

INTERPRETATION OF THE BEARDIE STANDARD

by Carol Gold

To understand the Standard of the Bearded Collie, first you have to understand what the Beardie was bred to do. Although they worked sheep, they were not the picture-book sheepdog, circling a flock of sheep and driving it across a grassy plain or gentle hills in response to the shepherd's commands to move this way or that. If that's your image of the Bearded Collie's heritage, think again. The Beardie is a hill herder and drover. A typical Scottish Highland hill sheep grazing area may consist of about five or six km² of mountainous hillside, rising to more than 1000 m high. Deep ravines cut through the hills. On the lower slopes, the ravines are filled with trees and, in summer, with bracken that can grow up to three metres high. Higher up there are thick heather, patches of marsh and as you go higher still, boulders, rocky outcrops and cliffs. Go up to the 1000 m mark and you may find snow, even in the summer. Scattered over the area, and almost as wild as the country, are several hundred sheep. It's the Beardie's job to go up on the hills to hunt out the sheep and start bringing them down. The shepherd can't see the sheep or his dog, so the Beardie has to work on his own. It's an exceptionally hard job: the dog has to cover the hillside again and again, working at speed. And he may have to do this dawn to dusk for days on end in all kinds of weather.

The dog must be agile enough to follow the sheep across the rocks. When faced with a recalcitrant ewe, he must face her down and get her moving by himself. Problems that arise are the dog's to solve. A hill Beardie also barks while he's working. This serves two purposes—it tells the shepherd where his dog is but, more importantly, it startles the sheep and gets them moving toward one another for safety.

The Beardie's other job was as a drover, moving cattle, and sometimes sheep, long distances to market in the days before railways and trucks. This, too, demanded stamina, intelligence and agility.

Keeping all this in mind, let's look at the Beardie Standard.

ORIGIN AND PURPOSE

“One of the oldest of the British herding breeds, the Bearded Collie has for centuries been the Scottish hill shepherd's dog, used to hunt and gather free-ranging sheep on the Highlands. The breed was also popular as a cattle drover. Both jobs required a hardy constitution and intelligence, initiative, strength, stamina and speed.”

“GENERAL APPEARANCE

“This is a lean, active dog, longer than it is high in an approximate proportion of 5:4, measured from point of chest to point of buttock. Bitches may be slightly longer. The dog, though strongly made, should show plenty of daylight under the body and should not look too heavy. A bright, enquiring expression is a distinctive feature of the breed.”

(Interpretation) The Beardie's very long, lean body is one of the most important features of the breed. The length provides flexibility for a dog that must change direction in a single step. It also provides the spring that adds to the Beardie's speed. Beardies, along with a very few other breeds, have a double-suspension gallop—that is, they are off the ground both when fully extended and when fully collected. When they hit the ground with their legs beneath them, the uncoiling long body adds extra driving force when the legs push off again. The body length also gives extra lung room without increasing bulk—that's where the leanness comes in. A lean dog cuts through the air with less resistance than a wide one and is more flexible as well.

The requirement for “plenty of daylight under the body” serves two purposes. Most obvious, it means that the coat should not be too long. It should follow the outline of the dog's body, not sweep the floor. Structurally, it means that the Beardie should not be short in leg. The 5:4 ratio must come from the long body, not from short legs. The measurement from point of elbow to the ground should be about the same as from elbow to top of shoulder.

By the way, that bright, enquiring expression is not a cute inquisitiveness, but an intelligent and questioning look.

CHARACTERISTICS AND TEMPERAMENT

“The Bearded Collie must be alert and self-confident, and should be lively and active. The temperament should be that of a steady, intelligent dog and must show no signs of nervousness or aggression.”

(Interpretation) This is the other most important section of the Standard. To work alone, to face down defiant sheep, a dog must be bold and confident. An aggressive dog working alone with livestock and other dogs would be a disaster.

SIZE

“Ideal height at the shoulder: Dogs 21”-22” . Bitches 20”-21” . Overall quality and proportions should be considered before size, but excessive variation from the ideal height should be discouraged.”

