generally gentler, while the males can be far more aggressive and work well in larger paddocks with larger stock.

At Dunluce, a 46,500ha property in north-west Queensland, Ninian and Ann Stewart-Moore have been working with Maremmas for nearly ten years. In 2002, sheep losses to wild dogs at Dunluce were at 15% and costing \$30,000 per annum, so Ninian and Ann bought 24 Maremma dogs from a breeder in Victoria. The dogs were already bonded to sheep and ready to work.

Initially the Maremmas were allocated specific sheep to care for; however some of the dogs reorganised themselves and moved to other mobs of sheep on the property. Despite being returned to their bonded mobs, some of the dogs continued to move freely between mobs, but by now stock losses to wild dogs had all but ceased with the presence of the LGDs.

According to Ninian, LGDs make their own decisions and work independently of people. For the vast majority of the year the livestock and dogs live in the paddocks with minimal interference from people.

"Herding dogs, which are intelligent dogs,

that you train and are totally under your command, are put in their kennel at the end of the day and that's it; but guardian dogs are out there making their own decisions 24/7," Ninian said.

The dogs feed from feeding stations in the paddocks, which are regularly topped up with dog biscuits, and they are given some fresh meat (not sheep) each week.

Dr Lee Allen, of the Robert Wicks Pest Animal Research Centre in Queensland, visits Dunluce regularly and has been researching the Maremmas for some years now. Many

are kept close to the homestead and have no opportunity to interbreed with wild dogs. The females live with livestock in small, well-fenced paddocks and the male is bonded to the family and lives in the houseyard. The pups are born in the small paddocks and grow up with the livestock. Ninian said it is vital the dogs bond with the livestock and have minimal bonding to people.

"You've got to throw out the window that 'dog is man's best friend'; the dog has got to be animals' best friend. Our pups are born in a small paddock with sheep and cattle and

"I'd heard that donkeys were being used in the States to manage coyotes, there was a female donkey being given away, so I thought we'd give it a try. I put it in the paddock and it was 'problem solved'."

of the LGDs are fitted with a GPS tracker to monitor their movements.

What the research shows is the Maremmas take on the top predator status and claim the paddocks as their own territory. The wild dogs continue to visit the paddocks, but no longer kill the livestock. Herein lies one of the most important aspects of managing LGDs – de-sexing. If the dogs are not de-sexed the chances of them breeding with wild dogs is high.

"De-sexing has to happen or they will interbreed with the wild dogs. People working with these dogs don't always de-sex them and it is causing a great deal of negativity and concern about them," Ninian said.

On Dunluce a Maremma breeding program is run with two intact females and one intact male – all three breeding Maremmas

we visit them on their territory for feeding, and train them to be handled, but we're not their best friend."

One of the most positive outcomes of working with LGDs for Ninian and Ann has been the reduced stress in their lives.

"We used to lie in bed at night wondering what sheep were being killed, and be up at daylight trying to find out what's going on. But after six months with Maremmas we realised we could give that up and just get a good night's sleep." 🐾

Further Information:

- Van Bommel L. (2010) *Best Practice Manual for the use of Livestock Guardian Dogs, Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre, Canberra*
- www.invasiveanimals.com
- www.dunluce.com.au