LEADING SHEEP FLOCK TALK

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Maremma dogs
Reducing lamb losses at Morven

Marie Crook-King and her 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.

'Mario' the Maremma dog with some ewes.

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 kilometres south of Morven.

"The only lambs we got that year were the 50 poddy lambs that we raised by hand," Marie Crook-King said.

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

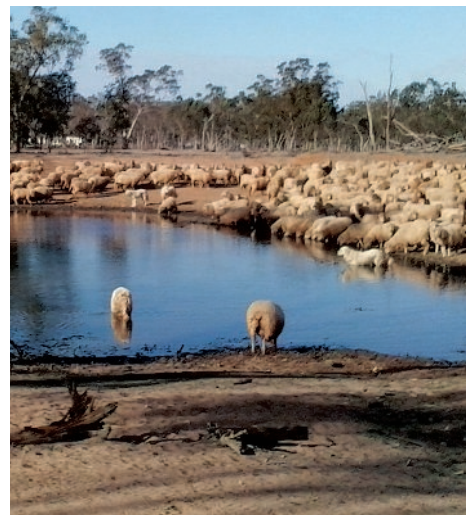
Three years on they have 26 Maremmas in work and 8 dogs in training. Last summer they lamb marked 50-60 per cent in a season also affected by drought. Wether losses have dropped from 24 per cent to under 4 per cent since they introduced the guardian dogs.

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.

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," Marie said.



A mob of ewes with Maremmas before shearing.

- Pups cost between $300 and $1200
- The dogs in work cost $600/month to feed, which equates to approximately $2.80 per sheep per year at current flock numbers.
- They are vaccinated for distemper, parvovirus and canine hepatitis, and wormed for hydatids when the sheep come into the yards.
- 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.

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 said.

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.

For more information, view a recorded webinar on Maremmas as guardian dogs and the full Crook-Kings Maremmas case study on the Leading Sheep website *www.leadingsheep.com.au*.

A Maremma feeding station out in the paddock.

Leading Sheep
Leading the way to profit and productivity

Leading the way for a more profitable sheep and wool industry through new technologies, knowledge and skills, the Leading Sheep project aims to help Queensland's sheep and wool producers increase their long-term productivity and profitability.

In line with the predation focus in this edition of Flock talk there are a range of other useful resources and information on the Leading Sheep website including:

- producer case studies on exclusion and electric fencing, coordinated control and guardian animals
- "Tracks and Traps" eBook
- fact sheet on using donkeys as guard animals
- a list of wild dog trappers that are available to work in Queensland
- recorded webinars (on-line seminars) on controlling feral pigs, and using alpacas, maremmas and donkeys as guard animals.

Also on our website you can sign up to our monthly newsletter, keeping you informed of sheep industry information and events – more than 1250 industry members and stakeholders have already subscribed. So check out *www.leadingsheep.com.au* now.

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The regional team bringing you Leading Sheep activities (left to right): Nicole Sallur, DAF Charleville; Noel O'Dempsey, 'Linallie' Texas; Joy Hardie, 'Verastan' Muttaburra; Amy Brown, 'Heather Station' Bollon; and Alex Stirton, DAF Charleville.

Thank you!

Thank you for your support and involvement with the Leading Sheep 2011-2015 project. This project was funded by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) and supported by AgForce.

With your help, we engaged with almost 3000 attendees at field days, workshops and webinars. Feedback from these events revealed a remarkable 75 per cent of attendees intended to make a change in their business as a result of what they learned at Leading Sheep events. Ninety-six per cent of participants would recommend the events to others and 93 per cent gained new knowledge.

We're pleased to announce AWI has approved continued funding for 2015–2018, and look forward to working with you to ensure the ongoing profitability and productivity of the Queensland sheep and wool industry.

A proactive network, progressive producers and sheep and wool businesses leading the way.

Nicole Sallur
DAF senior sheep extension officer
Leading Sheep project manager
Flock talk editor

Busting feral pig myths

Busting feral pig myths, understanding their vulnerabilities and getting the community engaged are key to feral pig control.

Darren Marshall from the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee shared his insights on pig control, their habits and impact on sheep operations at a recent Leading Sheep field day in Charleville. He has researched the impact of feral pigs on farming and grazing land and has discovered some misconceptions about their habits and controls.

Darren Marshall, Senior Project Officer (Biodiversity and Pest Management), Queensland Murray-Darling Committee.

"I think the impact feral pigs have on lambing rates is underestimated. Wild dogs have a significant impact, and the evidence is often plain to see. Pigs can, and do, prey on lambs, but will often leave no evidence behind - disguising their real impact.

