



A Farm Dog

by Denice Rackley

A farm dog is many different things to different people. To some it is a mutt (a mixed breed mongrel of questionable pedigree and even more questionable history), a tool to keep salesmen inside their cars but allow the feed delivery, and to others it is a companion in the shop and tractor that keeps you company with a nudging nose and wagging tail. To me, a farm dog, more specifically a Border Collie, is a working dog that assists with livestock. The appearance matters none. It is their minds, hearts and souls that endears them to me. They do nearly unfathomable feats- things you could only dream of teaching them but somehow they already know. A companion – absolutely, but they are so much more- a partner in the truest sense of the word. I rarely go toward the barn without at least one beside me and another already waiting for me at the pasture gate. I have raised sheep for over 20 years. Beginning with bottle lambs, my commercial flock is now 100 ewes and growing. I have only grown because I decided to ‘Work Smarter Not Harder’ and thankfully I bought a Border Collie.

Back in the bad old days, in my BBC (Before Border Collies) era, I used to move sheep like many people do- rattling a

Clockwise from top: Blu and I; Meg moved this yearling ewe in from pasture and held her along this fence so I could pull her large single lamb; Scott and I walking a ewe and her newborn lamb to fresh pasture; Blu and Scott gathering pairs bringing them to the barn for the night

bucket of corn calling “Sheep, sheep, sheep.” With every step I hoped they didn’t knock me over while shoving their way to the front to steal a few kernels. I was shoved along in a surrounding mass of moving wool and legs with sharp hooves occasionally stepping on me as we did a very uncoordinated dance toward the feed bunk. The goal was to arrive at the feed bunk with enough corn to keep the sheep from running out the gate. Heaven forbid I drop my guard and one of the ewes get her head in the bucket because then the real rush ensues as kernels hit the ground and woe to whoever may be in the

way. If I had been living right and the farm gods were smiling on me, I would make it to the bunk dumping corn in, getting quickly out of the way and heading to the gate while breathing a sigh of relief- I would not have to endure the gauntlet again till tomorrow. But just as I finished my sigh, there would be the dreaded sight of several ewes remaining blissfully grazing in the pasture paying no attention to the frenzy of those addicted to corn. I am sure they snickered at me as I walked toward them because they knew without a shadow of a doubt no human could move fast enough to get them through the gate if they didn’t not want to go.



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Now, with my farm dogs, life with sheep is far more enjoyable and infinitely easier. I gave up bucket rattling 16 years ago; now I simply send the dog while waiting patiently at the open gate. Now I am the one who snickers if sheep do not want to come to the barn. I know full well that despite the sheep trying every trick in the book, the dog will win and the sheep will march like soldiers in formation wherever I ask the dog to take them. Gone are the days of bumping, shoving, sheep with their heads stuck in buckets and my grumbled cuss words of frustration.

Absolutely every task that needs done, the dogs help me accomplish with less stress to me and the sheep. It is far more efficient. The times when I need to treat one or two sheep, I no longer have to bring the entire flock to the barn. I can either use the dog to hold sheep in the pasture - allowing me to catch one and treat it - or can bring just a few to the barn, whichever is best. The dog gathers and pushes sheep down an alley for vaccines or deworming. Rotational grazing is easy and takes minutes with the dog doing the vast majority of the work. Sheep that escape out of their pasture used to be a pain but now I see that as an opportunity to work a dog. There is no running or yelling or arguments to stress sheep and make people angry. And, I don't even need other people to help with daily management because the dogs are always ready to assist me.

Using Border Collies in my sheep operation has been the single most important management decision I have made. I hope that through sharing my experience using Border Collies you will come to see how herding dogs might open up opportunities and possibilities for you in your operation.

Adapted from **SHEEP!** magazine Jan/Feb 2016

Denice has used Border Collies to assist in the management of her sheep operation for 16 years. She now raises and trains working dogs as well as giving lessons, clinics and educational herding demonstration. www.clearfieldstock-dogs.com

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