

These Dogs Are so Smart, They Almost Have a Sixth Sense

Because of their uncanny intelligence, they have what some owners describe as a sixth sense. They can assess a situation and know when their unique skills are needed. And that makes them worth their bulk in gold to the owners who depend upon them for their livelihoods.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Australian Cattle Dogs have been bred in the land Down Under to be strong leaders with sheep as well as cattle, and with that reputation comes an inborn sense of invincibility, which makes them truly tough
- Built for hardiness, Australian Cattle Dogs are naturally vigilant and suspicious of unfamiliar activity, so they're perfect as protective watchdogs who are both stubborn and territorial
- Born to guard, protect and herd livestock in the rugged outback, more domestic situations in a family setting call for early socialization and training that combines fairness and consistency these dogs can count on
- Intelligent and highly trainable, Australian Cattle Dogs adore their close family members, and when raised with children may also do well with other children, but the dogs must always be treated with respect and require lifelong mental stimulation and daily rigorous exercise

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Also called a Blue Heeler or Queensland Heeler, Australian Cattle Dogs were born for their role as designated leaders and protectors over sheep as well as livestock because they were bred for it. Seemingly impervious to hardship, historically and still today, these dogs have been incredibly valuable to ranchers and farmsteads.

The history of Cattle Dogs involve multiple cross-breedings, since the ones first shipped from England weren't hardy enough to stand the conditions. As a result, those breeds were mixed with native Dingos, as well as Collies, Bull Terriers, Black and Tan Kelpies and Dalmatians. A hardy, medium-size dog is the result, the Australian Cattle Dogs that are known and loved today.

In the land Down Under, harsh conditions such as rugged terrain, feral animals and lack of fresh water can break lesser breeds. Cattle Dogs took their job very seriously and could be counted on to hold up their end of the bargain, even as they worked through hardship, hunger and hailstorms.

Even today, ranchers all over the world will tell you their Australian Cattle Dogs are worth their weight in gold. Due to their uncanny intelligence bordering on a sixth sense, they have the ability to assess situations and don't hesitate to take charge if they feel their unique skills are needed, which is mostly good.

Place these dogs in a domestic situation, however, and it's easy to see that it would take a unique setting to help these dogs adapt to households that might not be so dependent on their "dogged" determination to keep everyone in line.

Early Training Is Crucial to Refocus the Cattle Dog's Temperament

Ten or 12 weeks old is certainly not too soon to start puppy kindergarten (which will be as much about training you as it is to train them). Early socialization is also crucial to get younger dogs gradually used to encountering other animals, children and adults. Terrific Pets notes:

*"There are several breeds of dogs that are naturally very calm and well socialized and really don't need extensive amounts of work to be very non-aggressive and friendly towards other dogs and other animals. The Australian Cattle Dog is not one of (them)."*¹

The herding instinct is so strong that Australian Cattle Dogs may sometimes feel the need to nip at the heels and hind quarters not only of children and pets in the house but even adults, none of which is acceptable. According to Vetstreet:

*"Nipping should not be tolerated. Generally the Cattle Dog only intervenes if he feels a situation is out of control, so it is your job as his owner to not put him in that situation. If you act as the authority figure in his life, he will look to you rather than taking matters into his own paws."*²

Again, the best way to shape such behavior is lifelong, positive training that starts as soon as you bring your pup home. Be aware that if you wait until they're 6 months or a year old (the equivalent to starting to parent your child at 14 years of age), they rely on what they've taught themselves those first few months, which can often lead to substantial miscommunication (and behavior problems) down the road.

Socialization from the time they're puppies should incorporate daily "meet and greets" with cats and other household pets, if necessary, and older children but definitely with other dogs in calm, safe environments. For pups-in-training (which should be all of them), it's good to choose dogs for play dates that you're confident will be good with puppies.

That way your young pup will be relaxed rather than wary as he gets used to being in different situations. Puppy classes are invaluable for these learning situations, and I encourage all heeler owners to invest in puppy classes for the first year of their puppy's life.

Perhaps because they're so intelligent, Australian Cattle Dogs seem to have an inborn sense of fairness, so you should focus your training with plenty of love, but firm boundaries that combine fairness and consistency. They need to know they're not the one in charge — you are — but that they can trust you because you make good, fair, balanced choices.

