



# sheepdogs



## what are they?

Sheepdogs are working dogs used to herd sheep or other livestock, such as cattle or poultry. Dogs have been selectively bred over thousands of years. In herding dogs, the desire to kill and eat livestock has been suppressed, while maintaining many of the dog's hunting instincts and skills.

Sheepdogs can be used to move sheep from one pasture to another, to bring sheep in to a pen or a barn, and to separate individual sheep from the rest of the flock. As well as working on farms and smallholdings, sheepdogs are often trained for sheepdog trials that test both the skill of the dog and the handler. The breeds typically used for herding in the UK are the Border collie, Bearded collie, Kelpie and Huntaway. They have good herding instincts; trainability; they enjoy working and need plenty of exercise and stimulation.

## what are the benefits?

With a sheepdog you can gather and move your livestock much more easily. It's easier to keep stock on rough hill ground or in a system where you move animals on frequently.

Dogs trump quad bikes in several ways (although they can be used together). A dog can work on wet, rough ground and never compact the soil. A dog can sniff out a hidden, injured, sheep and her sharp ears may warn you that your sheep are out and halfway down the lane. With a dog, it's far easier to separate a sheep that needs attention.

Training and working a dog can be its own reward - as you develop your skills you may even want to take part in sheepdog trials. You might be able to supplement your income by working with your dog on larger farms. Finally, sheepdogs can be good guard dogs and companions.



*In the UK the intelligent and active Border collie is the most common breed of sheep dog.*

## what can I do?

**Getting started:** visiting someone local who works dogs is a great place to start. Do you have enough work for a dog, and if you don't, bear in mind that sheepdogs need far more stimulation and exercise than many other dogs.

If you decide to go ahead, contact a local trainer with a good reputation to help you find a dog suitable for you. For your first dog, it might be best go for an older experienced dog. Even with help, training a young dog can be time-consuming and, at times, stressful. The ideal situation would be to find someone who could offer you a trained dog along with handler training. Even a veteran dog can struggle to understand a novice handler, so getting some training with the dog you are going to buy can really smooth your path.

There are some differences between the breeds. Huntaways may be particularly good with large numbers of sheep over a large area; Border collies may be best for precise work requiring agility. In general though, choose the individual rather than the breed - any of the breeds could do any of the work you might need. Watch the dog you're thinking of buying work the livestock. Does she (or he) focus well or is she easily distracted? Does she listen to her handler? Does she move the animals calmly without startling them? A good sheepdog should leave the sheep when called but also appear eager to return to work. Spend some time with the dog; you are going to be a team so you need to know you will get on.

If you know whether you'll be keeping your dog outdoors or in the house, and you're buying a mature dog, you'll need to buy a dog accustomed to living that way. An outdoor dog should have a dry and draught-proof place to sleep with some bedding; an indoor dog should have her own space to retreat to, such as a dog bed.

**Working your dog:** sheepdogs love to work. A dog is rarely deliberately disobedient - the chances are, if things go badly, your dog doesn't understand what's wanted and instinct has taken over. You need to be calm and confident. The dog needs to have bonded with you and respect you, accepting you as leader of the pack.

Building a bond and earning respect is the first thing you need to do with your dog and may take several weeks. You, the handler, should be the one to feed, groom and exercise your new dog. As with any dog you need to be consistent and firm with discipline, without punishing or becoming angry. Always be pleased to see your dog, and always praise her when she returns to you, even if you had to ask ten times and you don't feel like it!



*The adaptable and hardy Bearded collie originated in Scotland.*

Handler training is important, either from the dog's trainer or from another trainer or college. The main basic commands when working a dog are: "come-by" (move clockwise around the sheep); "away" (move anti-clockwise around the sheep); "lie-down" (stop); and "that'll do" (stop working the sheep and return to handler). There are more commands, and they will vary between handlers. Start with easy tasks and short sessions. As you gain experience, forming a bond with your dog and learning to read her body language, you and your dog will become a team and working the livestock together will go more smoothly.

**Feeding:** buy good quality dog food from farm feed suppliers in bulk and follow the feeding instructions on the pack. How much depends on how much work she's doing, and will vary between individuals. Keep an eye on her weight and adjust the amounts if she's getting fat or losing condition. Avoid dog food made from 'human grade' meats rather than waste products; these are no more nutritious and result in more food waste. Look for feeds containing meat from MSC-certified fish or free-range poultry. You can make your own dog food - easier if you have a friendly local butcher to source waste meat, plus a large freezer. Do your research thoroughly, to be certain you're giving your dog a balanced diet.

**Health:** you need a good vet who has experience with dogs (you probably already have one for your livestock). If you spend time with your dog every day (and it's important that you do), you'll quickly notice if she's unwell. You should also regularly groom your dog, especially if she's long-haired.

Dogs are vaccinated against 4 main illnesses – canine parvovirus, canine distemper virus, leptospirosis and Infectious canine hepatitis. Make sure the dog you buy is up to date with these. She'll need boosters every 1 to 3 years. Dogs can get intestinal parasites, lung worm and fleas. Treat for worms 4 times a year, and for fleas every 1-2 months. If she lives outside, or your house isn't centrally heated, you may find treatment for fleas is needed less often in the winter.

**Sheepdog trials:** at first, working dogs may simply be for managing your sheep – but it can turn into a passion. There are hundreds of local trialing events held in the UK every year where you can test your own and your dog's skills. A trial typically involves: the fetch (bringing the sheep towards the handler, through gates); the drive (herding the sheep back down, then across, the field, again through gates); shedding (separating a some sheep from the flock); and penning (bringing sheep into an enclosure). Types of trials:

- Nursery: trials for inexperienced dogs unused to competition, often not including shedding.
- Novice: open to any dogs who have not won at novice level.
- Open: open to all dogs. Points can be gained towards qualification for national trials.

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/sheepdogs](http://lowimpact.org/sheepdogs) for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Nij Vyas, *Sheepdog Training & Trials*
- Longton & Sykes, *Training the Sheep Dog*
- Lew Olson, *Raw & Natural Nutrition for Dogs*
- [isds.org.uk](http://isds.org.uk) – International Sheep Dog Society
- [theworkingsheepdog.com](http://theworkingsheepdog.com) – tutorials & articles
- [bordercollieclub.com](http://bordercollieclub.com) – Border collie club of GB



*Border collie herding Indian runner ducks.*

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