

Colours and Markings in Working Dogs

Ingrid Prytz Ohm, Welsh Corgi Cardigan and Border Collies, Norway

The basic truth of all herding dogs, from the elegant eyeing Border Collie to the rough and touch Australian Cattle dog is that they are all predators.

The working styles of these dogs are either to stalk, heel or chase livestock, the real difference between them and the wolf is that we have, almost, managed to breed away the killing part of the hunt.

Livestock move off these dogs because they fear them, and it is this predator / prey relationship that controls the interaction between them.

My experience from working Border Collies on sheep, goats and cattle is that the markings and colorations in the dogs do influence how livestock perceive the dog, and thus its practical working ability.

The Mask

The Irish pattern so often found in herding breeds is known for the more or less symmetrical white in the head, the white collar, white legs and tip of tail. A very attractive marking for the owners, but also very practical as it will help to emphasize the expression of the dog.

The eyes and ears will be coloured in, and offset by the surrounding white areas. This emphasizes the eyes and ear carriage of the dogs and gives them a clear mask in the head. The masking is also something one will find in many of the species of wolves and wild dogs, but then not in the form of an Irish pattern but created by different colour patterns in the head.

The mask will make them look far more threatening than one that is completely white in head. I have never seen a difference in how stock react to symmetrically marked and half white headed dogs, so it seems that half a mask is equal to a full mask in giving the dog a “sharper” look while working.

Dogs with completely dark heads will many times be almost too powerful, especially on sheep. Not only will they scare stock more easily, but in some cases especially sheep will find them so uncomfortable to be around that they are not the best dogs for pen work and other times where the dogs have to be very close to stock.

The Tail

On a more breed specific note there is also a case where markings on the tail will affect the dog/livestock relationship. In eyeing breeds, like the Border Collie, the sheep will constantly be assessing how strong the dog is. Strength in these breeds is not measured physically but mentally; the strong dog will have the confidence to move steadily up on its stock, never breaking eye contact and only gripping when he has reached the animal or it charges the dog. The ewe or cow will look at the dog's posture and movement, but mostly the eye, to find out what kind of dog she is dealing with. A dog wise ewe or cow will pick a weak dog in an instant, and they will never move without a lot of uncontrollable running about, gripping and even barking from the dog.

The tail carriage of the dog is the best way to spot if it is feeling confident or not. The lovely, super low tail carried almost underneath the dogs belly shows a dog with all focus and courage, and nothing is there to distract the sheep or cattle from the eye of the dog. On weaker or younger dogs one often sees the tail lifting higher and higher, and when the dog loses its concentration or courage the tail often flips over the back.

The eye of the sheep will also be drawn to the flying tail, and this might be the disturbance that makes the ewe stop and fight the dog.

A large white tip on the tail will further aggravate this, as it makes the tail stand out so much more.

The colour

Colour in working dogs also affects how livestock will react to them. I am not sure if this reaction is imbedded genetically or a product of experience, probably a combination of both.

One of the best examples is how sheep in Norway react to red Border Collies. I have witnessed time and time again how sheep and goats will charge a red dog, where they would have moved smoothly away from a black and white. In Norway the red fox is one of our main threats to new born lambs, and it is obvious that the ewes confuse dog and fox in this case.

Stock will also be less likely to move off a predominately white dog, than one with a normal Irish pattern. But they will not attack like in the case of the red dogs – just wait until the dog gets a lot closer before assessing its strength and decide how to react.

In herds where the main working dogs are white this does not happen, as the sheep have become accustomed to the colour and know that there is power behind white dogs as well.

I will never forget how the handler of a very useful, but all white, BC bitch tried to dye her black before our National Sheepdog Championships a few years back. She turned out an unfortunate purplish colour, and gave us all a good laugh when it was her turn to run! But the sheep moved off her, and I think she made it to the finals.

In the case of very dark dogs, like in very dark headed ones, livestock tend to move off them at a greater distance and at a faster pace. This can be positive when dealing with heavy animals in easily controllable environments, but can be a real handicap on flighty stock in dangerous terrain.

On a more practical level I much prefer a dog with a fair amount of white on it for a very simple reason; it is much more easily seen! One thing is working your dog in a perfect green field on a sunny day – then you could spot your dog regardless. But most days you work your dog in bad weather, at dusk, in high grass and at great distances.

The dark and mottled dogs are hard to spot, and if you have hunted your dog so that it has been out of sight for a long while, it can be impossible to see if it has landed behind your stock or not.