(Interpretation) Historically, there has been a wide range of size in the breed. Larger, rangier dogs were used on the hills than on the lowlands. In fact, until 1964, the British standard called for “Dogs 20-24”, bitches rather less” and was only changed because the Kennel Club felt the range was too wide. Size alone is not all that important. For instance, a heavy or fine dog of correct size is inferior to one of correct proportions and substance that is too tall or short.

COAT

“The coat must be double with the undercoat soft, furry and close. the outercoat should be flat, harsh and strong, shaggy, free from wooliness and curl, though a slight wave is permissible. The length and density of the hair should be sufficient to provide a protective coat and to enhance the shape of the dog. but not enough to obscure the natural lines of the body. The adult coat may break along the spine, but must not be artificially parted. The coat must not be trimmed in any way. On the head, the bridge of the nose should be sparsely covered with hair which should be slightly longer on the sides, just to cover the lips. From the cheeks, the lower lips and under the chin, the coat increases in length toward the chest, forming the typical beard.”

(Interpretation) A dog that works outside in all weathers needs appropriate clothing. The coat is made up of medium-length hairs that grow in layers like a thatched roof, not of long hair that all grows full length. The thatching sheds water just like the layered feathers off the proverbial duck’s back. The hairs of a harsh coat are thicker, providing a more water-tight overcoat. (They also shed dirt more easily than softer hair—anyone with a correct-coated Beardie appreciates the wonder of a mud-covered dog that self-cleans as he dries.) The harsh hairs hold more oil than finer hairs, again improving the water-repellant quality (just try to get a correct-coated Beardie wet in the bath!) And they have little tendency to matt or tangle.

The undercoat must strike a balance between too much and too little. It should form a relatively thin layer of loosely interwoven hair close to the body (you should be able to find the dog’s skin through it). Undercoat insulates by trapping air between the hairs. With the correct amount, the dog can stay warm and, if water does penetrate the outercoat, the undercoat will dry fairly quickly. A thick undercoat holds the damp against the dog’s body and can take a long time to dry. Damp hair is surrounded by molecules of water where air should be—water conducts heat away from the body instead of holding it close to the skin. A correct undercoat brushes loose with little difficulty and stays that way with minimal care; a thick undercoat turns easily into felted lumps that lose their insulating quality. Obviously, too little undercoat provides no insulation at all.

A note about the bridge of the nose: Though the hair is sparse, the skin reflects the colour of the hair that grows from it. Dark skin grows the coloured hair, pink skin grows white hair. If you look closely at your Beardie’s muzzle, you’ll see wispy white hair growing from the pink bits.

COLOUR

“Bearded Collies are born dark, pure, black, brown, blue or fawn, with or without white markings. The base colours mature to any shade of black, grey, blue, brown or fawn, with the coat usually having a mixture of many shades at once and individual hairs showing bands of light and dark. Gray hairs may be lightly interspersed with all colours. Where white occurs, it should only appear on the foreface, as a blaze on the skull, on the tip of the tail, on the chest, legs and feet and, if round the collar, the roots of the white hair should not extend behind the shoulder. White should not appear above the hocks on the outside of the hind legs. Slight tan markings are acceptable on the eyebrows, inside the ears, on the cheeks, under the root of the tail, and on the legs where white joins the main colour.”

(Interpretation) The description of colour is pretty clear. It should be noted that there is no preferred colour, shade or marking (within the stated limits). However, traditionalists within the breed have long favoured dogs with strong colour and minimal white markings.

One of the unique features of the breed is the way the coat colour fades from the pure dark puppy coat to the sometimes almost completely washed-out adolescent coat and then darkens again with maturity. The amount of fading is not a reliable indicator of the adult hue.

The variety and ever-changing shades of Beardie coat can be attributed to the banding of each hair. Look closely at a Beardie hair and you will see that it grows in alternating bands of light and dark. Where the individual hair is light, it is thicker and coarser; where it is dark, it is finer. The blending of thousands of banded hairs give each Beardie his own unique colour.

The tan tricolour markings are deceptive. They can be quite rich and striking in a young puppy but almost always fade with maturity and at adulthood are vaguely yellow or pinkish, looking like white hair that isn't quite clean.

