Your Border Collie

Allow me to re-introduce you…

Angie Brown · True Nature Dog Services · Broxburn, West Lothian

To understand the behaviour you are seeing, you first need to see your dog as the dog they were bred to be — shaped by thousands of years of artificial selection, which simply means human interference in the breeding process.

A herding dog

Herding dogs have worked alongside us for hundreds of years — far longer than the name your dog goes by today. The traditional account has large droving dogs arriving with the Romans, later crossed with the smaller, quicker herding dogs of the Norse settlers, and out of that mixture came the working sheepdogs of the Scottish borders.

The name came much later. Auld Hemp, born in 1893 and bred by Adam Telfer, is the dog from whom every pedigree Border Collie descends — and he was simply a collie. It was not until 1915 that James Reid, secretary of the International Sheep Dog Society, used the words "Border Collie" at all, to mark out the working dogs of the border country from the collies of the show ring.

Once humans began making a living from livestock, we needed help to move cattle and sheep in a controlled, steady way, and the herding dog arrived to do it. The job had four goals:

- Work closely with a shepherd to move the flock, with the least possible stress to the animals.
- Control and, where necessary, inhibit the flock's movement — keeping them inside the boundaries without triggering them to flee.
- Keep the flock alive. No biting, no killing.
- Do all of it using the strength of their eye, or the force of their body position, without ever touching the flock.

Over the centuries we have gone on choosing which dogs to breed from, based on a handful of traits. Those traits are still sitting in your living room.

Social co-operation

Able to work closely with their human — but not so sociable that they would run off to greet the neighbours when there is work to be done.

> **What you may see:** Farms are quiet places, and visitors were rare. Now there is an expectation that every dog should be friendly with everybody. That isn't even true of humans, so how can we expect it of our Border Collies?

In a pet home, this can look like a dog who struggles with busy households, busy streets, and especially the dog park, where people seem to believe it is fine to walk up to any dog and pet him whether he wants it or not. This is less about being aloof,

aggressive or reactive, and more about the fact that these are loyal, protective, sensitive dogs who often prefer the company of their own people — and who would like the option of taking themselves away when things get too much.

What I most often see is behaviour that comes from a dog feeling trapped, or trying to protect their boundaries — personal and physical — rather than a dog who is unfriendly. It usually takes the shape of barking, lunging (most often lunging forward then jumping back, which is a defensive "go away please"), and straining on the lead.

Some dogs are simply over-excited, and many Border Collies bark when they are excited, so it can be hard for the untrained eye to tell the difference between a friendly dog desperate to run and play and a worried dog asking for space. The right education — for both ends of the lead — may never produce a dog who wants to meet everyone. What it can produce is a dog who treats all that human busy-ness as white noise.

Predation, shortened

Herding dogs have a shortened predatory sequence. Shortened does not mean the rest is missing — only that particular parts have been highlighted and strengthened:

Orient → Eye → Stalk → Chase → Grab-bite → Kill-bite → Dissection

The first four are the working end of a collie. Grab-bite is worth watching: in some working dogs it is quite strong, and that changes how we train.

What you may see: Because their primary job is to be acutely sensitive to movement, a collie's urge to stop and direct other animals can spill over into controlling the movement of humans, cats, and even things that aren't alive — particularly anything that moves suddenly, like cars, bikes, joggers and children.

That can look like bumping into your side, circling things, or a lunge and a nip at ankles, trousers or sleeves. It can escalate into lunging towards whatever has caught their eye, and the barking usually comes from frustration at not being able to get to it.

I have walked from my living room to my kitchen a thousand times. My dog Zac still believes it is his job to help me get there faster, because that is where the garden door is. He zigs and zags behind me, sometimes with an excited "yip!" — unless I have a cup in my hand. A cup means I'm only putting the kettle on, so no herding is needed and he is off duty. He still follows me, just in case something interesting happens.

It doesn't bother me, and nobody is in any danger. It might not suit every household — and that is fine too.

So instead of telling the dog off, which achieves nothing, we work on skills and learning that help your dog take direction from you. Relationship, bonding and emotional regulation bring real relief here, alongside the foundation skills that let a dog answer you wherever you happen to be.

