

The Australian Shepherd as a US farm dog

TRUDY VANDINE VIKLUND



Trudy with three of her Australian Shepherds.

In this article, we follow Trudy and her husband Dave from Oregon, United States who work as full-time farmers.

When Dave and I got married we both planned to raise livestock. Dave had raised sheep and feeder cattle up in Canada.

We started out by leasing pastures in our county and ran livestock on those pastures for many years. We would rotate pastures by loading stock in trailers and hauling them to a new location. We raised both cattle and sheep this way, while also

planning to buy our own farm. Once we bought our farm we moved all of our livestock to our new home. The farm was a Christmas tree farm before we bought it, and it still has lots of trees on it that didn't ever get cut for Christmas trees. Because much of the property is quite hilly and prone to erosion and run off, we decided to sell of all of our cattle and focus on the sheep.

My husband and I raise sheep and also train dogs. We have two flocks. One flock is Katahdin hair sheep and the other is Clun Forest sheep. We also train sheepdogs for people

and teach people to train their own. Dave also does some custom woodworking and welding.

A typical day

Like most ranches or farms, the days are very seasonal. What happens on a typical day varies a lot based on what time of year it is.

Our flock is out to graze most all of the year. The sheep live out in the fields and do not come into the barn or pens except for lambing, shearing or sorting.

We use Anatolian and Maremma

Guardian dogs to protect the sheep from predators. Predators here are mostly coyotes or cougars, but also eagles will take small lambs.

The rams are added to the flocks in late October. When the rams are in, the ewes are divided in different fields by their respected breeds, ensuring they get bred to the correct rams.

I will go out with a dog and drive through the flocks every day and write down the ewes who have been marked by the rams and record the dates. The dogs will help hold the sheep grouped up so I can get the numbers written down. The rams are in for about a month.

After all the ewes have been bred, the sheep are brought into the sorting yard. The rams are sorted out and then the ewe flocks are mixed and go back out in the fields for the winter while they are pregnant.

Usually around the end of November the pastures get pretty low and we start to feed the flock. We drive hay out to flock every day and feed off the trailer. The dogs love this time of year and always enjoy coming along and helping with this each day. They will hold off the trailer, wait at the gate for me, or help me get close to a ewe I might need to check. We will feed the ewes every day until April when the grass starts to grow again.

Lambing

By the middle of March lambing has started. Lambing is the busiest time of the year for us. The dogs will work very hard at this time.

The ewes give birth out in the back field. I will drive through with a dog several times a day to check the ewes and see who is lambing. As each ewe lambs out, they are brought in one at a time. They go into a lambing jug (a small private nursing pen) in the barn. The weather in March is still



One of the guardian dogs at the farm.

unpredictable and can be wet and cold for newborn lambs.

Bringing the ewes into the barn can be a challenge at times. The ewes are not used to being brought in, and they are also not used to being separated from the main herd.

To bring a single ewe in, right after lambing can be stressful, especially with yearling ewes. Some of the older ewes will follow the newborn lambs in a small cart, pulled by the ATV, all the way to the barn. Some will follow if I carry the lambs myself, in a low hung sling, and a dog will apply some pressure from behind. It is not always so easy, some of the ewes are very nervous and do not want to leave the spot that they gave birth.

"The dogs have to be brave and patient, steady and authoritative to bring those ewes in with their lambs."

They are also very protective of the lambs, and become quite aggressive to the dogs.

It can be quite a long and slow walk in from the field when a ewe will not follow her lambs. Sometimes the dog will have to make the ewe and newborns walk several hundreds of

yard to get to the barnyard. If the new mother happens to run back to the main flock, then the dog has to shed it out and hold it apart from the flock as we bring it in. The dogs work very hard at this, it is not an easy thing to do with some of the more nervous ewes.

During the month of lambing, I rarely leave the farm and the dogs work quite long days. Lambs are vaccinated, ewes are checked for mastitis, ear tagging, castrations, tail docking are all happening this month. The ewes are juggled for a few days and then put out into bigger and bigger mixing pens.

The dogs help with all the rotations of pens, mixing of ewes, doctoring, catching of ewes and lambs. We move each ewe from the back field one at a time, as she lambs, put her into a jug, then into mixing pens, and then eventually out to the front field as the lambs seem old enough to handle being out to pasture. By the end of the month, the back field should be empty and all of the ewes and lambs have gone through the system, are now out grazing on the front field.

Shearing time

Almost immediately after lambing, it is shearing time. At shearing there

is lots of sorting. The wool rams need to be caught and brought in. All of the wool ewes and their lambs need to be caught, separated from the katahdins, and brought in. Once in the sorting yard, the lambs have to be sorted away from the ewes because the lambs are too small to be put through the sorting chute at this age.

The lambs always cry, and try to run back to the chutes, it is a lot of work on the dogs to deal with this. However at the end of shearing, the lambs each find their newly shorn mother, and all the ewes go back out to pasture to join the katahdin ewes with lovely new hair cuts. Katahdin Sheep are a hair breed and do not need shearing.

