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DO COLLIES DREAM OF HERDING SHEEP?

Try Your Hand at Commanding Herd Dogs in the Lake District of England

By Josephine Matyas



Each year millions of city slickers drive to the north of England to recharge in the pristine beauty of the Lake District, an area of rolling hills, and miles of dry stonewalls and neatly clipped hedges that separate

each field into smaller sections. But there's specific terminology you'll need to learn if you want to navigate this spectacular area of England.

"Here the hills and mountains are known as *fells*," explains local guide Ian Jones, whose family has been living in this unforgettable landscape for generations. Small streams and rivers are called *becks* and the many lakes that dot the region are *tarns*. And in these *fells* in the rural county of Cumbria, you'll also see hundreds of sheep and lambs dotting the countryside.

It stands to reason that where there are sheep, there are sure to be working dogs – most likely border collies – with a strong herding instinct who have been rigorously trained to move the flocks. Sheep and sheepdogs are as much a part of the Cumbrian culture as are a pot of afternoon tea, or the poetry of William Wordsworth.

Border collies are working dogs, bred specifically to work stock. "It's a natural instinct they have," says Jones. And with this comes more specific terminology – this time it's the whistle and verbal commands that link sheepdog handler to working dog. With its mesmerizing, laser-like stare, the border collie displays mastery over the flocks of sheep; and with a series of whistles and spoken commands the shepherd shows mastery over the dogs.



People who know dogs know that a border collie without a specific task is a very bored pup. A supreme dog for sheepherding, they've also been bred to herd rams, ewes and lambs in the Lake District since the 18th century. A really good dog

knows the sheep; they have an incredible visual connection. “It’s a stare-off,” chuckles Jones. “And the dog always wins.”

Some farms in the Lake District offer sheepdog trial experiences to visitors. At Troutal Farm in Cumbria County, the “Lake District Sheepdog Experience” gives budding sheepdog handlers a taste of what it’s like to work with this incredibly clever breed. In one- or two-hour sessions, visitors get an insight into the challenges of “distance controlling” both sheepdog and sheep.

Troutal is a traditional working farm, raising the hardy Herdwick sheep, one of the three main breeds associated with Cumbria. As Jones explains, “Herdwick sheep are a species indigenous to the Lake District. They can cope with poor grazing, and all weather conditions.”



For their part, the border collies have a strong natural instinct . . . and that instinct has to be there before a trainer can do the level of training needed to steer a herd of sheep. A handler concentrates on starting his bond with a pup once it has been weaned from its mother. By eight months of age, the serious training starts – the whistle commands can be short and sharp but, most importantly, they must be very different from each other. The whistle for “Stop” is very distinctive from the whistle for “Go right” or “Go left.” Commands can be as simple as having a dog return to the handler, or as complicated as instructing the dog to move around the herd in a counter-clockwise direction.

The skill of the handler (as well as that of their faithful dogs) is tested at annual competitions from the local level to prestigious international events. But for the casual tourist who loves dogs and wants a bit of fun trying to measure up to these smart canines, an afternoon whistling in this beautiful countryside may be just the trick. At the end of the session at Troutal Farm, visitors can try guiding a dog – and sheep – around a small course. For any dog lover, this may be the perfect kind of “learning vacation.”

2010 English National Sheepdog Trials will be held in Northumberland, August 19-21. The International Sheepdog Trials will be held in Northern Ireland, September 16-18, 2010. In 2011, the World Sheepdog Trial in Cumbria will feature dogs and handlers from around the world (September 15-18, 2011).

FAST FACTS

Troutal Farm

01-229-716235

www.lakedistrictsheepdogexperience.co.uk

For more information on UK sheepdog trials, or on sheepdog commands in general, visit: www.internationalsheepdogtrials.org.uk; sheepdogwhistle.com

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