Sudden environmental change

Border Collies are often extremely sensitive to sudden change — sudden to the dog, not necessarily to us. They may show stress, or excitement, whenever the picture changes without prior authorisation.

> **What you may see:** It varies from dog to dog. The commonest ones families bring me: getting up off the sofa (with or without a cup), sneezing, bin day, those shoes being picked up, a different car parked outside and a flat refusal to walk any further. New or different sounds do it too, even ones we cannot hear.

The response isn't always what we would call negative — but they certainly notice when something is different. It can be as ordinary as a new dog bed. I have met any number of frustrated guardians whose collie would not entertain the lovely new bed they had just bought, while another dog takes to it instantly.

Building your dog's confidence helps enormously with all of this. What we must not do is get cross, or force a dog into something they are telling us they are not comfortable with. Just as with people, some Border Collies are naturally more cautious than others. So instead of getting frustrated, we work on skills and games that build confidence and teach your dog to report in to you about anything they find worrying. Then you — the calm, steady one — can offer direction about what happens next.

Hazard avoidance and self-preservation

Strong selection for guarding and for protecting themselves, their social group and the social order, against intruders, predators and anything else that looks like a threat. Honestly, this one applies to most breeds, and to most species.

> **What you may see:** Protecting home, family and territory comes naturally to all dogs, but those instincts can spill into less helpful places. Held alongside everything else we have bred our collies to be, it starts to make sense.

Misplaced versions of it include resource guarding against other dogs or people, territorial defensiveness (which is not the same thing as "I intend to do you serious harm"), barking and lunging at things in the environment, and attempts to send off strangers or anything that looks like a threat.

It isn't always the in-your-face kind of behaviour, either. In some dogs it looks far less fierce — what we might call passive. That doesn't mean it isn't there; only that it hasn't got any worse yet. Many people argue that resource guarding comes from fear. What I tend to see comes more from insecurity, which is fear-based in any case. If your dog feels threatened or unsure about his resources — you, his toys, his food, his sleeping places — the behaviour becomes far more likely.

Helping your dog feel better about those things, through voluntary sharing, swapping and similar work, brings relief to everybody involved.

What artificial selection leaves us with

Those same selected traits are why the following so often turn up as "behaviour problems" in Border Collies:

- Territorial behaviour — protecting the boundary lines of their property
- Protectiveness — protecting their family
- Reactivity towards strangers, human and canine
- Chasing the wrong things: cars, bikes, children, anything else that moves
- Barking at the environment — wind, rain, thunder, apparently nothing at all
- Sensitivity to light, to sound, even to the way people move
- Behaviour that can look neurotic: chasing shadows, lights or water, digging obsessively
- Becoming extremely upset at being left alone

That may read like doom and gloom, and it isn't meant to. While we see these as problems, they are all natural behaviours for a Border Collie, arising from centuries of breeding for very particular traits. Not every collie shows all of them, and some have no difficulties at all — though if that were your dog, I don't suppose you would need me.

The best bits

You have also got a dog who is, generally speaking:

- Extremely loyal, and devoted to you and their family
- Protective of the people they love
- A lover of training and play — though they can get over-excited and nippy with it
- Able to learn all manner of games, tricks and skills
- Your wingman, your partner, and your most loyal friend
- The dog you never knew you needed, right when you needed him most

All they ask in return is the commitment and the time to understand them, and to give them what they need.

Most Border Collies want to be near you constantly, and even asleep they are up and ready the second your feet move. A lucky few come with a built-in off switch — and if that is your dog, you are fortunate indeed. Most need help learning to settle and simply be, without being in the thick of everything. That is where I come in.

Border Collies are, in my opinion, a truly special breed. They ask a great deal of us, and they give back a thousand times more. They need real input: training, enrichment, appropriate play and physical exercise.

Are you up for the challenge?

Angie Brown · True Nature Dog Services · angie@truenaturedogs.com · 07534 108077
Certified Control Unleashed™ Instructor · Certified Family Dog Mediator · Diploma in Canine Behaviour and Training

The L.E.G.S. model of Family Dog Mediation is © Kim Brophey — much of my understanding of the evolutionary nature of our Border Collies comes from her course, and I share it here with pleasure. The predatory sequence is Dr Ray Coppinger's.