

It's all in the eye...

The amazing spectacle of two members of two different species working as a collaborative team

by Marjorie Simmins



The collie moves low and slow across the rough field grass, eyes rivetted on the small flock. Closer and closer she slinks. The sheep skitter nervously back and forth, but the dog only mirrors their movements, and draws closer yet.

A heartbeat before the sheep bolt, a woman's voice rings out: "Lie down!" The dog drops immediately, but her eyes remain pinned on the flock as she tensely waits for the next command. This time, the woman makes a series of whistles. Each new tone causes the dog to move left, right, push ahead, draw back—instantly.

"If we didn't have a Border Collie," says sheep farmer Sarah Nettleton, "we wouldn't have sheep." She laughs: "You want to hear the air turn blue around here? Just try handling the sheep without a dog!" Sarah, her husband Paul MacLean, their four sons and her mother, Martha Nettleton, live at Rockloaf Farm, on Isle Madame, Cape Breton. Currently, they have two Border Collies: Gem, eight years old and Ruby, six months old. A third sheepdog, Lucy, is a Maremma, a livestock guardian breed of Italian origin. Coyote predation is a concern for all farmers on Isle Madame and throughout Atlantic Canada.

For much of the time man has tended flocks of sheep, dogs have worked to guard, tend and herd them. Among the most popular herding dogs are the Australian Shepherd, Australian Heeler and German Shepherd; among the better-known guardian dogs are the Great Pyrenees and Bouvier des Flandres.

But for sheepherding around the world, the Border Collie is



Collies will herd anything—sheep, ducks, children—but the intense concentration never wavers. Opposite and top: at Hilary and Bill Flowers' farm in Blue Rocks, NS. Above: on the job at Lorna and Bill McMaster's farm in Pembroke, PEI.

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the legendary number one. Today, wherever there are sheep—from southern Greenland to the Antipodes and around the world, including right here in Atlantic Canada—there are Border Collies. They are used on working farms, and in trials (competitions where handlers direct their dogs to herd sheep through a series of gates and into a pen, using only voice and whistle commands). They also shine at dog sports such as rally obedience, agility and flyball. For this extremely intelligent breed, work is play—and nothing keeps them happier than their job.

Right now, the job for the Nettletons' young Border Collie, Ruby, is to watch and learn—from Sarah and from Martha (who was raised in Scotland where the Border Collie is most iconic). "My mother's knowledge is my greatest resource," says Sarah. And Gem sets a great example. "When Gem is 'on,' it is beautiful to watch," says Sarah. "It's great to work as a partner with her."

Amanda Milliken, five-time Canadian National Sheepdog Trial Champion and one-time US National champion, knows a lot about partnerships with herding dogs. She runs her sheep farm in Kingston, Ont, with help from three of her Border Collies: Roz, a current Canadian champion (her mother, Ethel, was a two-time Canadian champion); a young male, Monte; and a young bitch, Dorey, the 2011 US National Nursery Champion.

Milliken also founded the Canadian Border Collie Association (CBCA), the only registry for purebred Border Collies in Canada. "We founded this under duress in 1995. Either that, or the breed would go to the Canadian Kennel Club (CKC)—which we considered a serious retrograde step," says Milliken. CKC-registered dogs must "conform" to individual breed standards, primarily for body structure and overall appearance—but for working Border Collies, the aims are reversed.

"Border Collies are bred for their work, not for looks," says Milliken, now a director at CBCA. "Those work traits are very inheritable—as much as eye colour or coat texture and colour."

But not all Border Collies work on farms. More and more people are choosing the attractive dog, commonly black and white, for a pet. Milliken recommends caution.



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Lorna McMaster, shown far left, refers to her Border Collies as both companions and working partners. "The dogs love the job—and the relationship with the humans."



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"It depends. It can work—if you can accept an obsessive-compulsive coming into your life. Some people are suited to them. If you can manage their intelligence, people who have them as pets love them." Management might include dog sports, strenuous exercise, Frisbee, search and rescue and, of course, trialling and farm work.

In Branch, St. Mary's Bay, NL, is just such a working farm. Windy Meadows Kennels is owned and operated by Tom and Ernestine Power and family. The Powers breed Australian Shepherds, Havanese, Shetland Sheepdogs (Shelties) and Golden Retrievers—but their first love is their Border Collies.

"I always wanted to raise sheep," says Power, who was raised in Newfoundland in a family of 11 children. After some years in Toronto, Power, his wife and their daughters returned to Newfoundland in the 1970s, bought their 100-plus acre-farm and set out to be "old-fashioned farmers." In their heyday, the Powers had 400 sheep—and a string of Border Collies.

