

# Using Stockdogs For Low Stress Livestock Handling

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## Abstract

Low stress livestock handling techniques have recently come to the forefront of western rangeland management. These techniques have been long used by some stock handlers, but only recently have gained widespread recognition. Stockdogs can be a very useful tool in accomplishing livestock production and rangeland resource management goals. To successfully apply low stress livestock handling, stockmen often need to rethink their methods and attitudes towards handling animals. Once handlers have mastered these techniques and trained livestock to be handled in a calm manner, a stockdog can be effectively used to allow one person to handle large numbers of animals. Dogs should be encouraged to work using their natural instincts and thinking ability rather than to be used in a robotic fashion with commands for every movement. Handlers who trust their dogs and give them sufficient experience will be amazed at how helpful stockdogs can be in a variety of situations.

## Introduction

Stockdogs have long been used to facilitate the handling of domestic livestock throughout the world, and more recently on the farms and ranches of North America. Several breeds and working styles of stockdogs have evolved to fill various needs of livestock producers. These include livestock guard dogs, trial competition dogs, and feedlot working dogs. However, this discussion will be limited to the use of dogs for livestock herding, specifically, in western rangeland situations.

There are two working styles of stockdog currently in use on western livestock operations, commonly referred to as headers or heelers. Dogs described as headers have an inherent tendency to fetch stock to the handler. The term heeler describes a dog that has an inherent tendency to drive stock away from the handler. Some dogs will display both styles which can be very

confusing to novice handlers and sometimes even to the dog. Both styles of work have a place in our livestock industry just as do various breeds of cattle and horses.

Most often when handling large herds of livestock, a dog's tendency to head or gather stock to the handler is more desired than is a driving dog's tendency. In the Northwest, large herds of livestock are frequently on rangelands that are steep and/or timbered. In these situations, animals are less difficult for the handler to drive away than to gather or move as a group.

## Breeds

There are about 60 recognized herding breeds of dogs worldwide (Wilcox and Walkowicz 1995). Four breeds dominate the stockdogs used by the western ranching industry: Australian shepherd, border collie, kelpie, and Queensland blue heeler. Various crosses of these and other breeds are common and have resulted in some locally recognized "strains" of stockdog. Each of these breeds has highly inherited working styles and attributes. Cross breeds have produced some fine working individuals, but a broadened gene pool can make it difficult to predict style inheritance.

Australian shepherds are the youngest of the four mentioned breeds and were developed, not in Australia but in the western United States within the last century. Their working style is not as fixed as the older breeds with some bloodlines being predominantly headers and others predominantly heelers. Inbreeding in the early years resulted in many dogs with blue or mixed eye coloration. Natural bobbed tails are common. The best working bloodlines are of medium bone, moderate size and are agile and very athletic. These dogs work from an upright stance with varying degrees of eye. "Eye" is a term that refers to a stare that results in a near hypnotic spell over livestock. They are highly social dogs that enjoy the company of their handler.

Border collies are one of the oldest breeds of stockdog in the world. They were developed in the British Isles centuries ago and consequently, breed very true for working style. Border collies have been selected solely for working ability with no emphasis on outward appearance. The dogs instinctively work "on balance" (opposite the handler) and fetch to the handler. They typically work from a crouch in a near creeping or down position with a great deal of eye.

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Kelpies or Australian sheepdogs are small to moderate sized dogs that have been imported from Australia in recent years. Kelpies are very quick and athletic, and are almost entirely fetch dogs. They are slick haired and prick eared. These dogs work with a great deal of eye and work from a crouch that resembles the stalking position seen in predator animals. The breed is heat tolerant, very social, and has gained rapid popularity in various parts of the West.

The Queensland blue heeler or Australian cattle dog was imported to the United States from Australia in the mid-twentieth century. They rapidly gained popularity but that popularity has diminished somewhat in recent years. The breed is almost entirely composed of drive dogs (heelers) making them of limited use in low stress livestock handling situations. They are excellent corral or feedlot dogs. They are very muscular, agile dogs with short hair and prick ears.

### Selection

When choosing a stock dog, first analyze your temperament and attitude toward livestock and decide on an appropriate breed or even on whether to use a stockdog. This paper is meant to aid stockmen who believe in low stress livestock handling techniques. A dog and handler can complement each other's efforts and abilities tremendously when properly implemented.

