

Wild dog facts

Livestock guardian animals

Dogs and donkeys are used to guard sheep, goats and breeding cattle from wild dogs and other predators within Australia and overseas.

Livestock guardian animals require careful selection and training and there is often a high initial cost outlay. Livestock guardian animals require appropriate husbandry and health care.

Guardian dogs

Breeding dogs to guard livestock originated in Europe and Asia, where they have been used for centuries to protect livestock from wolves and bears. In Australia, dogs have been successfully used to guard small herds of goats, sheep, deer, alpaca and even free-range fowl. Several large sheep properties have successfully used guardian dogs under extensive conditions.

Some of the more common breeds are Great Pyrenees from France, the Komondor from Hungary, the Akbash dog and the Anatolian shepherd from Turkey, and the Maremma from Italy. All of these are large animals, weighing between 35 and 55 kg. They are usually white or fawn coloured with dark muzzles.

The behaviour of livestock guardian dogs differs from that of herding dogs - they do not usually herd their charges but, acting independently of humans, stay with or near livestock and aggressively repel predators. Breeding and proper rearing both contribute to the makeup of a successful guardian dog.

Failure to carry out their protective role adequately can usually be attributed to poor selection, improper rearing, cross-breeding or an attempt to train a dog that is too old. To get the best possible service from their dogs, livestock owners need to recognize the characteristics of a good guardian dog and know how to raise one correctly. Success is not

automatic, though, and some dogs do not perform well despite careful selection and rearing.



Maremma dog guarding goat herd

Tips to successfully rear a livestock guardian dog

- Select a suitable breed and reputable breeder.
- Rear pups with livestock, individually or with experienced dogs, from the age of eight weeks.
- While rearing the dogs, maintain contact with them so you can still approach and handle them when necessary. Any bonding between owner and dog should happen with the herd so that the dog knows its place is with the herd.
- Observe the dog and correct undesirable behaviour.
- Encourage the dog to remain with or near the livestock.
- Ensure the dog's health and safety - this includes providing a good diet, prophylactic medication and an annual veterinary examination. Dogs must be checked regularly.
- Dogs must be desexed.
- Manage livestock in accordance with the dog's age and experience; for example, keep livestock

in smaller pastures while the dog is young and inexperienced.

- Be patient and allow plenty of time to train your dog. Most guardian dogs will work well within a year, but they may need up to two years to mature fully.

Potential problems

Poorly trained, entire or improperly bred (crossbred) dogs can cause some problems. They may:

- harass, injure, or kill stock
- entire dogs can breed with wild dogs
- roam away from the flock
- harass, injure, or kill non-target wildlife or other animals
- become aggressive towards neighbours and/or bark constantly causing complaints.

How to help a livestock guardian dog

Good training and breeding are essential to success. Producers using dogs also need to maintain good fences and have an appropriate guardian dog/ livestock/ predator ratio.

Advantages and disadvantages of guardian dogs

Keeping livestock guardian dogs will not solve all stock predation problems, but it may limit the need to use other control methods such as baiting. If other methods are used, producers should ensure they do not harm the guardian dogs (e.g. use of toxicants such as 1080 baits is not recommended, and trapping should be used with caution).

Guardian dogs can be aggressive and may injure pets or confront unfamiliar people, such as visitors to the property, who approach 'protected' livestock. These limitations may preclude their use on smaller properties, or on properties in densely settled areas. Those who use guardian dogs should post signs to warn passers-by and should escort visitors when they approach livestock. The dogs should be well trained and used only in appropriate situations.

Guardian dogs are very useful in many situations, and good breeding and training combined with good

livestock management and targeted predator control can enhance their effectiveness.

Guardian donkeys

Under certain conditions, guardian donkeys can be a suitable option to guard sheep and cattle.

Donkeys are aggressive towards predators and may provide indirect protection for domestic animals. They are most successful in protecting livestock in small and level pastures, where the donkey can see all or most of the area from one location.

In open paddocks use approximately one donkey to 200-300 sheep, in undulating/scrubby paddocks, this should be reduced to 1 donkey to 100 sheep. In extensive situations, aim for one donkey per sheep camp.



Donkeys can protect domestic animals

Photo courtesy Creative Commons

Tips to successfully rear a livestock guardian donkey

- Ensure donkey is sound, healthy and free from any conformational defects. Donkeys must receive species appropriate husbandry and prophylactic medication. Ensure they do not have access to urea.
- Guard donkeys must be able to be handled.
- Select standard sized donkeys, not miniatures. Donkeys used with cattle should be larger.
- Select only the most aggressive donkeys. Donkeys need to be bonded with livestock just after weaning.

- Not all donkeys are effective guard animals. If one does not work, try another. It is worth the effort even if you have to try several animals.
- Use only females (jennies) or geldings. Do not use a mature intact male (jack or stallion).
- Keep young donkeys with goats, sheep or cattle after the donkey is weaned. Do not allow guard donkeys to run with other donkeys or horses. In this way the young donkey will think it is part of the flock or herd. Ideally, the donkey should be born in the flock or herd and its dam should be taken away at weaning to let the young animal grow up with the stock.
- If introducing a new donkey, initially pen next to the livestock then gradually pen with the livestock and let into progressively bigger paddocks. Bonding takes at least 4-6 weeks.
- Keep all dogs away from donkeys. Do not allow domestic dogs to become friendly with the donkey. Avoid or limit the use of working dogs around donkeys.
- Aim for 1-2 donkeys at a time. Select a pair of companion donkeys or a donkey that tends to run alone. A jenny with an unweaned foal can be used and tends to be much more protective than other donkeys. A mother with a foal has an extra advantage because the young donkeys will be raised with livestock.
- Fences must be in good repair.
- Donkeys may injure lambs or new born calves.

Further information

Further information is available from your local government office, or by contacting Biosecurity Queensland (call 13 25 23 or visit our website at www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au).

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