HEAD

“The head should be in proportion to the size of the dog. The skull is broad and flat, the distance between stop and occiput being equal to the width between the orifices of ears. The muzzle is strong and equal in length to the distance between the stop and the occiput, the whole effect being that of a dog with strength of muzzle and plenty of brain room. The stop should be moderate. The nose is large and square. Pigmentation of nose leather, lips, and eye rims follows coat colour at birth and should be of a solid colour without spots or patches.”

(Interpretation) The skull should be broad enough for an adult human to rest their whole hand on, flat out. There should be no ridge line down the middle. Viewed from the side, the muzzle and skull are not quite on parallel planes; the skull slopes very slightly toward the muzzle. It should never slope back away from the muzzle. The muzzle joins the skull smoothly at the sides, with good fill under the eyes and a full lower jaw. From above, the head appears to be a very blunt wedge.

When you look at a Beardie's face, it should appear as though the nose itself were an afterthought, added like a large shiny button to the end of the muzzle. The nose leather, lips and eye rims should always be as dark as possible and do not fade with the coat.

EYES

“The eyes should be set widely apart and are large, soft and affectionate, but not protruding. The eyebrows are arched up and forward but are not so long as to obscure the eyes. Eyes should tone with coat colour. Born blues and fawns will have lighter eyes with all shades of coat than born blacks or browns.”

(Interpretation) A Beardie's eyes appear almost human in their relative position on the head. This gives the dog the best binocular vision for judging depth and distance, important for a dog who has to run and leap across rough, rocky ground.

The phrase about eyebrows “arched up and forward but not so long as to obscure the eyes” is very important. Only the correct harsh coat will do this—soft puppy coat, for instance, falls into the eyes. Eyebrows that fall to the sides to frame the eyes (as unfortunately called for in the U.S. standard) are wrong. The eyebrows act as protection, keeping dirt, rain and foliage out of the dog's eyes.

Beardie eyes change shade along with the coat so eye colour always tones with coat colour. There is no apparent functional reason for this but it is one of the unique features of the breed. Eyes also differ between coat colours: black Beardies have dark brown eyes; blue Beardies have grey or hazel eyes; brown Beardies have amber eyes and fawn Beardies have golden eyes.

EARS

“The ears are of medium size and drooping. When the dog is alert, the ears lift at the base, level with, but not above, the top of the skull, increasing the apparent breadth of the skull.”

(Interpretation) There are two basic types of Beardie ears. One, the more traditional ear, is smaller and folded lengthwise. It tends to be more mobile than the other type, which is more hound-like, being flat and larger. In either case, it must lift to the top of the skull with alertness to assist the dog's hearing, a must for a pastoral breed.

TEETH

“The teeth are large and white, the incisors of the lower jaw fitting tightly behind those of the upper jaw. However, a level bite is acceptable. A full set of forty-two teeth is desirable.”

(Interpretation) The arrangement of a Beardie's front teeth are a good clue as to whether he has a correct, strong jaw: the lower incisors should form a straight line between the lower eyeteeth.

Why is a level bite acceptable? Because hill shepherds felt that a dog with a level bite would be less likely to break the skin of any sheep the dog grabbed while working.

NECK

“The neck must be of a fair length, muscular and slightly arched.

FOREQUARTERS

“The shoulders should slope well back, a line drawn through the centre of the shoulder blade should form a right angle with the humerus. The shoulder blades at the withers should only be separated by the vertebrae but must slope outwards from there sufficiently to accommodate the desired spring of rib. The legs are straight and vertical, with good bone, and covered with shaggy hair all round. The pasterns should be flexible without weakness.”

(Interpretation) This is the area that absorbs the shock every time a front foot hits the ground—without good forequarters, a Beardie would not last long on the hills or on the drive. The standard requirement for a ninety-degree angle between shoulder and upper arm can be misleading. Equally important is that shoulder and upper arm be of the same length. This allows the front leg to travel as far forward as possible so that each stride covers the most ground and so that the leg meets the ground at the most shock-absorbing angle.

The pastern's slight slope, too, is a shock absorber. Too much slope and the pasterns “bottom out” with every step; too upright and they transfer even the slightest jar right up the leg.

