

# The Border Collie: Versatility and Variety

by G. Chadwick

The Border Collie is widely known for its intelligence, trainability, loyalty and strong desire to work. People who needed a willing canine partner that could take on complex tasks driven by their herding instincts have perpetuated these traits in the breed.

**Versatility.** In 1994 in his book titled, “The Intelligence of Dogs” author Stanley Coren named the Border Collie as the most intelligent breed. This was in no way a surprise to Border Collie fans, particularly since intelligence was defined by the author as “working” intelligence (a combination of bidability, or willingness/desire to learn, and speed of learning tasks requiring fewer reinforced repetitions to master behaviors). Other breeds may have more ability for scenting tasks, more instinct to retrieve, stronger affinity for swimming, more natural show ring bravado. The Border Collies’ versatility beyond most other breeds is enriched by its physical athleticism and an active canine mind that demonstrates learning and thinking is fun for this breed.



Border Collies and other high-drive herding breeds, dominate the ranks of the working stock dog. In addition, Border Collies can be found at the top levels of nearly every dog sport (agility, flyball, flying disc, luring, tracking, musical canine freestyle, big air, etc.) More recently, Border Collies have been worked with great success at keeping golf courses and airport runways free from geese, ducks and other migrating fowl. A Border Collie can quickly master most things that a dog can be taught to do.

By now, the reader may be thinking that Border Collies just may be the perfect dog. Many Border Collie lovers would agree. There is just one job at which your average Border Collie may consistently fail and that is the role of “couch potato” or “backyard dog”. Border Collies are high energy, active dogs and they need a job to do. If you don’t provide mental and physical activity that your dog needs, the dog may invent it’s own “games” (which can include habitual behavior like barking, digging and chewing).

This may explain why, during the process of rehoming rescued Border Collies, there is a particular interest in what the adoption applicant plans to DO with the dog. The occasional trip to the dog park or monthly weekend hike is not an adequate routine for most Border Collies.

The special relationship that is observed between a highly trained dog and its human companion is awesome to see. Unfortunately, many families that chose a Border Collie for the first time end up disappointed because they are not set up to expend the time this breed requires. If you are willing and able to spend the time training, exercising, and building a strong bond with your new dog, that special relationship becomes very possible.



Natasha – 2003 ABCRescue

## Variety.

Appearance. For most of the history of the breed, the physical appearance of Border Collies was of secondary concern, perhaps more determined by climate and personal preference or random factors. The priority was always on the dog's working ability.

For a number of years (and continuing to the present) the recognition of the Border Collie breed by the American Kennel Club and the UKC had been strongly opposed by advocates of the breed who believe that a focus on breeding for specific appearance standards will generally weaken the working ability of the breed. Despite objections, in 1995 the AKC recognized standards for the Border Collie breed in the Herding Group.

Standards. As a result of AKC and UKC registration, there now exists a standard of appearance in these breed-focused registries. Other stock dog registries (such as the North American Sheepdog Society - NASDS and the American Border Collie Association - ABCA) also continue to register litters from proven working dogs but are opposed to any type of conformation standard. So a "registered" Border Collie could mean a dog that comes from a number of different registries that are focused on very different standards. Given the diversity in appearance that has existed in the breed, all the variations in eye color, ear shape, size, color and coat type continue to be recognized as part of the Border Collie breed.

The American-International Border Collie Registry, Inc (AIBC) states that male Border Collies can be between the sizes of 18" to 24" in height at the shoulder and females 17" to 22". It is not uncommon for males and females to be of the same size in this breed. Weight is from 30 and 60 pounds. The AKC supports a more narrow standard (Males 19" – 22" and 18" – 21" for females).

Eye Color. Variations are recognized in Border Collie eye color, which can be shades of brown from dark brown to light gold, or blue eyes.



(At left) Variations in eye color: soft dark brown Shayla, blue-eyed Tessa, and light brown Kylie (2003 ABCRescue). The red-coated BCs often have lighter brown eyes.

(At right),  
Bi-eyed  
Zephyr (2003  
ABCRescue)



Border Collies can also have a greenish cast to their eyes, flecking (although that eye coloration is more common in Australian Shepherds) and eyes of two different colors (called bi-eyed).

Coat. Perhaps the area of most obvious variety is in coat, first in color and color pattern and second in coat length. Coat texture can vary from hard/coarse to soft/silky.

Medium and long coats can also be straight, curly or wavy. The ideal coat (short or long) is double, with a dense undercoat and a somewhat coarse, outer coat.

