

Sheep safe

As spring approaches the chances of us encountering livestock and their young when out walking increases. Here **Julie Muller** explains how she and her collie benefited from a spot of countryside training.

The UK dog population is estimated at around eight million, with approximately 23 per cent of UK households owning at least one dog (according to the Pet Food Manufacturers Association). Generally speaking, dog owners use the nearest available space to exercise their furry friends on

a daily basis, but travel further afield to wide open spaces at weekends. It is during these times that people and their dogs become increasingly exposed to livestock. Usually there is no problem with this, as warning signs will be displayed and dogs will be required to be walked on leads. However, there is always the danger that

Most of the time he should be on a lead, but being able to control your four-legged friend around livestock is crucial.

free-running dogs will stumble upon livestock and potentially worry them.

PROJECT ZAK

Our three-year-old rescued Border Collie, Zak, is one of many dogs who has had a rather shaky start to life. Zak came to live with us in Malvern, Worcestershire, about six months ago. On arrival he knew nothing – not even his name – and it's taking us some time to train him. Zak is clearly from a working background and is very bright, but he definitely needs to learn about his conduct in the countryside – especially how to behave around sheep and other livestock.

SHEEP-SAFE

Several years ago I took my ageing Springer Spaniel, Smudge, on a six-week 'Sheep Safe' dog training course – more out of curiosity and not because Smudge was a problem around sheep – and I found the course really useful.

The course is run by Sue Harper, a dog trainer who specialises in courses that teach owners how to handle their dogs in the open countryside in the presence of livestock. Sue began teaching her courses for several reasons. While living in sheep country in the Ardennes, she had lost her Pointer and English Setter and heard that they had both been shot.

In Belgium, any dog running loose with sheep is a potential sheep worrier and may be shot without any questions being asked. Says Sue: "Later, while working as a peripatetic shepherd, I had to deal with sheep that had been attacked by dogs and realised that there was a real need for this type of training."

Sue resolved that she would do something to help and so she started to teach her Sheep Safe courses about five years ago.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Sue's courses usually last six weeks, although she does provide one-to-one, fast track

and refresher courses. Each set of six lessons is tailor-made to suit the needs of the group and every course focuses on building a strong relationship with your dog in the open environment. The dogs are taught to be obedient in real-life situations where they are exposed to all of the normal distractions of the countryside, including smells, sights, sounds and movement. More importantly, the owners are taught how to read their dogs and to see situations from the dog's perspective.

All of the lessons are held in a hay-strewn, open-sided barn, well used by sheep and other livestock.

COURSE STRUCTURE

A variety of dogs took part in the training course I attended, including two black Labradors called Drift and Jaffa, a Golden Retriever named Sam, a Pointer called Benji, a Jack Russell Terrier called Eddie, a Field Spaniel named Mabel and a Labrador X lurcher who had previously worried and killed a lamb.

The first lesson is all about getting your dog's full attention using all of the usual commands and rewarding him with lots of

treats and praise. The dogs are then taught the 'leave' command by teaching them to ignore a treat until they have a cue to eat it. Zak was really good at this task because he is not particularly interested in food – he just enjoyed the game.

By the third week, other distractions are introduced to the dogs, such as a chicken or a rabbit in a cage. The dogs are encouraged to walk/run past, ignoring the animals. This presented more of a challenge to Zak. He is very visually aware and sensitive to movement. Zak was very aware of the chicken in the cage but he soon learned to run past it.

As the weeks progress the dogs learn to link the 'leave' command with the cue for a return to their owner, so that with the sight of the sheep comes the stimulus for the dog to return to his owner.

READING 'DOG'

During the course, the dogs are given as much contact as possible with tame sheep and also livestock that are less familiar with dogs. At the same time, the owner develops the ability to 'read' their dog so that they can predict his behaviour and so avoid

potential chase situations. This was quite difficult for all of us because it depends upon timing. As Zak and I became more in tune with one another it was easier to predict what he was going to do and react accordingly.

Towards the end of the course, the dogs learn to sit and stay at a distance so that the owners have complete control over them should they unexpectedly meet livestock. They are then allowed to meet sheep in the confines of a barn and roam through them under the strict control of Sue.

Zak was brilliant when he was in close contact with the sheep and they weren't bothered about him at all. On the one occasion, when he became a little too interested in one of the ewes, he was soundly head-butted on the nose. That told him!

FUN LEARNING

I thoroughly enjoyed working with Zak while in close contact with the sheep. Also, much of the training involved playing games. I particularly enjoyed this because it was fun, it stimulated Zak mentally, and it gave me more control over his behaviour because I could

predict what he was going to do next.

All of the dogs and their owners gained a huge amount from the course as it gave the owners the confidence to walk their dogs safely in the countryside and not worry about the risk of them running off and potentially chasing livestock. This is why courses like Sue Harper's Sheep Safe course are so valuable, because they help owners to take control of their dogs and so be able to enjoy walking with their best friend in the countryside.

GETTING THERE

Before we attended Sue's course, Zak barked at horses, cattle and sheep, chased crows and pigeons and became very excited when he saw a cat. Despite his faltering start in life, Zak is a very bright boy and he did extremely well. He now has a healthy respect for sheep and cattle, and I certainly have more control over him.

His behaviour isn't perfect yet though, and I feel we would benefit from a refresher course in the future. I am looking forward to putting him through his paces again so I can continue to enjoy walking in the beautiful countryside with my best friend. ●



Rescue dog Zak is getting there with his countryside training.



Getting to know ewe: one of the course dogs greets a tame sheep.



Photos courtesy of Alison Spiers Photography.

By the end of the course the dogs are able to happily mingle among livestock.

Contact Sue Harper at www.educating-rover.co.uk or tel. 01684 568067 for training and course details.

About the author



Julie Muller is an environmental writer who specialises in writing articles that examine the ways in which people interact with their natural environment.