BODY

“The length of the back should come from the length of the ribcage and not that of the loin. The ribs are well sprung but angled back, making the ribcage appear flat and the chest is deep, giving plenty of heart and lung room. The back must be level and the loins should be strong. The level back blends smoothly into the curve of the rump and must not fall away in croup.”

(Interpretation) As explained under General Appearance, a long lean dog cuts through the air with less resistance and is more flexible as well. To achieve this and still provide plenty of lung room, the ribcage has to be deep—to the point of the elbow—and flat. The flat ribcage increases the potential for air intake. A dog (and humans, etc.) breathes by lifting its ribs to enlarge the chest cavity, thereby lowering internal air pressure and drawing in air from outside. The greater the difference between the ribcage at rest and fully expanded, the more air can be drawn in. The more angled back the ribs are against the spine, the more “air room” they can create when they lift.

The loin is the area between the last rib and the pelvis. It's the connector area between body and hindquarters. In almost every case, the shorter a muscle is, the more power it can exert when it contracts. A short loin therefore provides more strength to the dog's rear assembly. No more than about the width of four fingers should fit there. A slightly flat croup lets the Beardie extend his hind legs almost straight back. This extension is the secret behind the Beardie's ability to spring several feet straight up from a standing start, a useful trait when working on rocky outcrops and steeply-cut ravines. It shows in their typical side gait, in which hind legs drive back from the hip. A Beardie who falls away in croup cannot move his hind legs far enough back.

HINDQUARTERS

“The hindquarters are well muscled with good second thighs, well-bent stifles and low hocks. Below the hock, the leg falls at a right angle to the ground and, in normal stance, will be just behind a line vertically below the point of the buttock. The distance between the hocks should approximate the distance from hock to ground.”

(Interpretation) The second thighs provide the power to drive the rear. They are an indication of physical maturity in a Beardie and are usually not fully developed until the dog is around three years old.

The relationship between length of hock and length of stifle is important. A too-high hock is weak, while a too-low hock doesn't offer a long enough lever to give sufficient drive to the rear. A good ratio of length of hock to length of stifle is about 1:2.

FEET

“The feet are oval in shape with the soles well-padded. The toes are arched and close together, well-covered with hair including between the pads.”

(Interpretation) The hair between the pads is a natural protection from bruising and scratches and helps insulate the toe joints when the dog is working on cold, damp ground. It should never be trimmed away.

Though the standard doesn't mention them, Beardie toenails tend to be long (by comparison with other breeds). This adds to their gripping power when making turns and climbing or jumping on rough ground

TAIL

“The tail is set low, without kink or twist, and is long enough for the end of the bone to reach at least the point of the hock. It is carried low with an upward swirl at the tip while standing. When the dog is excited or in motion the tail may be extended or raised, but must not be carried curled forward over the back.”

(Interpretation) In the ideal picture of a moving Beardie the tail is streaming out behind, just slightly lower than the dog's back and wagging happily as the dog moves.

GAIT

“Seen from the side, a correctly moving dog appears to flow across the ground with the minimum of effort. Movement should be supple, smooth and long-reaching, with good driving power in the hindquarters and feet lifted just enough to clear the ground. The forelegs should track smoothly and straight. Each hind leg should move in line with the foreleg on the same side. The back should remain level and firm.”

(Interpretation) “Flow” is the operative word in Beardie gait. A Beardie should move so smoothly and with so little wasted up and down motion that if you saw only his topline from behind a hedge, you shouldn't be able to tell if he were moving himself or standing still on a moving walkway.

When moving, a correctly made Beardie's neck and head should be thrust forward. Reach should come from the shoulder in front and the forefeet should strike the ground at least as far forward as the dog's nose. In the rear, drive comes from the hip and the rear leg should extend fully, with hind feet reaching well back of the buttock. There should be no hint of prancing in front nor kicking up behind when the dog is moving out.

Moving away, the long stifle, combined with the narrow hips of the correct lean body, give the impression of “moving close behind”. This is correct movement for a Beardie and should not be confused with cow hocking or crossing over.

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