



Guardian dogs hold promise of wild dog control

Peter and Marie Crook-King and their daughter Julie Brown are optimistic they've turned a corner after three tough years of devastating wild dog attacks, thanks in part to the Maremma dogs they have guarding their flock of 2600 Merinos.

It's not before time. In the 2013-14 financial year the Crook-Kings lost 900 adult sheep and every lamb that was born on their 30,000 hectare property 'Glenorie', 85 km south of Morven.

"We would see lambs being dropped in the paddock but a week later they were gone," remembers Marie Crook-King.

"The only lambs we got that year were the 50 poddy lambs that we raised by hand."

'Glenorie' is mainly mulga country, some heavily timbered, and forms an island in a sea of cattle properties, with the next closest sheep producers 50 km to the north and 170 km west.

The Crook-Kings decided on a three-pronged attack to try to limit wild dog damage – building a 200 km exclusion fence with their neighbours, trapping, and investing in Maremma guardian

dogs for their sheep.



'Mario' with some ewes

Three years on, they have 26

Maremmas in work and eight dogs in training. Last summer they marked 370 lambs, which equates to a lambing percentage of 50-60% in a season also affected by drought. Wether losses have dropped from 24% to under 4% since they introduced the guardian dogs.

Julie admits the decision to use Maremmas was the start of 'a massive learning curve', which began with reading the Guardian Dogs Best Practice Manual from the Invasive Animals CRC, and an initial visit to Ninian and Anne Stewart-Moore of 'Dunluce', Hughenden, to see the dogs in action.

For anyone planning to invest in guardian dogs, Julie has one piece of advice – they require a big investment of time and money.

A Maremma pup generally sells for \$300-\$1200 and owners spend years training them to bond with the sheep.



How does it work?

The Crook-Kings made their biggest investment in 2012 when they travelled south to Lurgenglare Maremmas at Invergordon, Victoria, and returned home with nine grown dogs and five pups.

After some trial and error in training, Marie and Julie found they preferred the dogs to be two to three years old before they could be trusted to guard the flock, as younger animals tended to sometimes 'play' with the sheep, or stray from the mob.

In training, the dogs are yarded with sheep for several months, tethered each night and monitored closely during the day to ensure they can be trusted.

"It's a very gradual process because you need to be able to trust them fully when they're out in the paddock, because then they're the boss," says Marie.

"We constantly check them in the paddocks and if a dog leaves its mob, we will bring it back in and re-educate it."

The Crook-Kings use working kelpies but the training is different for the guardian dogs – Marie says they must be able to be led, caught and put on the chain, and they aren't encouraged to make friends with visitors or contractors.

She doesn't use commands on the dogs, apart from growling or saying 'NO' if a young dog makes a mistake in the yards, and says that unlike kelpies, Maremmas generally won't look a person in the eye.



Mob of ewes with Maremmas before shearing

It's a trait together with their floppy ears and calm, aloof behaviour that ensures the Maremmas are accepted by the sheep they protect.

While they have no preference for males or females, Julie is adamant that all guardian dogs must be de-sexed, to prevent them from wandering and mating with wild dogs.

They work on a ratio of 1:100 head of sheep in a mob of wethers, and 1:50 for ewes, although that can change in the paddocks closer to the homestead.

"Wethers tend to run together in big mobs so it's easier for the dogs to guard them, but ewes may split up or be more individual, so that makes it more challenging," Marie says.





Older sheep are harder to educate to the dogs.

“When we first started they would just see a Maremma and run, because they were so afraid of the wild dogs.”

When it comes to mustering, the Maremmas generally know the ‘Glenorie’ kelpies and don’t worry too much about them, although some will ‘arc up’ at the working dogs, she says. The kelpies tend to ignore the guardian dogs.

Once the sheep are in the yards, some guardians choose to wait outside, while others will allow themselves to be caught and tied up on the chain until they can re-join their mob.

Marie and Julie can tell each Maremma apart in the paddock, and Julie says they all have their quirks.

“They’re very funny - some are very friendly and let out a few excited yelps when they see me but others stand back and bark menacingly, or will try to push the sheep away,” she says.

But while they’re fast, agile and strong, Julie says they’re not naturally aggressive dogs and use a deep bark and threatening behaviour to dissuade predators or protect the stock.

“I’ve been bitten by a cattle dog, but I’ve never been bitten by a Maremma!”

Maintenance

Adult Maremmas weigh 30 to 50 kilograms but once in the paddock, their food intake decreases due to their habit of scavenging.

Julie’s brother Bill Crook-King built numerous feeding stations out of lightweight RHS steel with corrugated iron roofs that were placed at various watering points on ‘Glenorie’, with a bag of dog biscuits in each one.

Julie estimates the dogs cost \$600/month to feed, which equates to approximately \$2.80 per sheep per year at current flock numbers.

Julie is a vet, so she vaccinated the guardian dogs for distemper, parvovirus and canine hepatitis, and worms them for hydatids when the sheep come into the yards.



A Maremma feeding station



Mortality rates are low. The Crook-Kings have lost 5 dogs in three years, with one death from baiting. Dog fights, heat exhaustion and proximity to public roads are also common causes of death.

Additional dog control

The Crook-Kings have completed their section of the wild dog exclusion fence and continue to trap inside the fence to complement the work of the guardian dogs.

On average they trap or kill 60-70 wild dogs per year, and have trapped 30 in the first seven months of the year in paddocks where sheep are not running. They've also seen evidence of dog attacks on some of their 250 Santa Gertrudis-Angus cross cattle.

The last section of 20 km is yet to be closed in the 200 km exclusion fence which encircles an area of 202,000 hectares, covering 17 properties owned by 11 landholders. The netting fence stands 175cm high with an apron at the bottom to prevent the dogs from digging under it.



Maremmas separated from ewes while in the yards

Conclusion

The Crook-Kings say controlling wild dogs on 'Glenorie' will depend on vigilant patrolling of the new exclusion fence and eradicating any dogs found inside it.

They feel 'a lot more positive' about the future since investing in Maremmas to protect their sheep and are hopeful that the guardian dogs may also assist in protecting newborn lambs from feral pigs and other predators.

Julie Brown says anyone considering investing in Maremmas for wild dog control must be completely committed, as guardians require a big investment in time and effort to ensure they're properly bonded with their flock.