When selecting a breed and a puppy, it is important to deal with a reputable breeder with a known working bloodline. The recent acceptance of stockdog breeds by people with no need for stock handling has resulted in lines of dogs bred for companionship or conformation shows. With diminished emphasis on working ability, these breeds have been diluted to some degree. Begin by asking stockmen who work dogs in similar situations to yours, to refer you to a breeder or trainer. A good breeder is willing to guarantee the health and working instinct of his/her dogs. Environment and training is the major influence on the final ability of a stockdog, but you must begin with a healthy and willing dog.

When the time comes to select a pup, spend some time observing the litter. When the pups are first approached, there are two behaviors that I look for and avoid. The first is any puppy that hides or avoids contact and maintains a submissive posture. These pups either take a long time to develop and mature or never do mature. The second behavior is any puppy that unthinkingly charges right up to me running over other puppies in the process. Pups in this second group tend to act first and think later. An experienced trainer can usually make something of both pups, but the effort is normally

greater than the outcome. These pups should be placed in companion homes and removed from lines of dogs bred for handling.

### Low Stress Techniques

The proper handling of livestock requires a deep understanding of behavior patterns. It is well documented that domestic livestock are prey species, and that fear plays a major role in their behavior (Grandin and Deesing 1998). With eyes at the sides of their heads, herd animals see in panoramic vision. They see primarily in shades of black and white and therefore, react strongly to movement and contrast (Doane's Agricultural Report 1979). Loud noises, abrupt noises, repetitive noises, and odors can also affect animal reactions.

A style of livestock handling called low stress livestock handling has recently come to the attention of the majority of stockmen. The most successful stockdog and horse trainers have been well aware of this style of handling livestock for many years. Stockdog trainers such as Allen (1979), Lithgow (1991), and Holmes (1992) have written excellent books about training dogs with an emphasis on efficient stock handling. Most modern day horse trainers also use quiet, gentle techniques that involve a great deal of animal psychology (Hunt 1985, Dorrance 1987, Lyons 1991, Roberts 1996). In my dog training clinics or when addressing stockdog trial contestants, I always emphasize that *the fastest way to move stock is slowly*. If the stock do not remain calm and controlled, the dog may create more work than it saves.

### Flight Zone

The flight zone of an animal is the distance within which a person may approach before the animal moves away. This circular zone around the animal may be equated to a balloon. When pressure is exerted on the balloon, it moves away and regains its circular shape. When a person enters the flight zone of an animal, it will move away. When a person retreats from the flight zone, the animal will normally turn to face the person and sometimes, move toward the person. The same principle applies to a dog entering or leaving the flight zone.

Several factors influence how the flight zone is used when herding animals. The first is the animals' previous experiences. For example, range cattle have a larger flight zone than dairy cattle that are constantly handled. Secondly, the speed and depth that the flight zone is invaded influences how fast an animal moves away. A dog rapidly penetrating the flight zone induces fear and a chase may result. Thirdly, the flight zone will often be a different diameter for the handler than for the dog. Be

well aware of these factors when moving stock. I have often seen handlers incorrectly position themselves or ask their dog to exert pressure in the wrong spot, resulting in unexpected results that they should have anticipated. Remember, when moving stock with a dog, best results are achieved when the dog and handler work as a team and complement each other's actions.

### **Rethink Methods and Attitude**

In years gone by, horses and dogs were "broke" but thankfully, they are now "trained" in most good stockmen's minds. Calm, quiet methods prevail among successful stockhandlers. I have been in situations where I have lost my temper, as have most stockowners. Upon maturing as a stockhandler, you realize that force, vocal outbursts, and rage do not work. If you are sincere about proper livestock handling and proper use of a dog, begin by evaluating your methods and attitudes.

The following is a collection of analogies that should be commandments for the stockhandler. Some of these are my own, many are borrowed from other trainers and stockmen, and the remainder are collected from who knows where. They all readily apply to stockhandling.

- If you always do what you always did, you will always have what you always had.
- Make the wrong things difficult, and the right things easy.
- The fastest way to move stock is slowly.
- You can't teach experience.
- There is no substitute for miles and wet saddle blankets.
- Notice the smallest change and the slightest try and reward it.
- Let your idea become the horse's idea.
- Don't expect a pup to be born with a high school education.

### **Starting a Pup**

Once you have decided to use a dog in livestock handling, have adjusted your methods and attitudes, and, have selected a pup from a reputable breeder - you are ready to begin training a dog. First, teach yourself proper low stress livestock handling techniques. Secondly, train your livestock to respond to low stress livestock handling techniques. And lastly, practice, practice, practice.

