

Working Dog Spirit

Thanks to their heart, skill, and dedication, dogs are still essential to farmers and ranchers.

Lisa Hanks

Since the beginning of farming, there have been farm dogs. From the Romans to the Saxons to the Scots, people have considered farm and ranch dogs a vital part of daily life. Their main task, though, is herding. These wranglers will herd anything, including sheep, cattle, goats, reindeer, and poultry, and perform a few other odd jobs, too.

“Gathering stock at a distance is one of the most important jobs a dog can do on many ranches,” says Mary Bowsher, who runs about 200 sheep on her 100-acre ranch in Texas. She explains that collecting the livestock is the first task before any other work — checking health, sorting, and shipping — can be done.

Good working dogs have incredible herding instinct, non-stop drive, and rock-solid work ethic. Imagine a 40-pound dog convincing a 1,000-pound cow to move anywhere! Let’s take a peek at a few of these dogs at work.

Natural talent

Bowsher has been successfully using working dogs since the early 1980s. Her 8-year-old Border Collie Tres is “one of the most naturally talented dogs I have handled.

“There’s nothing more beautiful, in my eyes, than watching Tres fly out over the hills, running wide and deep to keep from disturbing a flock of sheep, and coming up behind at the precise point needed to start them moving back toward me,” Bowsher says.

Ranches and farms typically have few funds to pay for men or machines. “Even non-skilled labor would be too expensive to hire with the relatively small profit potential in today’s livestock operations,” Bowsher explains.

Every day Tres and fellow ranch dog Bob rotate herds of sheep, lambs, and goats to new pastures, push them into the safety of night pens, drive them to the central facility for health procedures and sorting for sale, and retrieve lost stock, if necessary.

“During lambing season, we feed supplemental grain and have trained the dogs to hold the sheep away from the feeders until the grain has been distributed,” Bowsher says. “Many livestock producers have fallen and been injured due to the jostling of hungry animals.”

Bowsher adds that Tres and her five other Border Collies, aren’t just working dogs, though. “While work is the focal point of our relationship, companionship is important as well.”

Teamwork in action

“Border Collies and [Australian] Kelpies are the best breeds for what I do because I’m a one-person operation,” says Carl Larsen, of Texas.

With help from his 2-year-old Border Collies, Willie and Bugs, Larsen runs a pre-conditioning cattle operation of about 400 cattle. He cares for freshly weaned calves for about two months to reduce stress and illness, thus pre-conditioning them, before they’re sold.

“Every day we head out to the pasture, and the dogs’ll help me gather sick cattle and bring them into the pens. They push the cattle into the chute so we can doctor them,” Larsen says. “If I didn’t have dogs, I’d have to have two to three guys on horseback helping me.”

Gathering the cattle for inoculations and deworming, and moving them into pens so they can be trucked to other locations are also part of Willie and Bugs’ duties. And, says Larsen, they make good watchdogs.

Using voice commands and whistle signals, Larsen starts training his dogs on goats, then switches to light dairy cattle — if you call 300 pounds light. “I use dairy cattle because they’re not as muscled up,” Larsen says. “If they kick at a dog, they won’t hurt him.”

Don't worry about the working dogs, though. "They watch out and don't put themselves in harm's way too much," Larsen adds. "The dogs get in there and make the cows move, then get back out."

Although still a bit immature, Willie and Bugs are out in the pastures with Larsen daily. "They're working dogs and companions," he adds. "I couldn't do this job without them."

A watchful eye

"Pony is very good at telling us when a lamb has been born," says Allison Bryant of Georgia, who raises heifers, sheep, and ducks with husband Michael.

"She can smell the new lamb, and runs over to the gate of the pasture where the lamb is. Then she jumps up and down as if to say, 'In here!'"

A 7-year-old Australian Shepherd and the Bryants' main dog, Pony works the farm along with five other Aussies. The dogs' primary job is to help move 10 cattle and 70 sheep around the 60-acre farm, a relatively small operation.

Georgia's humid climate makes deworming the livestock a prime concern. About once a month Bryant passes her sheep through a squeeze chute where liquid dewormer is squirted into their mouths. "The sheep don't like the taste and resist going through the chute," Bryant says. "The dog pushes the sheep into the chute and keeps them from backing out."

In addition to rotating livestock to fresh pastures, sorting out the rams from the ewes, and finding lost livestock, the dogs also prevent males from ramming people in the pasture.

"Rams can be sneaky and can come after you when you're busy doing something else," Bryant laughs. "The dog makes sure that doesn't happen."

The dogs are a valuable part of the Bryants' farming operation.

"Without the dogs, several people would be required for routine chores," Bryant explains. The person would have to run around or ride an ATV. "A good dog can gather up the livestock within minutes. Plus, they reduce the stress to the livestock. If you're trying to fatten up a heifer, you don't want her running around burning calories!"

Working dogs are valued for their heart, their working abilities, and their determination to finish the job, whatever it may be. But they're also prized companions, making life just a little bit more fun for hard-working ranchers.

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Find out what a day in the life of a working ranch dog is like.