

Herding Breeds: Joys and Challenges

Are you thinking about adopting a herding breed? Although the various herding breeds have many things in common, each have characteristics unique to that specific breed. For example, Australian Cattle Dogs were bred to herd cows. They needed to be a formidable, strong-willed dog. Border Collies were bred to be a more sensitive dog who excelled at working closely with shepherds taking care of their flock of sheep. Living with a herding breed dog can be fun, but if you are not a match, it can lead to challenges.

General Characteristics

If you think that a herding breed dog might be right for you, then you probably already have a daily exercise routine and wouldn't think of skipping a day. Great! This will be an interest that you both share.

Herding breeds are typically industrious, athletic, energetic, focused, highly intelligent, fast learners and loyal. These traits describe dogs who require daily exercise, both mental and physical, for their well-being. These types of dogs may get bored and develop problematic behaviors if left to their own devices. Challenging and fun activities should be worked into their daily routine so they learn what to expect and get the mental stimulation and exercise they need.

Many herding breeds are one person dogs (or at least listen to one person better than everyone in the family) and need clear and consistent training words and actions. They basically need a job to do and dog sports are a great outlet for them.

A Look at the Various Herding Breeds

Australian Cattle Dog: (Red Heeler, Blue Heeler) Bred to drive cattle over long distances across rough terrain by nipping at the legs and faces of the cattle.

Bearded Collie: Bred to be independent decision makers, herding sheep in rough weather in the hills of Scotland.

Border Collie: Bred for herding sheep in the British Isles in all weather conditions, use eye stalking and movement.

Corgi: Pembroke Welsh Corgis and Cardigan Welsh Corgis are one of the oldest herding breeds and were bred to nip at the legs of sheep, geese, ducks, horses, and cattle.

German Shepherd: Bred to assist shepherds in herding and protecting sheep.

Old English Sheepdog: Bred for driving cattle and sheep.

Shetland Sheepdog (Sheltie): bred to herd sheep in the Shetland Islands of Scotland.

Australian Shepherds: Bred for strong herding and guarding instincts.

What they all have in common: It shouldn't come as a surprise that herding breeds have a tendency to nip when herding. If their herding species isn't available to them, they can turn that instinct into herding children, other animals in the home, other animals outside the home, cars, bikes or anything that moves. These dogs also have a tendency to bark and possibly nip at visitors in the home, strangers at the door, or when people walk past or into the yard.

What is their Ideal Home?

Herders form strong bonds with their people, so they may need some help learning how to be alone while you're at work. A busy, urban environment can be overwhelming for a lot herding breeds, especially those that grew up in a more rural setting. Many herders would love to work on a farm, but a calm, quiet home with a fenced yard where they can engage with you, play, and have a bit of space would be a great environment too.

Not every herder is going to enjoy the dog park. Some of these dogs love to stalk, bark at, or control other dogs at the dog park to keep them moving or rounded-up. Some love to JUST chase the ball and don't really care to interact with the other dogs or people at the park, these dogs might get snippy if other dogs come around their ball or Frisbee.

We recommend taking dog training classes and/or trying out a dog sport (see a few suggestions below) with your herder. Oregon Humane Society offers a variety of dog training classes, workshops, and one-on-one training. Learn more at oregonhumane.org/training.

Resources

Books to read:

[Teach your Herding Breed to be a Great Companion Dog](#), by Dawn Antoniak-Mitchell

[Secrets of the Working Mind](#), by Carol Price

[101 Dog Tricks: Step-by-Step Activities to Engage, Challenge, and Bond with Your Dog](#), by Kyra Sundance

Dog sports to try:

Agility | usdaa.com

Flyball | flyball.org

K9 Nose Work | k9nosework.com

Treibball (Urban Herding) | americantreibballassociation.org

The Oregon Humane Society is not affiliated with any of the organizations listed above and is not responsible for the services offered. We encourage you to reach out to organizations and local trainers on your own ask for details about training methods and practices. We recommend trainers that use force-free, positive reinforcement training.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.