

# Border Collie Characteristics



## Introducing the Shepherd's Dog

The Industrial Revolution created urban markets for lamb, mutton, and wool; but how could the vast hills of unfenced land in the Borders of Scotland and northern England be put to raising sheep? Hardworking sheepdogs were the key, helping shepherds turn this inhospitable land into sheep-raising country. Our modern sheep-herding collie was improved in the nineteenth century, and the genetic refinement of its working skills occupies thoughtful livestock producers on several continents to this day. Breeders try to balance a dozen heritable working traits to produce the best dog for their purposes, factoring in climate, terrain, livestock type, and the kind of dog they get along with. Guided by a skilled trainer, a talented dog develops remarkable mastery over livestock. The true Border Collie is known by how it works sheep and cattle, and by no other standard.

## Herding Characteristics

Because their early work was to gather sheep from the hills, Border Collies are, by nature, gatherers rather than drovers or tenders. They can, nevertheless, be taught to drive stock away from the shepherd and even to keep their charges within certain boundaries. They are also sensitive to commands from their handlers and can distinguish slight variations in the many whistles they understand, responding appropriately to each tone.

Shepherds look for exceptional athletic ability, a biddable nature, and superior livestock sense. In general, a dog that is light on its feet, flowing in its movement, quick to cover its stock, and has great endurance is the most valued. The dog's temperament must be sensitive enough to bend its will when asked, tough enough to stand up to the pressures of training, eager to learn, with enough confidence and determination to carry on with its work without constant guidance. Some Border Collies are reserved rather than outgoing, but they must love to work with and for the master. While innate livestock sense is bred into all good working collies, their working style can vary. Most people admire a dog that works with its head low to the ground, with its hindquarters high and its tail tucked between its hind legs. They can run as fast as the wind, yet stop in an instant or switch directions without stopping. They don't take their eyes off their sheep. Their intense gaze is focused on the stock, willing them to obey, to go where the dog directs them, to stop if the dog blocks their path. The stock aren't rushed or afraid, but they certainly respect the

dog. A good Border Collie's obsession is its livestock, and this is as it should be.

Sheepdog trials have a very practical purpose of proving the worth of the most desirable Border Collie studs and dams. Each year, there is one, and only one, Border Collie champion: the dog or bitch that wins the National Handlers Finals sheepdog trial sponsored jointly by the United States Border Collie Handlers Association and the American Border Collie Association registry.

### **The Breeding Behind a Good Border Collie**

How did Border Collies get to be such smart and useful livestock dogs? During the nineteenth century, forward-looking shepherds felt that the faithful farm collie could be made more useful with the addition of traits from other types of dog: the "eye" of a staunch setter, the speed and silent nature of a racing hound. No dog has all the herding traits in perfect proportion, and the intricate assemblage is easy to lose. Breeding a good Border Collie is not easy. It takes great experience with dogs and herding requirements, and a bit of luck in addition.

### **Soundness**

In the days when dogs that were unfit to work could not be kept, most dogs with physical problems were put down. As Border Collies became more popular with farmers around the world, hobby trials competitors, and pet and dog-sport owners, some latent problems began to surface. The International Sheep Dog Society and the American Border Collie Association have programs that are reducing the incidence of inherited eye diseases. All dogs should be tested by a canine ophthalmologist, preferably between 6 and 12 weeks of age. Dogs having or producing pups which have genetic eye abnormalities should not be bred. There is some hip dysplasia, and conscientious breeders have radiologists certify that breeding dogs are clear of hip dysplasia. The American Border Collie Association will record this information, as well as eye certification, on pedigrees. Osteochondritis dissecans (OCD) occasionally causes shoulder lameness, and some researchers feel there is a genetic component. Epilepsy, which can have a genetic basis, occurs occasionally. Obviously, affected dogs should not be bred.

### **Appearance**

While a group of one hundred Border Collies will probably look as if they belong to the same breed, they will not have a uniform appearance. Since a "good" dog can be judged only by its herding performance, there is no "breed standard" of appearance to which Border Collies should conform. In general, they are of medium size (25-55 pounds), with coats that may be smooth, medium, or rough. Colors are black, black with tan, and, less common, reddish-brown, all usually with white markings. Predominantly white Border Collies and merles, though unusual, also occasionally appear.

## **Border Collie Registries**

The original registry for working sheepdogs is the International Sheep Dog Society in Great Britain. In 1946 two words, "Border Collie," were added to the pedigree to ensure that the dogs were not confused with the British Kennel Club's Collie. In North America, the principal registry for working dogs is the [American Border Collie Association, Inc.](#), 82 Rogers Road, Perkinston, MS 39573. The only registry of Canadian Border Collies is the [Canadian Border Collie Association](#), Kelly Knowlton, Secretary, 1687 8th Concession Rd, W, Cambridge, ON, N1R 5S2, Canada. The United States Border Collie Club, Inc., supports these registries for their efforts to preserve and promote the working Border Collie.

Despite strong opposition from all people who value the genetic heritage of the breed, both the Kennel Club in Great Britain and the American Kennel Club have taken up the registration of Border Collies. They have imposed written physical standards as breeding guidelines and award titles for conformation in dog shows. In Australia, New Zealand, and Britain, where a strain of Border Collies has been bred for dog shows for twenty years or more, those dogs have a predictable physical type, but their ability to herd livestock has been severely compromised.

