



Dogs on acreage

We have a useful resource on our website; 'Rural dogs' by Jen Digate. It motivated me to summarise some of the points and also to discuss issues that people are having in our local area.

There are pros and cons to having dogs on acreage. Obviously, the space is wonderful for your dog, but it shouldn't take the place of taking your dog out. Many people don't take their dogs out thinking that they have enough space, but the problem is that they lack mental stimulation, varied exercise and can become de-socialised. When I speak about dogs becoming de-socialised I'm also talking about coping skills in an everchanging environment. Sensitivity to noises, new people and other dogs. As dogs develop their brain develops along with what they are exposed to and what they know well. If they miss out on a variety of safe experiences they lose coping strategies & develop behaviour problems. The younger the puppy is the more flexible they are to learning.

If your puppy or dog shows signs of anxiety when taken out (such as yawning, restlessness, salivating or shaking) it's very important to back off and give them time to adjust; reduce the exposure to a level where they can cope and gradually increase it and your dog's confidence grows. Seek expert help in the early stages; don't wait until it gets worse (because it will).

One problem we seem to be having in the semi-rural areas is an increased number of reactive dogs. It's important that dogs are unable to escape from their property or that gates aren't left open; it's a disaster waiting to happen. Also dogs should be only encouraged to bark when someone pulls up into the driveway or approaches the gate; your dog does not need to bark at people walking past unless that person stops at your property. A good guard dog is one that barks for a reason; not one that barks at everything and everyone. Not only is it annoying for neighbours far and wide (yes the sounds travel) but people will not respond to check on your house if your dogs are always barking.

When walking your dog you should keep them on lead unless it's a dedicated off lead area or you can clearly and safely see ahead of you. If you see another person or dog put your dog on the lead. No matter how friendly your dog is! If you take your dog to an off-lead dog park keep it brief and watch your dog closely; inappropriate behaviours can quickly develop if not monitored and bad experiences can lead to fear and reactive behaviour. Avoid taking your dog during the peak period and limit off lead play to once a week. In between these trips consider taking your dog for swims, hill climbs, gentle strolls, car rides and visiting friends or family.

There should be few disadvantages to having your dog on acreage if its managed carefully.

- Ensure your dog has a secure area or an area off the house where they can be placed to keep them or others safe for short periods of time.
- Ensure your puppy is taken out to puppy classes (from around 10 weeks of age) & continue careful social training through adolescence (4-8 months as a minimum) early training in a well-controlled environment builds resilience in your dog. And this is pivotal in reducing the chances of behaviour problems later on.
- Take your puppy and young dog for car rides and walks off the property. Keep them safe on lead but from a young age they should be exposed to traffic, noises, different people, buildings and other animals.



- If you haven't taken your dog off the property for some time then do it very slowly. Isolated farm dogs are not suitable just to turn up to a group training class; it would be extremely stressful and overwhelming for them and they wouldn't learn. Start with drives and walks with them to see how they cope. If they struggle or show signs of anxiety then consider individual training.
- Get your dog used to car travel and in the cooler months see if they can cope with very short periods of time in the car without you (maybe whilst you go into the petrol station or the pet shop for a treat?)
- Just because you are on acreage it doesn't mean your dog won't benefit from toys and treats; especially when you go out. They should look forward to you going out if you provide them with a treasure hunt, treat scatter or treat dispensing toy. Providing your dog with bones, chew toys, treats and toys when you go out will reduce excessive barking and minimise destructive or stressed behaviour.
- Allow your dog inside. Dogs allowed indoors have more incidental training, are generally more responsive and it's easier to teach them to be calm. If in doubt bring your dog inside on the lead for short periods once a day to trial. Give them something to chew on or keep them busy with training.
- If you have a working breed dog, be aware they are easily stimulated and can sometimes become overexcitable and hard to control. Early training and socialisation is important as well as providing them with mental 'work' such as puzzle toys, games and things to chew on. You might find they benefit from training in sheep herding work if trained young enough.