

Working dogs

Experts in the field

An increasing number of rare breed owners are using sheep dogs to manage their flocks. Rachel Kelly meets the experts.



*Cathy Wainwright with Skye (left) and Meg (right).
Photo: Darren Cassie.*

As any enthusiast will know, primitive sheep possess certain characteristics that can make them more difficult to shepherd than domestic breeds. An increasing number of owners and breeders are overcoming these problems by using sheepdogs, a solution that has been in existence in the British Isles for centuries.

Cathy Wainwright, flock manager for the Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust, has had 20 years' experience of shepherding and dog handling. "There's a myth that you can't work primitive sheep with a dog," she said. "I think this has come about because people now tend to keep small flocks which then become tame. The tamer the sheep, the less respect they will have for the dog."

Cathy has three dogs which she uses on the wildlife trust's flocks of Manx Loaghtan and

Hebridean sheep, as well as on her own flocks of Hebridean, Manx Loaghtan, North Ronaldsay, Soay and Boreray sheep. Her management skills are put to good use as the trust's sheep graze around 15 different nature reserves, ranging from two acres to 15 acres. "Before I started the sheep were being herded by a group of volunteers – a process that could sometimes take all day," said Cathy. "The first time I used the dogs it took half an hour but now the sheep are used to it, it takes about 10 minutes."

'Improved' primitive breeds such as Manx Loaghtans and Hebrideans are generally considered easier to work with because they have more of a flocking instinct. "The more primitive the breed, the more of a challenge they are," Cathy explained. "I have found that the sheep, as well as the dog,



need to be trained, and flocks that are not used to being dogged will take a while to adapt."

The lack of flocking instinct prevalent in primitive sheep is a natural survival tactic – if the sheep don't flock, then more of them will escape harm from predators. North Ronaldsays and Soays are particularly likely to display this behaviour. "Ronnies are one of the most difficult breeds to manage as

they will immediately split into groups. They are also highly intelligent and are able to work out ways of getting away from the dogs," explained Cathy.

"The best type of dog is one that will work quite close to them. In fact, the dog that I use on the Ronnies is the one that I am least likely to use on the other sheep. She is pushy and fast and will nip the sheep to turn them back if they break away."

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Cathy doesn't discourage her from this, in fact it is in line with methods used by sheep breeders on North Ronaldsay island who traditionally used dogs to catch individual sheep and actually bring them down.

Training

Border collies are the most widely used breed and tend to control the sheep with 'eye' (this refers to the amount of concentration on the sheep that the dog shows). Jeff Moore from the Worth Valley in West Yorkshire, breeds and trains border collies and is a keen participant in sheep dog trials across the UK.

He bought his first dog to manage his 60-strong flock of Hebrideans. "She was an older, experienced dog and she did the job very well," explained Jeff. "I took one or two lessons in handling and haven't looked back."

Jeff now owns five dogs, ranging in age from seven months to eight years old. "It is interesting to see whether a puppy will take to working," he said. "You can't start training until it is older and stronger but you can see if it's got the instinct by taking it and showing it the sheep. If it runs up to the pen, it is interested – better still if it runs round the pen to try and head the sheep." Hebridean sheep are

considered to be particularly suited to working with dogs because they flock together well and are free moving. "Some people use them specifically for training their dogs," explained Jeff. While he cautions against overworking a flock for training purposes, Jeff recognises the uses of the breed. "Hebrideans can stop a young dog developing too much eye, unlike bigger and heavier lowland sheep such as Shropshires which will stand and look at the dog, forcing it to crouch down and move only if the sheep move."

According to Jeff it can take up to two years to fully train a border collie for flock or trials work. "But a well trained dog is invaluable," he said. Wildlife trusts across the country have conservation flocks running into the hundreds and Jeff believes that the border collie is an essential tool in the management of these delicate eco-systems.

"They are key to moving the sheep on and off the pasture at the appropriate times of the year, with the minimum amount of disturbance," he said. "Imagine the damage that a quad bike might cause."

Other breeds

While border collies are generally the most popular, they are not the only dog breed

used for working with sheep. One of the oldest of the British herding breeds is the bearded collie which has been used for centuries to hunt and gather free-ranging sheep on the Highlands of Scotland.

Jonathan Crump works bearded collies on his dairy farm in Arlingham, Gloucestershire. He keeps Gloucester cows, Castlemilk Moorit sheep, Gloucestershire Old Spots, and Tamworth pigs, as well as a range of poultry.

He started with a 'beardie' crossed border in 1987 and now has four female beardies. "I use them to work the sheep and the cows and find that they

are more suited to my needs" he said. "They use less eye than border collies and are far more vocal."

The bearded collie has traditionally used its bark to locate, and flush sheep from their hiding spots. Jonathan finds the dogs particularly adept at working his sheep which, he says, can be tough and strong willed themselves.

"The dogs have great stamina – this is also useful because the sheep are very quick and the dogs must work hard to control them," he said.

Buying a working dog

Whatever the choice of breed, anyone thinking of buying a sheep dog is recommended to seek help from an experienced dog handler.

"Check the parents and make sure they are sound working dogs, preferably eye tested for PRA (progressive retinal atrophy) and CEA (collie eye anomaly) as well as checking the pedigree for ancestors known to have epilepsy," said Cathy.

There are an increasing number of sheepdog auctions taking place across the UK. "Check these events are properly licenced and if intending to buy a dog at auction always take someone with you who knows what they are looking at!" warned Cathy.

If you are buying a puppy,



The bearded collie has been used for centuries to hunt and gather free-ranging sheep on the Highlands of Scotland.

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Jonathan Crump with his much loved bearded collies.

always buy from a reputable breeder rather than an auction. The International Sheep Dog Society holds a register of nearly 6000 border collie pups so it is worth contacting them.

A well bred pup will cost up to

£200, a part broken dog of eight to 12 months could be £600 to £800, while the fully trained youngster could cost up to £2000.

But don't rule out the older working dogs. "Some retired dogs still have a few years' work

in them," said Cathy. "They are extremely well suited to certain jobs."

For further information on buying a working dog, contact the International Sheep Dog Society at www.isds.org.uk.

Major sheep dog trials 2006

Scotland

27-29 July, Tillyochie Farm, Kinross

Contact secretary Janette Arniel on 01764 664137

Wales

3-5 August, Penbedw, Nr Mold

Contact secretary Kerry Anne Jones on 01352 780992

England

11-13 August, Underly Hall, Kirkby Lonsdale

Contact secretary Carol Palmer on 01200 445293

Ireland

17-19 August, Lissanoure Castle, Pharis, Nr Ballymena

Contact Tourist Information Centre on 0282 5638494

International

24-27 August, Gobelsburg/Langenlois
Visit www.isds.org.uk/trials/index.htm

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