

## Maremma guard dogs at Dunluce

Ninian and Anne Stewart-Moore , Dunluce, Hughenden

Dunluce is a 46,500 ha sheep and cattle property 36 km west of Hughenden in the Flinders Shire in north-west Queensland. It is predominantly open Mitchell grass downs with some timbered Boree country along the Flinders River which forms the northern boundary. Immediately to the north of the Flinders are basalt outcrops and plateaus which provide perfect cover for wild dogs. As many local graziers have left the sheep industry, Dunluce is now the most northerly sheep property in the Flinders Shire and therefore possibly in Queensland.

### Dog losses at \$30,000 a year

By 2002, with no immediate neighbours running sheep, a less-than-successful 1080 program going on, and dingoes attacking our sheep almost nightly, we began to consider getting out of the sheep industry also. At the time, we reckoned that wild dogs were costing us around \$30,000 a year through killed and maimed sheep, less than 40% lambing and reduced wool production due to stress. Ann and I didn't want to be responsible for the fresh mauling of our stock on a regular basis.

### Maremmas – already bonded to sheep and ready to work

We had heard about stock-guarding dogs, and Maremmas in particular, and decided to investigate, starting with Google. We ended up, in March 2002, heading to Victoria to purchase 24 Maremmas, already bonded to sheep and ready to work. Including a second-hand dog trailer, the outlay was around \$20,000; as we were then running around 20,000 sheep, our capital outlay (which was more than saved in the first year) was around \$1 per head of sheep. Since then, dry seasons have meant a reduction down to around 12,000 sheep. Our annual outlay for dog food, worming tablets, and vet fees has been between \$5000 and \$7000, depending upon whether we bred pups that need desexing. This is about the same as we spend on lice and worm control for the sheep, but does not allow for our time input which was initially quite large as we had no precedent to follow on the scale that we were attempting. The Maremma management is now a part of our normal routine.



## Stock losses drop from 15% to 3%

After 3 years, our annual losses had gone from above 15% down to an acceptable 3%. I believe the actual number of sheep killed by wild dogs now to be well under than 10 head per year although there are still plenty of dingoes around. After 5 years I believe we now have the best protected flock of sheep in Western Queensland, and I would welcome in good spirit any challengers to that claim. We can drive past a mob of sheep late in the afternoon, see a Maremma or two out there with them, and go home and have a good nights sleep.

Dunluce does not cost the Queensland Government one cent in support because with Maremmas running free-range we can no longer do any baiting or trapping. However, we willingly contribute to the Flinders Shire Council Wild Dog Levy and actively support the 1080 campaign going on around us.

## Territorial dogs

The main protection that our Maremmas give us is that they occupy the territory. All dogs are territorial—that was our problem in the past, we would get rid of one lot of dogs and the next week there would be new ones in their place. Maremmas are nocturnal by habit and have a loud, deep bark. We have not observed any evidence of altercations with wild dogs.

## Essential elements

There are a number of essential elements to the success of running livestock-protection dogs:

- All guard dogs must have successful bonding to the livestock that need to be protected. This process ideally starts as soon as the pups' eyes are open and continues until around 7 months when they are mature enough to desex and be put out to work.
- **Do not** use entire males or females in a free-range situation. Keep any breeding stock under control near the house. Not only is there a risk of interbreeding, there are no other unwanted distractions and there are no downside effects.
- Be absolutely sure of the pedigree of any dogs purchased. A half-reed Maremma will look like a Maremma but could have very confused and undesirable instincts.

- Do not over-humanise pups as they are growing up, or they will tend to want to come home to be with you and leave their stock unprotected. There is a fine balance of being able to handle them when needed, whilst allowing them to be with their livestock as a priority.

There are many other do's and don'ts but all the negativity you have heard will, I guarantee, be because of non-adherence to these 4 points.

## Other guard-dog breeds

I believe there is a huge role for using livestock protection dogs in our grazing industry now, for protecting both sheep and cattle, but it has to be done correctly or it will not work effectively.

I have only spoken about Maremmas, a 2000-year-old breed from Italy, as they are my only experience, but there are 13 recognised stock-protection dog breeds in the world, and I have no doubt they all have their merits.

There is definitely a need for an official Code of Conduct and a set of management principles to be formulated for people to follow as there is very little on paper on the subject in this country. However, there has been a lot of good work done in the USA and there are several papers and publications available from there. "Livestock Protection Dogs, Selection Care and Training" can be sourced from: <http://www.amazon.com/Livestock-Protection-Dogs-Selection-Training/dp/1577790626>

I also believe that some of the huge amount of taxpayers' money thrown at 1080 baiting should be directed at developing this method of protecting our livestock industries.

Prepared by Ninian Stewart-Moore for the "Wild Dog and Predator Forum" at Winton, Queensland on 06/06/07.