Summer months

During the early summer months the ewes have plenty to graze on and the lambs are growing fast. This time of year the daily routines are pretty easy, mostly driving through and check how the lambs are growing. We make sure any problems are addressed and

that the guardian dogs are fed and watching over the lambs good. We often run electric wire fencing to do some rotational grazing at this time of year, and it seems there are always a lamb or two who go through the fence and can't get back in. The dogs are used to work the single lamb back to a spot they can get through the fencing again.

Weaning

July is usually weaning. Weaning is also a lot of work for the dogs. The entire ewe flock, with large lambs at their sides, are brought in to sort. I will go through and decide which lambs I will keep for replacement ewes at this time. They are marked differently from the lambs I will sell.

The dogs help me to catch all the lambs needing to be tagged. The ewes are then separated from the lambs, and ewes are moved back to the same back field that they gave birth on earlier that spring.

The lambs are moved up to a smaller field that is up by the road. During the next couple months the weaned lambs will be sold. I sell

to some private buyers and some larger number buyers. The larger groups leave first and then I sell the rest in smaller packets. Each time someone comes to pick up their order of lambs, I will use one of my dogs to get the proper lambs off the hillside pasture by the road and the dog will load the young lambs into the truck/trailer.

By the end of the August, all the lambs will be gone except the replacements I am wanting to keep. These now are moved back in with the ewes and the flock is one big flock again. The flock will usually have enough graze to get through August, sept, and October.

In October then the cycle starts again, I sort out the different breeds and put them with their respective rams for breeding.

On the down times, we are always checking the flock for anything that needs addressing. The guardian dogs need to be fed and cared for daily also. Slow times of the year are good times to work on training the younger dogs or preparing the dogs for trials.



Gus

What dogs do you have?

I have 6 Australian shepherds. One is quite old, 16.5 years, and she still enjoys coming out to feed the sheep and guardian dogs with me. Her name is Tick and she is the mother or grandmother of all the other dogs I have. I have 2 young pups, 6 mths old who will start training later this year. I have 3 main work dogs, they range in ages from 4 to 11 years old. Gus is 4 years old, Jill is 7 years old and Newt is 11 years old.



Jill

Why did you buy an aussie?

When I got my first aussie, I hadn't started into raising sheep yet. I spent a lot of time riding horses back then. Growing up, I had a family friend who had an aussie, and it made me always interested in them.

I loved the good natures, loyalty and desire to bond and please the owner that Aussies had. I saw some talented aussies at a trial and knew that was the type of dog I wanted.

I have always used aussies to help me with my livestock. It would be really hard to raise sheep without dogs to help. We use the guardian dogs to protect them, and the aussies to move them. Without the dogs I would lose a lot of sleep worrying about coyotes, and spend a lot of my energy chasing sheep.

Your dogs tasks

The tasks these dogs need to do vary a lot. These dogs need to be

"I value most the open field work in my dogs, because my sheep are most often out to pasture grazing."

really versatile. Without a dog, I would have a very hard time getting the sheep out of the trees and off the hillsides. My dogs need to be able to cast, cover and push. I can

pretty easily move sheep about in small places on my own, but having the dogs do it is very helpful.

My dogs need to be able to handle the pressure of working an aggitated single, work a group of several hundred. They need to be able to push and load trailers, keep stock of feed, push rams away from ewes. They need to be fast and have a lot of focus to cover things that are trying to get away. The dogs do everything from help to load trailers, catch singles, gather a flock that is bedded down in trees, rotate pastures, sort, load chutes, push large mobs, guard gates, really anything I happen to need at the time.

Pros and cons as a farm dog

I only own aussies, and use aussies for everything I do on the farm. My husband, Dave, uses Kelpies and they are equally capable of all the work needing to be done. He uses his kelpies, and I use my aussies. We do not share the dogs, or work stock with each others dogs.

Each of my aussies have different pros and cons. I find each dog to be an individual. Newt is my strongest outrunner, and strongest forcer, but he is the least patient. Gus is my best for covering, holding and patience. Jill is my best listener, and maybe best multi purpose type

dog. Each dog can each handle any task, but each dog brings its own pros and cons to a given job.

If I was going to say a pro to using the Aussie as a breed, I feel like they are very steady and brave dogs. They have the mental fortitude to stay calm under pressure and have a huge desire to please.

I have been lucky to have very loyal and willing Aussies who give their hearts to do what I need from them. I like the temperament of the aussie, which is a bit tough and gritty, but also very eager to please. I like that they want to come forward into the stock and push.

"I feel like aussies have the mental fortitude to stay calm under pressure and have a huge desire to please."

Perhaps a con to the breed is that they are bred for so many different purposes that it can sometimes be hard to find dogs of similar work type to breed to.

When breeding the dogs, I like to breed a certain style to another dog of similar style. In the aussie, there are so many different varieties and dogs bred for non-work traits, that it can be hard to find consistency in the work for breeding purposes.

Training

All of my dogs I have trained myself. I do attend clinics and take lessons, but I have never sent one of my dogs away for training, nor bought a pre-trained dog.

