



Herd Is the Word

Herding dogs can help you with many livestock-handling chores

By Audrey Pavia

Keeping livestock on a small farm can be a very rewarding experience.

Raising sheep, cattle, goats or poultry provides a sense of closeness to the earth and a true feeling of accomplishment in your farm. Got farm dogs? You got dirt, too. [More>>](#) On the other hand, raising livestock is hard work.

Moving the animals around the property, separating individuals for veterinary care and keeping them in one area of the farm can be challenging.

Herding Dog and Other Dog Organizations

American Kennel Club
5580 Centerview Drive
Raleigh, NC 27606
(919) 233-3600
www.akc.org

American Herding Breed Association
277 Central Ave.
Seekonk, MA 02771
(508) 761-4078
www.ahba-herding.org

United States Border Collie Handlers Association
2915 Anderson Lane
Crawford, TX 76638
(254) 486-2500
www.usbcha.com

Australian Shepherd Club of America
P.O. Box 3790
Bryan, TX 77805-3790
(979) 778-1082
www.asca.org

American Working Collie Association
208 Harris Road, FA 1
Bedford Hills, NY 10507
www.awca.net

Northwest Stockdog Association
2499 Donegal Ct.
West Linn, OR 97068
www.effectnet.com/dickinson/index.htm

That is, unless you have the help of a four-legged assistant in the form of a good herding dog. A herding dog can do wonders to lighten your livestock-handling load. With a herding dog at your side, you'll be amazed at how much easier your job can be.

Combine all that with the great companionship you'll get, and it makes owning one of these amazing canines worth considering.



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How Herding Dogs Help

The chores that a good herding dog can help you achieve are many, according to small farmers who are currently using canine helpers to manage their livestock.

Small farms throughout the world use herding dogs to get livestock chores done quickly and efficiently, and have done so for thousands of years.

“Ever had to wrestle an unwilling sheep or goat down to deworm, trim feet or shear?” asks Marie Koebke of Alamar Kennels in Van Alstyne, Texas, a breeder of Border Collies and Australian Shepherds.

“Ever had your cows get out in the middle of the night, or try to get a steer into a chute that doesn’t want to be doctored or vaccinated? It isn’t easy and can be dangerous. A well-trained dog can make all these jobs go much smoother and easier. When it is time to get the livestock out of the upper pastures or move them to another pasture, a dog can save the work, time and expense of three people. A dog has more livestock sense than most humans and can anticipate the stock’s next move long before you can. The maneuverability of a dog’s four legs to your two saves many steps.”

Koebke notes that daily jobs can also be made a lot easier with the help of a herding dog.

“I use mine to keep the sheep off the feed pans and out of the way while feeding grain,” she says. “I also use the dogs to hold one group while I push others out of the pen, in our case llamas. We also use them to hold sheep in a corner while we catch them to deworm, trim feet, doctor or just generally look them over. Any time we move stock from one place to another, we use a dog. Loading a trailer becomes a simple task with a dog behind the stock. Moving from one pasture to another, sorting, any task now takes just me and a good dog to make it easy.”

Koebke reports that she has a cousin who works on a dairy farm in a milking parlor and uses a dog to help her with her chores.

“She has a Border Collie that lays at the door to keep the other cows from sneaking in for grain,” she says. “When she is done with one group, the dog takes those cows out of the parlor, goes through a couple of fences and brings eight more in and puts them in the stanchion to be milked. It only takes one girl and one dog to accomplish the milking of several hundred cows.”

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Herding Dog Breeds

Although herding comes naturally to many dogs, not all breeds have the instinct to work livestock. Dogs bred specifically to herd are the ones with the strongest instinct and the most trainability for this job.

Humans have been using dogs for herding for thousands of years, and consequently, a great many herding breeds have been developed over time.

Some of the most common herding breeds seen working on farms today include: Border Collies

Belgian Tervurens

Australian Kelpies

Australian Shepherds

Australian Cattle Dogs

Many other herding breeds also make great farm workers. Check out the breed profiles on DogChannel for more information on some of these breeds.

The American Kennel Club, the largest dog breed registry in the United States, currently recognizes 18 herding breeds, including the Collie, Shetland Sheepdog, Old English Sheepdog and Welsh Corgi breeds, to name just a few.

Other non-AKC herding breeds also exist, such as the Australian Kelpie and the English Shepherd.

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Styles of Herding

Some of these AKC and non-AKC breeds retain more herding instinct than others, and some were bred to excel at the different styles of herding: Driving Mustering Boundary

Driving is the style most commonly thought of when one thinks about herding dogs. Driving dogs push livestock through gates and pens, and can take animals from one part of the farm to the other without human assistance.

Mustering dogs, on the other hand, retrieve livestock from far away areas of the property and return them to the farmer.

Boundary herding requires that the dog provide an artificial fence line around livestock, keeping the animals from wandering out of a designated area. Boundary dogs can also move livestock to keep them gathered and in the right place.

While certain dogs are bred to specialize in one type of style more than another (German Shepherds excel at boundary herding, while Border Collies are known to be excellent drivers), any herding dog can be trained to perform one or more of these herding styles.

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Choosing a Breed

When it comes to choosing a herding breed, it's important to think about what you need your dog to do, and then study each breed to determine which ones are best suited to your situation. Remember too that while your herding dog will be a working animal, he will also be a companion and family dog.