Tailor-Made Activities Designed for Their Temperaments

Other than working ranches where Australian Cattle Dogs are encouraged to be exactly what they were bred to be, their skills can be refocused they can be more of a pet and companion than a working dog. People who love the breed often enjoy them as partners for biking, running or even kayaking.

Being extremely active, both physically and mentally, they thrive on having a job to do, so they need regular activities to keep them engaged in positive outlets. That's why they often do well involved in dog sports, such as obedience, rally, flyball, agility and flying disc competitions. A busy cattle dog is a happy cattle dog, so the most activities you plan, the better. At a minimum, I recommend enrolling in a Nose Work class for these smarties, which will help positively harness their innate tracking and herding skills.

What Australian Cattle Dogs have in common with other highly intelligent breeds is that they love being part of every activity. Once they've gained your trust, you also have their adoration, which is one reason they've also been referred to as "Velcro" or "shadow" dogs — they stick to you like glue. These dogs often understand thousands of words, which is why they can become such bonded life partners with active pet lovers.

Exercise is an absolute in the life of a Cattle Dog; not to do so can turn a potentially loving family dog into a destructive terror simply because they have so much pent up energy. Vetstreet says it well:

*"Australian Cattle Dogs have a strong sense of adventure and they think they are invincible. Be prepared for your dog to incur a lot of injuries. Fortunately, he is truly tough, but living with him and wondering how he will hurt himself next can be nerve-wracking. Get used to it."*³

Commit to long periods of active exercise with your Cattle Dog daily (yes, I said daily), and never assume a walk around the block will suffice. Their energy has to go somewhere, and a positive outlet is so much better than having to chide them for chasing bicyclists or the neighbor's cat. If you can't commit to at least an hour a day of rigorous exercise I recommend considering another breed.

In addition to physical exercise, this breed needs lifelong environmental (mostly mental) enrichment. This means she needs to have fun, brain-stimulating, thought-engaging "play time" multiple times a day. This can include interactive puzzles, treat release toys and specialized training sessions that work on mastering different tasks, behaviors, tricks and commands. The more you interact (or "work") with this breed the happier they are.

Physical Aspects and Health

The Australian Cattle Dog has a smooth double coat and thick undercoat that comes in combinations of black, red, chocolate and blue/gray. Both the blue and red can also come in merle or "speckle" coat. Both colors can be solid or mottled with white or gray, with or without black, blue or tan markings on their heads and tan markings on other areas of their bodies. The red speckle coat is even all over the body, and may include darker red markings on their heads.

That layered coat protects the dog from inclement weather, and doesn't require a lot of grooming other than an occasional brushing with a stiff (not a soft) brush, and bathing is not recommended unless it's absolutely necessary.

Overall, they appear as having sturdy, compact bodies with well-developed muscles which give them astonishing agility and strength. For the unversed in the way of show dog characteristics, Cattle Dogs have narrowly pointed faced, pointed, upright ears and rather small eyes when compared to the size of their nose. They're described by Vetstreet as having:

*"A broad skull, muscular cheeks, a black nose, dark-brown eyes that glint in suspicion when a stranger approaches, medium-size prick ears, and strong teeth for biting cows. The muscular neck leads into a rectangular body with strong shoulders and a deep chest. The tail hangs in a slight curve when the dog is at rest, which doesn't happen very often."*⁴

Males can stand 18 to 20 inches tall at the shoulders, with females slightly smaller. At peak adulthood they can weigh anywhere from 33 and 62 pounds. Potential health problems for Australian Cattle Dogs, according to Vetstreet, include:

- **Hip dysplasia**
- Progressive retinal atrophy
- Patellar luxation
- Genetic deafness

In addition, portosystemic (liver) shunts, can be a congenital anomaly that results in irregular development or positioning of the blood vessels to and through the liver, compromising the blood flow to dog's liver.

If the Cattle Dog gets plenty of exercise, play and mental stimulation, you can expect a lifespan of as long as 14 years or more. If you're the energetic type who loves including your dog in an active lifestyle, they'll be able to not only keep up, but challenge you to be your most active self, and be a wonderful companion in the long run. Hundreds of these dogs can be found in shelters nationwide, and there are breed-specific rescues waiting to help you find the perfect Cattle Dog.

Sources and References

¹ [Terrific Pets 2003-2024](#)

^{2,3,4} [Vetstreet 2001-2024](#)
