

A FARM DOG THAT EASES SHEEP WORK



Denice Rackley employs, raises, trains and sells cost effective canine farm hands.

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A farm dog is many different things to different people. To some it's a mutt, a mixed breed mongrel of questionable pedigree and even more questionable history. A farm dog keeps salesmen inside their cars, but allows the feed delivery.

To others it's a companion in the shop and tractor, a buddy to ride along during planting and harvest, keeping them company with a nudging nose and wagging tail.

To me a farm dog is a working dog that assists with livestock, more specifically a Border Collie. The appearance matters none. It's their minds, hearts and souls that endear them to me.

They do nearly unfathomable feats, things you could only dream of teaching them but somehow they know what's needed. A companion? Absolutely. But they're 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.

Back In The Days Of BBC

I have raised sheep for over 20 years now. Beginning with bottle lambs, my commercial flock is now 100 ewes and growing.

Back in the bad old days, in my BBC era (before Border Collies) I used to move sheep like many people do, rattling a bucket of corn and calling, "Sheep, sheep, sheep," every step hoping they wouldn't knock me over. Each of them would be shoving its way to the front to get a chance to steal a few kernels. Pushing me along in a surrounding mass of moving wool

and legs (with sharp hooves occasionally stomping me), we'd all do a very uncoordinated dance toward the feed bunk.

I was always hoping I could arrive with enough corn in the bucket that I could dump it in and get the gate shut. Heaven forbid I drop my guard and one of the ewes got her head in the bucket, because then the possible outcomes got even worse. The real rush would ensue as kernels hit the ground: Woe to whoever may have been in the way!

If I had been living right and the farm gods were smiling on me, I'd make it to the bunk, dump corn in, get quickly out of the way, head to the gate and breathe a sigh of relief, not having to endure the gauntlet again till tomorrow.

Then, "Ugh!" That dreaded sight of several ewes remaining blissfully grazing in the pasture, paying no attention to the frenzy of those addicted to corn.

I was sure they were snickering at me as I walked toward them. They knew without a shadow of a doubt no human could move fast enough to get them through the gate if they didn't want to go.

The saying "Work Smarter, Not Harder" eventually came to me. And thankfully, I wised up and bought a Border Collie.

Farm Dogs: An Easier Life

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'm the one who snickers if sheep don't 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 cusswords of frustration.

The dogs help me accomplish absolutely every task that needs to be done, with less stress to me and the sheep. It's far more efficient.

Those 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 it can bring just a few to the barn, whichever is best.

The dog gathers and pushes sheep down an alley for vaccines or worming.

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 in the butt. Now I see such events as an opportunity to work a dog. There's no running or yelling or misunderstandings that stress sheep and make human helpers angry. I don't even need the other people to help with daily management: 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 experiences using Border Collies you'll come to see how herding dogs might open up opportunities and possibilities for you in your operation.

Denice Rackley has run a commercial flock since the mid-1990s. Full time off-farm work soon made herding dogs essential to her flock management. Degreed in biology, an associate in veterinary technology, certified in canine massage, she worked as a registered vet technician (RVT) 15 years (still does at times) and today runs her own grooming business, raises and trains Border Collies and organizes herding dog clinics, lessons and demos, including guest experts from around the world. Phone: 605-842-6321; e-mail: denice.r@bycos.com; website: www.ClearfieldStockDogs.com



Collecting sheep from an open stubble field close to nightfall: Using herding dogs it's quick and efficient; without, it's nearly impossible.