"It's also important to understand how pigs may compete for pasture. Data is scarce, but we do know they are mostly herbivorous and can consume a lot of pasture.

"There is a misconception pigs will travel great distances or move out of a national park onto a property. Where they have a food source such as pasture or grain, a water supply and shelter they are actually unlikely to travel great distances," Mr Marshall said.

Mr Marshall said another common myth is that pig harvesters or hunters can significantly reduce pig populations.

"While hunters can reduce populations in the shorter term, it is often difficult to maintain enough pressure across enough country to effectively keep population numbers down in the longer term," he said.

"In fact, we have found that properties that rely solely on regular pig hunters tend to have higher pig populations. Often a pig hunter might kill say 10 pigs out of a population of 40 and the numbers will quickly re-establish and increase. Feral pigs are prolific breeders with one sow being able to produce up to 20 piglets in 12 months.

"While there are misconceptions about pig control, photos don't lie – using pictures taken by remote cameras before and after a control operation like an aerial shoot, we are able to see how pig numbers change."

Results show that when the whole region is involved, control is most effective. This could mean regional coordination of dates, pre-bait, aerial shoot and trap, followed by a population count to evaluate effectiveness.

Research suggests that unless a feral pig population is reduced by 70 per cent, the population will quickly return to pre-control levels, so it's essential to expose as much of the population to the control method as possible.

"Whether baiting or trapping, free feed for at least seven to ten nights to draw in as many pigs as possible; it's important to double the free feed quantity each night until there is some left over. This way you know that all feral pigs in the population are getting an adequate food supply and will get enough bait when the free feed is switched to toxic bait," Mr Marshall said.

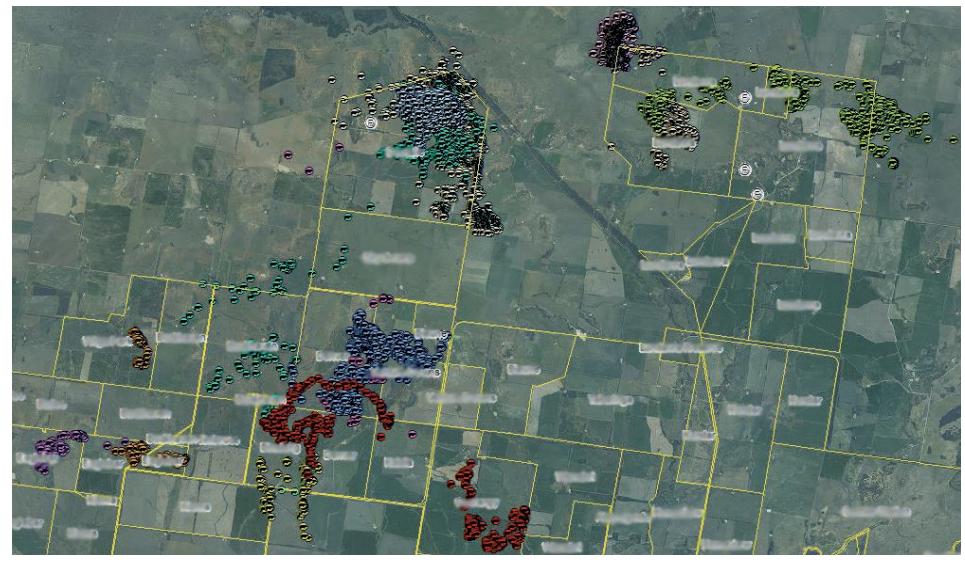
"Free feed should be put out in lines so dominant feral pigs cannot hog the food source and all pigs can access it. If some feral pigs do not get a lethal dose when the free feed is switched to toxic bait they will become bait shy and become problem animals."

Mr Marshall says there is a misconception that feral pigs will move on from the free feed after a few nights. This is often because the free feed food source is not large enough to sustain the whole group of pigs. If the group is not receiving enough food they must move on.

"In my experience if you supply enough food for the whole mob they will not move on until that food source is depleted," he said.

Mr Marshall is involved in a study in partnership with the University of New England and Pennsylvania State University, which will fit up to 50 feral pigs with GPS collars across southern Queensland, northern New South Wales and Tasmania to understand the habits and preferences of the animals. The study will commence in early 2016 and will run for 12 months.

For more information view a recorded webinar on controlling feral pigs on the Leading Sheep website *www.leadingsheep.com.au.*



Data collected from tracked pigs shows that feral pigs do not travel far if they have a food, water and shelter source.