"It's a good idea to go to herding trials and talk with people who have the various breeds," says Cathy Modica, a herding dog trainer in Escondido, Calif.

"Ask about the breeds' strong points and weak points. For example, while Border Collies predominate in the working field, they do require a fair amount of work to keep them happy. Other AKC herding breeds are equally good at doing chores. They may take a little longer to train, but they also know when to settle down and be a family member."

Many small farmers have a strong interest in Border Collies, since this is the most visible and often used breed in herding.

Jimmy Walker, a herding dog trainer in Hillsboro, Texas, notes that Border Collies are popular because of their intelligence and their natural instincts to gather and herd.

"Border Collies are thought by many to be the most intelligent breed of dog," he says. "Their instincts and intelligence make it easier for one dog to work large numbers of stock. Border Collies are used to work cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks and geese. Some dogs can do it all with correct training to learn which livestock need a little force and which don't. Some Border Collies are a little more one-sided, being strong and having a tendency to bite more and therefore only work cattle. Others are softer and only work the smaller species that don't need that kind of force."

Walker adds that Border Collies are real time savers.

"Because of their natural instincts to gather, they can be taught to go out and bring stock to you," he says. "Most small farmers need tasks to be completed as quickly as possible. Border Collies help with this because they save steps that the farmer doesn't have to take."

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Puppies vs. Adult Dogs

Whether or not to start with a young puppy or purchase an older dog that has already been trained is another question small farmers make when considering adding a herding dog to the family.

"Some people like the idea of training and learning along with the puppy," says Koebke. "However, the drawback is that you have at least a year before the dog is useful to you. There is also that big question as to whether or not the dog will be able to do what you need. By the time you discover that, you are two years down the road and have wasted a lot of time and money finding out that the dog can't do what you want. If you are inexperienced, it is also possible to take a really good puppy and ruin it with one mistimed correction on stock or a bad experience at a critical point in the puppy's development."



Koebke adds that a puppy can still be a good choice under the right circumstances.

“This is not to say you shouldn’t start with a puppy,” she says. “I personally want a dog to grow up with me, learning me and my nuances and moods. You just need to exercise common sense and seek out help to start things off right.”

Modica notes that whether you start with a puppy or an adult also depends on how much work needs to be done and when.

“Realistically, a pup won’t be ready for real training until six months of age at the absolute earliest, and even more realistically, about 12 months. Once started in training, it will take several months before the dog can do simple chores. One thing to remember is that a pup will probably work, but there’s no guarantee that it will. It’s sort of an unknown, which is why the pup should be bought from someone who is breeding for herding. A dog that is already trained is a known entity, will cost more, but you can start working with it immediately.”

Small farmers who opt for an adult dog that is already trained can expect to pay \$1,000 and upward, depending on the level of training the dog has been given. Conversely, a puppy from herding lines can cost anywhere from \$600 to \$1,200, depending on the breed.

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Getting Started with Herding-dog Ownership

Before embarking on herding-dog ownership, it’s a good idea to learn about herding training and how to work a herding dog, according to experts.

“The most difficult part of herding is usually acquiring a basic knowledge of livestock, but most farmers already have this,” says Koebke.

“The most important thing is knowing how a dog affects the livestock, and how the human can help or hinder the dog. I strongly recommend finding someone nearby to help you learn the basics, whether you buy a trained dog or start on your own.

“It is very easy to ruin a good dog, especially a puppy, through sheer ignorance. Then, once you feel comfortable, go back occasionally to keep from developing bad habits.

“A dog is only as good as his handler allows him to be. If something is not working, don’t take it out on the dog, it is usually your fault. Dogs are kind of like computers—if you input the wrong information, they output the wrong answers.”

Modica recommends attending herding trials and talking to people who are breeding dogs for herding.

“Most people at trials and breeders who breed for herding can help direct someone who is looking for a dog to help with chores,” she says. “I would caution that you be wary of someone who is a breeder but doesn’t have much herding experience, yet says ‘I have the perfect dog for herding in this litter.’ Way too many times, herding ability is erroneously linked to hyperactivity, or to dogs that are ‘high.’ It is unfortunate that people link this to herding. A good herding dog to help out with chores on a small farm should be stable and easy to train, not a dog that is bouncing off the walls.”

If you are going to make the investment in a herding dog, it pays to get formal training so you can learn the ropes. “Find someone to help you,” says Modica.

“If you start with a puppy, do not think this pup will learn by just following you or another dog. Pups left on their own develop bad habits. Keep him on a line if you take him to stock, and do not let him get into trouble with stock. If you correct him when he gets into trouble, he may think he is being corrected for working. When you are not able to be with him, kennel him or keep him confined in some way. Many a good dog has been ruined before he ever got started by having too much freedom.”

If you’ll be getting a puppy, Modica recommends communicating with a trainer as soon as you get your pup so you know how to raise it. “When the dog is old enough, send him off to someone for the training. This will run you anywhere from \$300 to \$500 a month, and will take two to four months. For a busy farmer, this may be the best and most economical option.”

In the meantime, learn as much about herding as you can, and consider taking lessons from a trainer or herding



instructor. Before long, you and your herding dog will be an efficient team, and you'll be wondering how you ever managed without him.

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About the Author: Audrey Pavia enjoys her own herding dog, Nigel, a Pembroke Welsh Corgi. She is a former senior editor of the American Kennel Club Gazette and former managing editor of Dog Fancy magazine.

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