The United States Border Collie Club, Inc., opposes registering Border Collies with organizations, such as the American Kennel Club, which offer conformation classes for Border Collies. Since its formation in 1975, a primary purpose of the USBCC has been to protect working Border Collies from misguided efforts to create a breed based on physical characteristics instead of on skill in herding livestock.

## **Border Collies for Sports and as Pets**

Because they are highly motivated to work in partnership with their owners, Border Collies are well suited to most canine sports. To compete in their performance events such as Obedience and Tracking tests without registering with the AKC, a Border Collie owner must neuter the dog and apply for an Indefinite Listing Privilege.

Many Border Collies and their owners enjoy the fast-growing sport of Agility, as it enhances the relationship between dog and handler and develops a confident, bold, and motivated dog. The best Agility is found in meets sanctioned by the [United States Dog Agility Association](#), Inc., P. O. Box 850955, Richardson, TX 75085-0955. Some Border Collies excel in Fly Ball and Frisbee competitions. In northern climates, Border Collie sled-dog teams are competitive in middle-distance races.

As pets, Border Collies have a mixed record. While some people have no difficulty controlling the dogs' herding instinct, high energy and quick minds, less-skilled owners may be frustrated by these traits. The calm, well-behaved dogs seen at sheepdog trials are the result of careful attention to the dogs' mental and physical needs. Border Collies that herd are fulfilled. In pet environments, with experienced dog people who give them the structure, love, and fellowship they crave, they can be superb pets. With less-skilled owners, unfortunately, they can become a neurotic nuisance. An honest appraisal of your lifestyle, skills and needs before getting a Border

Collie can save you from heartache. It is very hard to find a farm home or a new pet home for a Border Collie which has developed bad habits, and every year many Border Collies are destroyed because they proved to be too much dog for their owners.

### **Care**

Yes, Border Collies shed. Rough-coated dogs develop thick undercoats in winter which must be combed out at the onset of summer's heat. Teeth must be cleaned and toenails clipped. A veterinarian will recommend a program of vaccinations and medications. Be aware that heat exhaustion is a killer. Border Collies often lie in shade or cool water after a hot run or hard work. Even so, their obsessive natures do lead to unnecessary deaths from hyperthermia. Be warned, also, that allowing them to roam free inevitably leads to trouble, as the herding instinct can be activated by anything that moves. Border Collies' attraction to motion should be confined to safe outlets, as most chronic car-chasing is eventually fatal. Inappropriate herding should be stopped immediately by saying no and meaning it. The USBCC recommends spaying or neutering pet dogs for the owners' comfort and for the sake of the breed's working instincts.

Dogs are a commitment. Before you acquire a Border Collie puppy, be sure you want to spend two years training and thirteen more enjoying a highly energetic dog that anticipates your every move, shares your every joy, comforts all your sorrows, and beats you in every race.

### **Puppies**

If you need a livestock dog, it is imperative to find a puppy whose parents work to a high standard. They should have a livestock dog temperament suited to your handling skills. If your interest in a Border Collie pet has survived our warnings, be prepared to answer questions about your dog-owning experience and your plans for raising a Border Collie puppy. Responsible breeders will be very careful about where their puppies go. Visit the breeder and spend time with the adult dogs. Temperaments vary from shy to bold, calm to excitable, although all will turn serious when they work livestock. For whichever purpose you acquire a puppy, take care to establish your authority and control as a kind, benevolent master. A Border Collie's personality can be ruined by harsh treatment, neglect, or letting it assume a dominant role in the household. People who own Border Collies like their intelligence, high energy, and their desire to participate in every phase of human activity. However, they do take time, patience, and dog-handling skills to develop into either a working dog or a fine companion dog. A well-trained Border Collie is a pleasure to live with and will be reliably well behaved anywhere.

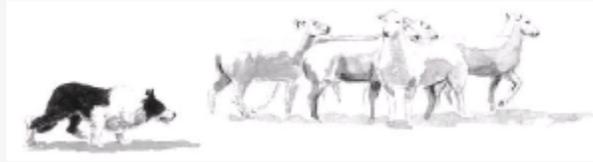
### **Rescue**

A number of individuals and organizations around the country are dedicated to rescuing Border Collies who are abandoned or unwanted, furnishing them with basic training and health care, and finding new homes for them. If you have decided to get a Border Collie, why not consider giving a new home to one of these dogs? Most Border Collie rescue organizations list their dogs on [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com).

## **The United States Border Collie Club, Inc.**

The USBCC is the oldest Border Collie breed club in North America. Founded to protect the Border Collie's unique genetic heritage, protecting the Border Collie remains the club's task today. It took five hundred years of single-minded breeding to produce the Border Collie. In the latter part of the twentieth century it took only a couple of decades for dog-show fanciers in several sheep-raising countries to reduce their selected strain to just another pretty pet.

The USBCC neither registers dogs nor runs sheepdog trials. Our membership consists of working farmers, pet owners, and sheepdog, agility, and obedience trial competitors who share information and experiences through a quarterly newsletter. The USBCC presents the traditional working Border Collie to the dog world, the media, and anyone who might affect its future.



Copyright © 1997 USBCC, Inc. All rights reserved. Copies of this brochure may be downloaded for personal, noncommercial use, provided the brochure is used in its entirety, including this copyright notice. No part of this brochure may be otherwise reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the United States Border Collie Club, Inc. Contact [info@bordercollie.org](mailto:info@bordercollie.org) if you wish to use this text in any way.