

*Stock dog series: Part II*

# Best Stock Dog Breeds

*A recent poll indicates top five breeds recommended for use as a stock dog in the United States.*

Story by

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Soon-to-be dog owners frequently ask, "What breed will work best for cattle?" says Deb Meier, editor of *The Stockdog Journal*. To some breed-specific enthusiasts, this question may seem offensive. However, the diversity and management of cattle operations are determining factors in what breed of dog will be best for a particular situation.

Recently, research at South Dakota State University included an online poll asking cattle producers across the Midwest what the top-five stock dog breeds were. The results:

1. American Border Collie
2. Australian Cattle Dogs
3. Australian Shepherds
4. Australian Kelpies
5. Hanging Tree Cow Dogs



Border Collie

## Border Collies

According to the American Border Collie Association (ABCA, [www.americanbordercollie.org/](http://www.americanbordercollie.org/)), the Border Collie breed originated during the Industrial Revolution, when there was an urban market for lamb, mutton and wool. In the vast hills and unfenced land of Scotland and Northern England, shepherds had to use stock dogs as tools to herd their flocks, resulting in the breed of Border Collies.

The ABCA states that Border Collies are not bred for appearance, meaning not all dogs in the breed look alike. They vary in weight from 25 pounds (lb.) to 65 lb. and have smooth coats. Their colors are typically black, tan and a reddish-brown with white markings. They may have erect or falling ears.

Quick and eager learners, Border Collies are known for their speed and superior livestock sense, says Meier. Other distinct traits are exceptional athletic ability, good nature and a high level of confidence.

## Australian Cattle Dogs

Australian Cattle Dogs are commonly



Australian Cattle Dog

known as heelers because of their instinctive grip, says the Australian Cattle Dog Club of America Inc. (ACDCA, [www.acdca.org/](http://www.acdca.org/)), explaining the development of the heeler, which was to control wild cattle on drives through the inhospitable wilderness of Australia. Thomas Hall, an Australian drover, was the developer of the breed. He crossed the Scottish Highland Collie with the Australian Dingo to create an Australian Cattle Dog.

Heelers are known for their protective instincts of their stock and handler, says Meier. They are a strong, muscular, compact dog with great agility and strength. They weigh 45 lb.-65 lb., with rough wiry coats. Colors are red or blue with black, white and tan speckles throughout their coat. They have erect ears and prominent eyes. Heelers possess high trainability coupled with a strong desire to please. Most can perform routine jobs after just a few exposures to cattle.



Australian Shepherd

## Australian Shepherds

Contrary to its name, the Australian Shepherd is the only stock dog breed developed in America, according to the U.S. Australian Shepherd Association (USASA, [australianshepherds.org/](http://australianshepherds.org/)). The breed traces back to the early 1800s, when sheep herds were brought to America from Australia. Basque shepherds on the western coast were known to have little blue dogs with bobtails that they crossed with German Coolies, creating what is known as the Australian Shepherd.

According to the USASA, an identifying characteristic is the natural or docked bobtail of the Australian Shepherd.

Typically ranging from 25 lb. to 55 lb., they sport coats of medium texture and wavy hair. Their colors are blue merle, red merle, solid black and solid red. Another distinct characteristic is the butterfly nose.

Meier says the most distinct characteristic of an Australian Shepherd is companionship with its herd, as well as its master. Australian Shepherds are versatile and easily trained, performing tasks with style and enthusiasm.



Australian Kelpie

## Australian Kelpies

In 1870, the Australian Kelpie played a huge role in the development of the sheep and wool industry in Australia, says the North American Australian Kelpie Registry Inc. (NAKR, [www.kelpiesinc.com/](http://www.kelpiesinc.com/)). The breed descended from the British working Coley. Kelpies were bred to handle the harsh hot landscape, extensive acreage and unruly Merino sheep.

In North America, the Kelpie has not carried a highly visible profile. They are bred exclusively for the working environments of the United States and Canada, says the NAKR. The breed is bred to work, they are extremely intelligent, and they have a keen sense of livestock. They average 30 lb.-45 lb.; and have thin, smooth coats and erect ears. Colors are black, fawn, blue and liver; however, most have tan markings.

"Kelpies are a breed that you don't have to worry about," says Meier. "They are great guardians and have a stamina that is unlike any other."

## Hanging Tree Cow Dogs

A jack-of-all-trades is the Hanging Tree Cow Dog, says Meier. They were bred in America by Greg Ericsson and his son Choc, and named after the Hanging Tree Ranch in Philadelphia, Miss. They are referred to as "The Ultimate Cowboy's Dog." The composite breed is  $\frac{3}{8}$  Border Collie,  $\frac{1}{8}$  Catahoula,  $\frac{1}{4}$  Australian Kelpie and  $\frac{1}{4}$  Australian Shepherd.

According to Jimmy Tillman of Hanging Tree Ranch, some characteristics of the Hanging Tree Cow Dog are their intelligence, ability to handle all types of cattle, good bone structure and endurance.

These dogs are known as gathering or herding-type dogs that can wind and trail cattle. Their appearance must be slick hair and bobbed tail. Their colors vary from black, red or merle, to multi-colored.

## Registration

In the cattle industry, breed registration is a highly recommended and desired tool for the success and integrity of an operation. This also rings true in the canine industry, says Meier. The stock-dog industry has varying opinions about the best registry for your stock dog.

Almost every working breed has an association in the United States. There are other registries that promote different agendas that some breeders do not support, such as the American Kennel Club (AKC), Continental Kennel Club (CKC), Federation of International Canines (FIC) and the American Pet Registry (APR).

"This is a very touchy subject," says Meier. "Some breeders believe the AKC has a set of standards that conforms breeds to be judged based upon their looks rather than their true working ability. I believe everyone should decide for themselves. There are other tools and registries to look for when purchasing a dog."

Meier says if breeders have their dogs registered with an individual breed association, it is typically a good indicator they care about the skills their animals possess. Each association has its own agenda and promotes different traits. Registries to investigate include the National Cattledog Association ([www.nationalcattledog.com/](http://www.nationalcattledog.com/)), North American Stock Dog Society and the American Herding Breed Association ([www.abba-herding.org/](http://www.abba-herding.org/)) in addition to individual breed associations.

## Don't act on impulse

Deciding to purchase a stock dog is an important decision. Take time to do it right, says Meier. She suggests going to working dog trials to see what individual breeds have to offer your operation. At trials, you can talk to the handlers, breeders and owners to ask questions about the breeds and the successes they have had.

"If you've never seen a trial, you will be entertained and amazed, and will learn a lot about what stock dogs are all about," says Meier.

**Editor's Note:** Kelli Fulkerson, a student at South Dakota State University, was the 2012 Angus Journal summer intern.