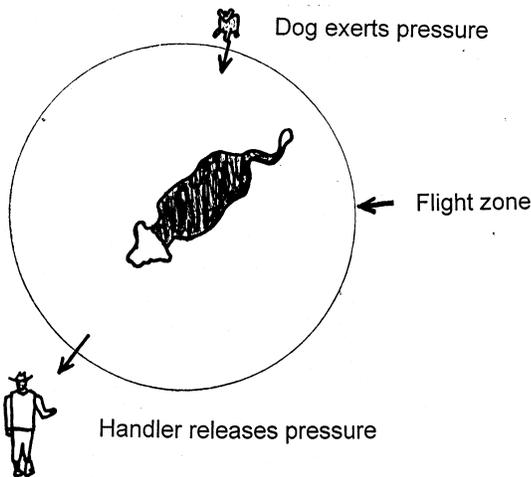
Remember your pup was not born with a high school education and has no experience, just an inbred instinct to work stock. By the time he is old enough to start on stock, he should already know enough manners

and verbal commands to be controllable. As a side note, most trial-trained dogs are nearly "robotic", in that they only do what they are commanded to do. The most useful dogs for ranch work, with properly trained livestock, will work with minimal commands purely on their natural instincts and experience.

Begin by working your dog in a small area, on young stock that have been properly handled and are responsive. A small corral or a round pen like horse trainers use is a good place to begin training. You can let the pup begin to get the feel of moving stock in the enclosed area; and then encourage the pup to circle the stock. Remember that you want to encourage calm movement of the animals. When the livestock are between you and the dog, encourage the dog to exert pressure and simultaneously release pressure on your side of the stock. The stock will move away from his pressure and into your release of pressure (Fig1). By starting in a small area, you can block the dog's movement and push him away from you toward the other side of the stock. In short order, you will be able to move animals in any direction and at a steady pace. Next, move to an open area and begin working more animals over longer distances. Work with the flow of movement of the livestock. Larger herds of animals work with a collective flight zone and respond in the same manner as smaller herds. Once you have a smooth flow of movement, you can direct that movement to result in low stress handling of the livestock, even in large herds.

I like to use as few commands as possible and expect the dog to think for himself as much as possible. Given the opportunity, a dog will rapidly learn the edge of the flight zone and how to work in and out of that zone. That is commonly referred to as learning to "rate" stock. A young dog will often follow the edge of the flight zone to circle the stock. The result is animals that are frozen in one position and sometimes it is difficult to resume movement. The animals cannot be herded without movement, and the herding will be low stress only if the movement is calm and controlled.

There is no substitute for experience. Your experience as a stockhandler, the experience of your livestock, and the experience of your dog are important elements of success. Do not be afraid to seek the advice of experienced stockmen that handle their stock and dogs properly. Trust your dog to develop his instincts and to learn effective responses in different situations. You cannot correct a mistake until it happens. Corrections need to be well timed and generally, only verbal. If the dog is going around stock the wrong way, verbally correct him and push him in the correct direction by blocking his movement. Use the same single word



**Figure 1.** Stock will move away from pressure and toward a release of pressure.

command such as “no” or “hey” each time he goes a wrong direction. Say nothing when he goes the right direction to encourage him to “think on his own”. Make the wrong things difficult, and the right things easy.

Dogs started in this fashion become “thinking dogs” rather than robots. They probably would not win a prestigious trial competition, but would do well and be invaluable on the ranch. In rangeland ranching situations, dogs need to think and react instinctively. Trust the dog and give him lots of experience. Have high expectations of yourself, your stock, and your dog and build on the experience. Remember to work as a team and to complement each other’s actions.

### Conclusion

The principles of low stress livestock handling work well in modern range management applications. Stockdogs can be a useful tool in accomplishing the proper handling of livestock and the proper utilization of the rangeland resource. Many stock handlers need to rethink their methods and attitudes and should commit to a calmer approach. Once handlers have trained themselves, they can train their livestock to low stress handling techniques. Dogs can be introduced to stock and kept in a controlled situation to develop their instinct and encourage calm work. A dog should be advanced to larger herds in open areas as soon as possible and given as much experience as possible. Trust, high expectations, and timely corrections with appropriate

rewards will result in a stockdog that will prove invaluable for many years.

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