

Dog aware fact



Livestock 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 in a limited way for many years to guard small herds of goats, sheep, deer, alpaca and even free-range fowl.

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 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 having been properly reared.

Key points in successfully rearing 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, and worming and vaccinating it.
- 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 or improperly bred (crossbred) dogs can cause some problems. They may:

- harass, injure, or kill stock
- 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
- pen stock in smaller yards at night
- maintain an appropriate guardian dog/livestock/predator ratio.

Advantages and disadvantages

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, however, producers should ensure they do not harm the guard dogs (e.g. use of toxicants such as 1080 baits is not recommended, and trapping should be used with caution).

These dogs are potentially 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. Dogs have worked well in both fenced pasture and herded-range operations.

These dogs may not be suitable for very large pastures where livestock are widely scattered, and at least two dogs are recommended for large areas with more than several hundred beasts. The dogs can be reliable and effective in reducing the impact of predators on livestock, but it is unreasonable to expect any dog to exceed its physical capability.



Maremma dog guarding goat herd

If you are dog aware:

You know that there is more than one control method for managing wild dogs and that a mix of methods leads to more effective long-term results.