

Bonding Maremma Sheepdogs to Sheep and Goats

Introduction: Older Dogs and Rescue Maremma

A high number of livestock guardian dogs (LGDs) are adopted as mature dogs from rescue organisations and pounds. In these cases, it is important to allow the dog time to settle in and bond with you first. On-lead boundary walks and taking the dog with you during daily chores help build trust and develop a partnership between you, as the handler, and your LGD.

Older dogs may never fully bond to stock, particularly if they have spent most of their lives living closely with people. In many cases, these dogs are better suited to general farm or property roles where they remain part of the family while also helping to deter predators from smaller groups of stock/poultry. Having a reputable rescue organisation assess each dog for suitability is essential.

Understanding the Breed

Maremma Sheepdogs are not a typical domestic breed. They are intelligent, independent thinkers, with inherent guardian traits. Guiding them requires consistency, respect, and calm leadership. A Maremma that respects you is more likely to work with you. Unlike herding breeds, they are not driven by constant commands. They are natural problem-solvers and may not respond immediately if they are focused on guarding.

Barking should not automatically be reprimanded, especially at night. Barking is part of how a guardian dog protects its charges. If barking becomes excessive, investigate the cause, thank the dog for alerting you, reassure it, and then encourage it to settle. Over time, you will learn to recognise the different types of barking and what they indicate.

Choosing the Right Puppy

Ideally, a puppy should be at least 10 weeks old before leaving the breeder and should come from a working mother that actively guards sheep. Bonding two pups of a similar age is preferable, giving them an outlet for play with each other rather than with stock. It is very important to purchase puppies from an ethical breeder who prioritises good temperament, sound conformation, and freedom from genetic disease.

A breeder who has already raised the puppies with sheep will make the bonding process much easier for both you and your dog. A good breeder invests considerable time and care in producing puppies suited to livestock guardian work and should also be willing to provide support and mentoring as you continue the bonding process.

Preparing the Set-Up

You will need a generous, puppy-proof pen with shelter from the elements for both your dog and the stock. Set up a safe area where the puppy can retreat if sheep or goats become rough. Livestock panels with gaps large enough for the puppy to pass through, but too small for stock to follow, are often useful. A crate or kennel within this area can also provide security and help the puppy feel safe.

This set-up should allow the dog to stay close to its flock while also preventing overwhelming or unsafe interactions during the early stages.

Bonding by Development Stage

8 to 16 Weeks: The Critical Window

Choose four quiet weaner sheep or a couple of calm ewes with lambs to stay with the puppy throughout the bonding process. It is important for the puppy to spend most of its time in this area so it can begin to see the flock as its family group.

During this stage, introduce lead training and basic commands. Get the puppy used to being handled and groomed. Socialise the dog with family, visitors, and other household or property animals. On smaller land holdings, walk boundaries daily so the puppy begins to understand the limits of its territory.

The goal at this stage is to build trust, familiarity, and calm, appropriate behaviour around stock.

4 to 6 Months

At this age, the puppy should begin showing appropriate guardian behaviour, such as staying close to the flock and becoming more settled around stock. The dog is still far too young to be expected to protect against predators, so it must remain safe and protected from injury, fear, and overly rough stock.

Monitor for excessive mouthing, chasing, or play behaviour. A puppy may see the flock as littermates, so inappropriate play must not be allowed to develop. If you notice these behaviours emerging, increase supervision and intervene early.

6 to 12 Months

At this stage, the dog may be moved into a larger paddock with its flock, provided the fencing is secure and adequate to prevent wandering. A hotwire placed low to the ground can help teach fence respect and reduce the likelihood of fence breaching later on.

You may gradually introduce more quiet stock at this point, but this period still requires dedicated supervision. It is not unusual for a dog that was previously calm to become overly playful during adolescence. If needed, separate the dog using a fence or a sizeable pen within the paddock unless an older, trusted guardian dog is available to mentor it or you are present to supervise closely.

Maremma naturally protect their flock, but maturity takes time. Many dogs are unfairly labelled as failures simply because they were given unsupervised access too soon. When stock are injured, the consequences for both the dog and the animals can be severe. If problems occur, return to basic controlled training. Prevention is always better than correction.

12 to 24 months

Your dog/s will now be showing strong guardian traits at sexual maturity if the bonding process has been done correctly and is well on the way to being a trusted, dependable guardian. Care needs to be taken to ensure that correct behaviour continues.

Training and Daily Handling

Basic training should be done during the day rather than at dawn or dusk, when the dog is more likely to be focused on guarding. Remember that Maremma are independent thinkers. When they are “on the job,” they may not come immediately, and this is normal.

Regular handling is important. Grooming, nail trimming, ear cleaning, and checking paws and mouth should become part of the dog’s routine. This not only supports health and wellbeing but also builds trust and makes future veterinary care easier.

Key Reminders

- Source puppies from an ethical breeder who breeds dogs with strong working traits and has already started the bonding process.
 - Having an older guardian dog as a mentor is ideal, although not always possible, so bonding two puppies of a similar age is best practice.
 - If you want your puppy to become a full-time working guardian, it must spend most of its time with the flock.
 - Choose calm, gentle sheep to ensure the pup is not injured or frightened
 - Praise appropriate behaviour.
 - Never hit the dog or use harsh handling, as this can damage trust and cooperation. If a correction is needed, a firm “no” or “leave it” is sufficient.
 - Introduce the dog to visitors and teach both the dog and children how to behave appropriately around one another.
 - Help the dog understand that household animals are also valued members of the environment.
 - Supervise closely at every stage of development.
 - Praise, routine, and shared work help build a strong working relationship.
 - Having a crate in the pen is recommended, as it provides security for a young dog and prepares them for vet visits or periods of confinement.
 - Feed the dog in a quiet environment away from stock.
 - Commit to the time and consistency needed. In time, the result will be a dependable guardian and loyal companion.
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This is a short overview of bonding a Livestock Guardian Dog to stock. Further resources on bonding to poultry/stock can be found in our guides section or contact us for advice.