



FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

Herd Protectors

War on Foxes! Alpacas to the challenge

Perhaps even before the introduction of the Merino to Australia, sheep farmers have been waging a constant war against feral dogs, foxes and dingoes.

Much has been said about the desirable characteristics of the alpaca, reasonably low maintenance, environmentally friendly and with a superbly soft and valuable fleece. But until recently it was a little known fact to those who were not involved with the alpaca, that this unique animal possesses another characteristic which significantly benefits the Australian sheep farmer: that of a defender against predators! Especially foxes.

For years sheep farmers have been plagued with losses of lambs to foxes and wild dogs. Indeed, many farmers have introduced Maremma dogs as protectors of their flocks in an attempt to reduce those losses. But Maremmas are not inexpensive, have to be trained to protect sheep or goat flocks, and having been trained are not particularly friendly to humans other than their owner. They require special feeding and are inclined to bark at anything that moves, thus possibly disturbing companion flocks unnecessarily.

On the other hand the instinct for one or preferably two alpacas to bond as companions with sheep and goats has resulted in the growing use of wethered adult male alpacas as flock guardians.

The alpaca, a larger, strong animal, is uniquely observant and curious. While it is normally a gentle and placid animal it is particularly protective of its mob against predators, and especially companion offspring. In addition, while they will tolerate familiar farm dogs they hate with a passion those they don't recognise. Indeed, cases have been recorded in Australia of males or wethers bravely standing in front of females and progeny in the corner of a paddock fending off attacks by packs of dogs. In some cases the dogs have killed a guardian while most of his flock has survived.

Because of their observant and curious nature, alpacas will notice a threat like a dog, fox or dingo immediately and move towards it, alerting the rest of the mob by emitting high pitched squeals not unlike that of squeaky wheel bearings. Because these predators generally avoid confrontation they will usually move away; however should this not be the case the alpaca will chase the predator and may even kick and stomp upon it until either the dangerous animal has run away or is dead.

"Prior to selling our 2400 acre sheep and cattle property in the central west of New South Wales three years ago, we used alpaca wethers to guard our 800 ewes during and after lambing. They enabled us to achieve almost 100% lambing whereas previously, even with annual fox control programs, we had only achieved 80% - 85% lamb breeding rates", said Bob Richardson, a Yass NSW alpaca breeder and current Vice-President of the Australian Alpaca Association. "So guardian alpacas are a profitable investment for sheep and goat breeders."



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Mr. Richardson went on to say, "*The alpaca eats the same food as the sheep, does not bark at anything that moves, and costs about half as much as a Maremma. In addition it requires much the same care as sheep, but does not get fly strike or foot rot and never needs crutching or mulesing. Moreover, unlike many other animals, alpacas do not shed their fibre so the risk of fibre cross-contamination with sheep is negligible, much less likely than from sheep dogs during yard work*".

The Australian Alpaca Association strongly recommends that alpacas used as guardians for lambing, ewe and breeding goat flocks should be fully grown adult castrated males at least 18 months to two years old. They should not be kept alone when not running with a companion flock, so they are often purchased as a pair.

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