

So what is your Border Collie NOT good at ...
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If you have a Border Collie you have a very special dog; a dog that is intelligent, sensitive, eager to please and very quick to learn. Sounds like the perfect pet? Yes, with our help they can make wonderful pets, but we need to remember that when we take one of these very special and complex dogs into our homes we have a responsibility to try to understand all the factors that make a Border Collie what it is. The more we can understand our Border Collies the less likely it is that we, and our collie, will encounter serious problems. Border Collies have been bred for generations in a very specific and restricted environment for a very specific task and, as a breed, are relative new-comers to life as pets. Some cope very well and others struggle. It is our duty to try to understand these beautiful, clever creatures and to help them to cope.

We can easily find books that tell us what Border Collies have been bred for. We will be warned about their sensitivity to movement and tendency to chase things and about the fact that they need to have their brains occupied, but what we are not generally asked to think about are those characteristics that are not necessary in a working sheepdog, but which make life easier for a pet dog.

Anyone who has owned Border Collies will be aware that they are generally cautious dogs. Without intensive and sensitive socialisation as puppies they are often wary of people, intolerant of unfamiliar dogs and anxious about anything new or changing. Even with intensive socialisation some retain these characteristics. Border Collies are prone to being affected by a single bad experience and have poor “bounce back” when something goes wrong for them.

They are very sensitive to reprimands, but equally crave guidance and instruction. Because they are very sensitive to movement, any fast movement that they cannot control can be very disturbing to them. No wonder so many Border Collies hate traffic. Remember though, it is this sensitivity and intelligence that we find so appealing.

So why are they like this? Why can life upset them so easily? To understand our collies fully we need not only to consider what they have been bred for but also what they have not been bred for.

When a shepherd is selecting dogs to breed from he is selecting for a specific task and characteristics that do not interfere with this task are likely to be ignored.

Over the generations your Collie has NOT been bred to:

- Cope with noise

Collies need to have very acute hearing to hear and interpret a shepherd's signals at a great distance, but sheep farms are generally quiet places and their sensitive hearing does not cause them problems. Urban and domestic life bombards our dogs with noise and this can cause them extreme stress. Be aware of this and if necessary protect your dog from excessive noise. Speak quietly to your Collie; he doesn't need you to shout at him.

- Cope with change

Sheep farms tend to be relatively unchanging places; there are sheep, the shepherd and his family, the barn where the dog sleeps and an odd tractor or car. Sheep dogs don't generally need to cope with change. Every time our urban collie leaves home the street outside will probably have changed (new

vehicles, new people, rubbish skips etc.). Just going out for a walk, even if the dog looks forward to his walk, can generate stress and we need to be aware of this and help him cope.

- Cope with the presence of strangers/visitors or groups of people... Sheep farms tend to be isolated places. It is not necessary to be at ease with people to be a good working sheep dog. In a pet home our dogs are surrounded by many strange people in the street and visitors to the home. If you get your Collie as a puppy, make sure he is sensitively socialised to people at an early age. If he is older respect the fact that he may find meeting strange people stressful.
- Cope with the presence of strange dogs..... apart from the familiar dogs with similar characteristics that live on the farm with them, working sheepdogs are unlikely to need to mix with other dogs. As pet owners we expect them to meet a lot of strange dogs, many with appalling "dog manners", and often with our dog on a lead so that it does not have the option of running away. Even if your collie does not react aggressively in these situations he could well be very stressed.

Many sheepdogs will never leave their farms so traditionally they haven't really needed to get on with other dogs or unfamiliar people. Sociability and resilience are not characteristics that have historically been important in the development of the Border Collie. Although your dog may not be directly from working stock he will still have many of the characteristics inherited from generations of working sheep dogs and equally he may not have inherited those characteristics that would make life in a pet home easier for him.

Shepherds are the experts with Border Collies and we can learn a lot from them. Yes, we've all heard of harsh and callous shepherds, but many value their dogs very highly, not just as working dogs, but also as members of their family. Watch a sheepdog working, it is referring back to the shepherd for guidance all the time. His impulses to chase and control movement are under very tight control. The shepherd is guiding the dog and the dog is exhibiting self-control. Ideally this is how we want our collie to be with us. If he is checking in with us to find out what do next not only is he under control and less likely to get himself into trouble, but he is also getting reassurance from us. He doesn't have to worry; we will tell him what to do in any situation. Encourage your dog to look to you for guidance; it shouldn't be too hard, it's in his genes!

Watch the shepherd to, he has to keep very calm and guide his dog at all times. You just don't see excitable shepherds, an excitable shepherd would mean an excited dog and scattered sheep! Be a calm owner. Think about this if you are considering Agility or Flyball with your Collie, a good working sheep dog is fast and has lightning reflexes, but is not in a state of over-excitement. Teach your dog calmly what you want him to do. If he understands and is enjoying what he is doing he will do his best; after all he has been bred from generations of dogs selected for their willingness to work as a team with their handler. There is no need for your dog to be roused to a hysterical state for it to perform well, and it is bad for its mental and physical health to be in such a state. If your dog shows signs of stress or gets over-excited ask yourself is this is really the best activity for him.

A final thought... when a working sheepdog is not working alongside the shepherd he is shut away in a quiet, non-stimulating place to rest and recover and to keep him out of mischief! Importantly, adrenalin levels that have probably been quite high while he is working now have a chance to return to normal. Your sensitive, alert pet Collie is being bombarded with information from his environment all the time; make sure he has plenty of opportunity to rest in a secure, non-stimulating place where he can relax.

Think Border Collies, think working sheepdogs... maximise their strengths, understand and respect their weaknesses.

Source: <https://fuzzylogicdog.wordpress.com/2017/05/22/so-what-is-your-border-collie-not-good-at/>