"We fell in love with the breed," says Power. "All dogs are beautiful, but the Border Collie is the best worker, the easiest to train. It amazes me how intelligent they are." He adds quickly that it is a bad idea to buy a Border Collie just to brag about its intelligence. "The books [on dog intelligence] haven't helped them in that way," he says.

The Powers make sure that any potential buyer knows that the dogs will need a lot of exercise, far more than other breeds.

For himself: "I will always have chickens, sheep and Border Collies." His flock is down to 50 ewes now, and one of his daughters is taking over the training of the Border Collies, allowing Power to take life easier.

"I find sheep relaxing. The Border Collies are a part of that."



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Hilary Flower of Blue Rocks, NS, is a sheep farmer, Border Collie breeder and sheepdog trial organiser. See farm work being demonstrated at her trial on July 28—spectators are welcome. Details at realdogs.ca.

His voice softens: “It’s just the way you lean on a fence in the evening, when the work is done... and the Border Collie is lying in the dirt at your feet, and he’s kind of muddy. It’s so nice.”

The strong connection between humans and animals is something that has fascinated Lorna McMaster all her life. McMaster and her husband, Brian, own and operate Pembroke Farm, a working sheep farm in Pembroke, PEI. McMaster breeds, raises and trains Border Collies. McMaster, who studied as an animal behaviourist and worked as a public school teacher, also offers herding lessons and clinics, and demonstrations each summer.

McMaster, too, refers to her Border Collies as her “companions and working partners.” She has trained the brother and sister team, Sadie and Jack, who were born in her bedroom, to run on two different whistle tones (so as to avoid conflicting commands). “The dogs love the job—and the relationship with the humans. They want to please you, yes, but they want to do it right.” Having once had a rib broken by a ram, McMaster knows what the dogs are up against, and also knows that sheep farming isn’t for everyone.

“If you don’t love sheep, don’t do it!” she laughs. McMaster, in fact, thinks sheep are “incredibly smart” and underrated. “Sheep don’t use their facial muscles to express emotion. This may be why humans perceive them as stupid. Sheep are as smart as dogs—they have strong family ties, can recognize many different faces, know the difference between my car and visitors’ cars. They learn the dogs’ behaviour very quickly.”

The (fascinating spectator) sport of sheepdog trialling is becoming popular around the world—especially with women. “In the US, it is all women. In the UK, it’s still primarily a man’s

sport,” says US-raised McMaster.

As for trialling in the Atlantic region, “There seems to be a lot of interest.”

Bill and Hilary Flower of Blue Rocks, NS, were successful competitors at the trial circuits in Ontario and the US for many years. At their own sheep farm, where they live with their children, Emily and Will, they have put on clinics with experts from the UK. They also organized trials at New Ross for some years. This summer they’re holding a trial at their own farm.

Through her business, Scotia Border Collies, Hilary breeds and trains working Border Collies. Bill is a commercial lobster fisherman during the winter months, and works as a marine co-ordinator and animal wrangler in the film industry during the spring and summer. They have 70 ewes, two young dogs, Floss and Dahli, and two older dogs, Maid and Dash—Maid and Floss are their mainstay workers.

Hilary, raised in northern Wales and Cheshire, takes her responsibility as a dog breeder seriously. She breeds specifically for working traits and temperament, and tests her dogs for any problems with hips, eyes and hearing. The testing is expensive. But it guides her breeding program, which ideally, she says, can be “a science.”

Like Lorna McMaster, Hilary also has a “started dogs” market. Not all farmers, or people who trial dogs as a hobby, have the time or desire to train a sheepdog themselves. She thinks the current trend of breeding for conformation is sad (and show breeding has come under intense criticism and scrutiny in recent years). “You can lose the athletic ability and workability.”

“Hilary wants the perfect dog,” smiles Bill. “That’s why she’s breeding dogs.”

“The dogs have to have guts,” says Hilary. Just last year a ram broke Bill’s shoulder. “So they can’t be too sweet.” Instead, she wants the dog to be “liveable—and brilliant with sheep.”

The Flowers’ upcoming trial, July 28, is free and open to spectators. The trials mimic real farm work. “The precision of the Border Collie is wonderful,” says Bill. “You don’t want to walk the fat off your stock. You want to get them through the gates and to the market, in as short a distance as possible.”

With her dogs, Hilary is slightly partial to the females. “I find them more loyal. They can sometimes be a little more sensitive, and occasionally, temperamental. The boys’ minds are sometimes elsewhere. Having said that, my best dog so far has been a male.”

You get the feeling that in fact, Hilary’s “best dog” has not yet appeared on the farm. Until then, Maid and Floss capably herd the flocks for the Flowers. Like young Ruby in Cape Breton, and like young Border Collies around Atlantic Canada and the world, they know their turns come next. It’s their birthright. 🐾