I start training them when they are close to a year of age, although they have had some experience working prior to that. But I get serious in the training at a year of age. I start with a lot of balance work and natural work, and as they seem ready I move into some off balance work and then into farther distances. They can do some of the more simple tasks on the farm early on, and I like to let them do things they are ready to do. They will not be ready to help with a nervous lambing ewe until they have a fair bit of experience under their belt.

My dogs do also trial. To me this is the ultimate test in our partnership, and my dogs ability to read livestock and handle pressure.

"I love to put to the test the things that they learn and use on my farm, and see that they are capable to do this on unfamiliar livestock and unfamiliar territory."

Other sports

My dogs are stock dogs and pets/companions. I do not do conformation, agility or other dog sports.

I used to do obedience, agility and even conformation as a kid with Akitas and a labrador. With

the aussies, I like to focus on the stock work. The things I do with my dogs besides stock work are things where they can just be pet dogs. I take them for lots of walks through the fields, swimming in the pond, they like to go to the beach, things like that.



The dogs live the life of a work dog, but also the life of a companion. There are days/weeks where they work very hard, but there are also days/weeks where they do not do much more than relax and hang around the house and go for walks.

What qualities do you think are important for Aussies, so they can be used in practical work on a farm?

So much of this depends on how a farm is run and what is expected from the dogs.

I think a dog needs to be brave and powerful, but not a bully. I like a dog of good character. Livestock will read weakness in a dog very easily.

For my purposes a dog needs to be able to work a fair distance away from me, be able to make good independent decisions. They need to be obedient and flexible. Speed and endurance is very important, I like long legs and lighter bone for this.

I think for serious work they need to have some amount of eye or intensity to keep them well focused on the task and prevent stock to out maneuvering them. Patience, grit, speed, power, proper grip, cover, scope, independence and partnership all in one perfect package. These dogs need to have a lot of drive and focus to work long days under hard conditions, but also they have lots of days of just hanging out and being dogs where they need to be relaxed and lazy all day.

The qualities I look for in selecting a dog are how smoothly they move around the stock. What are the shapes of the flanks? Do they approach straight and calm, with no hesitation? I want to see a low, relaxed tail set, and low head with serious intent. I want them to be very focused, not distracted and looking around when they feel pressure. They must be confident enough to obey commands while working and not loose their power. They should cover naturally, with give and flow, as an instinctive reaction to the stock's movement.

A dog who falls in behind on a cover in not going to be useful when working nervous livestock. Balance is very important to me, as it is highly genetic and it indicates a dogs ability to work independently and make good decisions.

How can one help other farmers find the breed?

Showing the dogs work is likely the best way to help farmers find the dogs. Farmers might attend trials, and see good dogs there.

Occasionally we will do herding demos at fair and places like that. This allows farmers to see what the dogs are capable of doing.

In the US, aussies are a pretty common breed, so not hard to find them.

I think the issue might be for a farmer to find the right kind of aussies. Farmers may not understand how to recognize difference between the type of aussie that is capable to work on a ranch, and just your average pet or show dog type aussie. That part is more about education, or maybe trial and error on the part of the farmer.

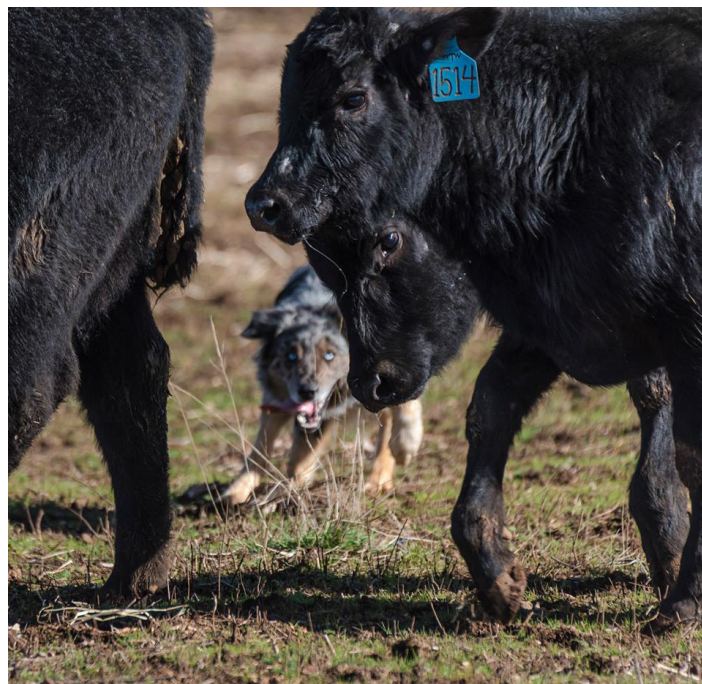
The Australian Shepherds is a wonderful breed, with a unique heritage.

It is very exciting to see these dogs going to other countries and bringing their work overseas. It makes me so excited to see new people interested in contributing to the working heritage of the breed.

Trudy Viklund



Trudy and Tick



Gus working cattle



Jill