**Color:** The “traditional” Border Collie is a medium sized dog (35-45 lbs), with a rough (medium long) black coat color with white markings arranged in the typical “collie” pattern (white blaze on face and white muzzle, white ruff encircling the neck, white chest, four white feet and a white tip on the end of the tail).



(At left) **Buddy, Classic Black/White (2003 ABCRescue)**

A fairly common variation to the traditional look is the “split face” (black over one eye and white over the other).



(At right) **Ralph (2004 ABCRescue)**

The second most frequent color of Border Collies would be the “reds”. This color can be seen with traditional white markings or variations in the white pattern with the reddish brown ranging from a dark mahogany brown to a pale rust shade.



**Range of Reds – Mahogany, Red/White, Rust/Tri-Color Ruby (2002 ABCR), Scout, Kylie (2003 ABCR)**

(At left)

**Scout (ABCR Member’s Classic Red/White Color)**

Other variations to the classic “collie” patterning also occur regularly. These dogs, called “patterned whites” come in many variations, from large areas of black, red or merle to mostly white on the body.



**Mae (2003 ABCRescue)**



**Patterned Whites Blake (2003 ABCRescue)**



**Seeker**



A less common basic color would be blonde/light tan with traditional white pattern. In some countries this strawberry blonde color is called “red” and the darker reddish-brown is called “brown”.

*(At left)*  
**Blonde Border Collie Pup Brody (2004 ABCRescue)**



*(At right)*  
**Blue Merle (tri-color) Border Collie - Kody (2004 ABCRescue)**

Although seldom seen in rescued dogs, Border Collie coats have been produced in blue or red merle color, or a lilac cast (muted blue/gray), lemon/white (light gold) and even brindle coloring.



Any of the colorations can also have small spotting (often called “ticking”) on the white areas (legs, face and chest). The ticking can vary from a few spots to very dense. Some refer to profusion of lots of small size ticking as a coat color called “sooty”.

*(At left)* – Turk (2003 ABCR)  
*(At right)* – Pirate (2003 ABCR)



All of the coat colors can also be seen with tri-coloring. The tri-colors are dogs with a pattern of tan/rust points on their face (below each eye), “eyebrows”, and legs (where the white meets the darker coat color).



**Red Tri – Color Kylie (2003 ABCRescue)**

**Black Tri – Color Max (2003 ABCRescue)**



**Coat Type (Length):** When people become interested in Border Collies they often comment that they didn't realize BCs could have short coats. In reality coat length varies from very short (called smooth coats), through medium, to a long, thick double coat (called rough coats). Usually the rough coated dogs have longer fur (feathering) on

the backs of their legs and tail plume and a longer ruff (around their neck), with shorter fur on the face and front of legs and feet. Examples of the variety of coat length are pictured here.



**Short Coat – Jack (2003 ABCRescue)**



**Rough/Long Coat - Ladd (2004 ABCRescue)**



**Black/White Medium Coats  
Natasha & Boris (2004 ABCRescues)**



**Black/White Medium Curly Coat  
Axle (2004 ABCRescue)**

**Ear Carriage:** The last area of variation in Border Collies would be in the ears. Ears are usually seen in tipped (also called semi-erect or tulip ears), drop ears, prick, or sideways folding. It is also common in Border Collies for the individual dog to have ears that are different (one pricked and one bent), often referred to as mixed ears.



**Left to right: ABCRescues with Sideways ("Yoda") ears, Mixed ears, and Drop ears.**



Left to right: ABCRescues Skye with prick ears and Kylie with tipped (aka semi-erect or tulip ears)

Gait and Movement. With all this variety, in Border Collie Rescue (usually without benefit of pedigrees or knowledge of working skills of the breeding lines), we are often challenged to determine which dogs are Border Collies. Often the most telling factor is the general demeanor of the dog, including its energy level, the intelligent, inquisitive look in the eye, and the dog's gait or movement.



(At right) Hawk (2002 ABCRescue) exudes energy

(Below) Working boy, Gus, in classic BC crouch



The Border Collie is an agile dog, able to suddenly change speed and direction without loss of balance and grace. When intent upon an object of interest (a toy, a treat, or stock) there is often a crouch or stalk position with a steady gaze (the Border Collie "eye") and a lowered head. The movement is free, smooth and tireless, with a minimum lift of the feet and an overall balanced appearance.

Typically the body is slightly longer than it is tall, and is capable of speed and quick reactions. Even the more appearance-focused breed registries (i.e., AKC) state that in Border Collies color and markings are always secondary to physical evaluation and gait.

When and if you decide to adopt a rescued Border Collie, understand that every dog is a unique individual with his own personality. Intelligence, trainability and instinct vary with each dog. The rewards of living with a Border Collie are many, once you understand the commitment.

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