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The ultimate hipster holiday or an example of woolly thinking? The Feeneys' farm in Co Sligo offers tourists a crash course in shepherding over a day or two of sheep thrills and dog spills on the beach. **Yvonne Gordon** joins a professional – a border collie called Bella – to find out how it's done

Come-by! Here! Come-by! Here!" The whistle blows. Martin Feeney is giving Bob directions on Streedagh beach in Co Sligo. Bob is a sheepdog and is moving 30 ruminants, bringing them across the sand in a straight line to Feeney, following his master's calls. Feeney uses his voice to direct the dog and a whistle when the animal is further away. There are commands or whistle sounds for orders such as "left", "right", "stop" and "come back".

He and his dad Eugene are practising on the beach with their border collies for forthcoming sheepdog trials. In trials, the dogs have to move their woolly charges around a field through different gates and then back to a pen.

Readers of a certain age will remember the joys of shepherding from watching *One Man and His Dog* on the BBC in the days before we had access to unlimited television stations. The expansive beach is ideal for practice sessions.

Having walked a border collie for years, I have been constantly amused at his herding behaviour and impressed by his intelligence. I have always wondered how they round up sheep and why they have a herding instinct.

Then I found you can book a visit to the Feeneys' farm to see how it works, learn how it is done and even have a go.

It's a beautiful morning. The early sun is reflecting off slivers of water left on the sand by the recently departed tide.

Ben Bulben is the backdrop, shadowed by the morning light. Cows graze on grass at the edge of the beach and there's a distant sound of sheep bleating.

Bob follows the sheep across the sand, herding them towards us, keeping them in a tight group. His head is slightly bowed, his tongue is out and his eyes are totally fixed in concentration. No matter what direction he is running in, he never takes his eyes off his charges.

"Their instinct is to bring sheep to you," Feeney explains. "It's with a dog's eye that he moves the sheep. A Border Collie won't touch sheep, they don't attack them or bark at them. It's through their eye and their presence that they move them."

When Bob has brought the flock back to where Feeney and I are standing, his dad Eugene sends his own dog Sweep across the beach to bring them back over to the other side to him. Feeney and Eugene – or really Bob and Sweep – take turns bringing the sheep back and forth across the sand.

Feeney explains what the different commands and whistle sounds mean.

I try a calling a couple of commands to Bob, but he ignores me – in fact, he doesn't even flinch. Although he's just three, he only takes instructions from his master, and watching

the two work together, I see the strong bond.

Feeney has given me a sheepdog whistle but he tells me it'll be a while before I get a sound out of it – and he's right: there is a knack, and for the first two days I have the whistle, all that comes out is air.

Later, back in a field on the farm, Feeney's other dog Jack (aged seven and Bob's father) demonstrates his skills with four sheep and a pen. Feeney explains the voice commands – "come-by" means left, "away" means right, "lie-down" means stop and "that'll do" means stop working and come back.

Sheep farmers all use the same language, but each dog responds only to his personal owner's voice.

After seeing how it works, it's my turn and I get to work with a younger dog, herding three sheep in a pen in a field.

The dog – Kim, a one-year-old border collie puppy – is a bundle of energy. She runs around the pen a couple of times but her concentration wavers and she's soon off running down the field, ignoring Feeney's commands. After a comical chase, he finally catches her and swaps her for Bella, an older puppy who, at two, is calmer.

Feeney shows how the dog's instinct is to always bring the sheep to you, and they will do this even if you don't give a command. The dog will always stay on the other side of the sheep, and herd them towards whatever direction you're in.

When I stand on one side of the pen, Bella the sheepdog herds

the sheep into the corner nearest me. If I move to another side of the pen, the dog moves on to the diagonally opposite side, herding the sheep into my corner.

The sheep, Feeney says, see the dog as a predator so they instinctively move away without the dog having to touch them – although Bella does try a couple of nips through the pen fence when she thinks a sheep is being particularly stubborn.

Bella responds to sounds I give her to move along, but she moves when the sheep do, not when I do, so sometimes we cross paths. It takes me a while to get the hang of this, but we soon get into a rhythm. Whatever way I go, she directs the sheep to me. Feeney will work with her exactly like this for many months, taking her from the flighty excitable puppy stage like Kim, to the trained professional like Bob and Jack.

Feeney has been working with sheepdogs as long as he can remember. "The first dog I remember here was Craig, he was dad's trial dog when I was very small," he says. "I used to go out the back of the house and work Craig, putting the sheep in and out the shed. I was about five or six."

Feeney, now 32, competed at his first trial when he was nine and in 1994 he qualified to run at the International Young Handlers for under 25s in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. Feeney won that when he was just 11 – the youngest winner there has ever been.

By the time he was 13, he was on the senior Irish team with his dad and stayed on for three years. "Nobody has been on the Irish team as young as that since," he says. "I've been at it a long time. I have been on the Irish team six times with three different dogs."

However, although the setting of their farm makes a visually stunning training ground, there is a drawback. "We have a big handicap here because most of the people that win that are from big estates," says Feeney.

"It's all natural work for the dogs to go out into a 400-acre field. We're trying to teach them

things that aren't natural to them, because the west of Ireland is all small fields."

Although the dog trials are a pastime, these are very much working dogs on the sheep farm, working with Feeney every time sheep have to be moved around.

"Everything we train the dogs to do is for normal farm work," says Feeney. "With the farm, there's something to be done every day. Yesterday I was weighing lambs to see would I get them ready for the factory. There's always sheep to be moved, or dosed or sheared."

"You don't do anything with sheep without the dogs, they do everything."

Feeney has 350 sheep, including lambs, in various different fields, and he knows each one and its history, such as how many lambs it has had or when it was last in the pen with the dogs. "You get to know them all," he laughs. "It's their heads, they all have different heads!"

The farm work follows the seasons – March and April are busy times with lambs being born. After that, the lambs need care – and lots of grass to keep them all fed.

In September, the lambs are separated from the sheep. The sheep get less grass so they produce less milk, but the lambs get more to get them ready for the market.

As well as being a competitor in the sheepdog trials, Feeney is also in demand as an experienced sheepdog trials judge for competitions in Ireland and overseas. Two days after my visit he will be judging trials in Glenfin in Donegal.

Although training the dogs needs a lot of time and patience and Feeney is outdoors doing this in all types of weather, he loves it. "It's something I've grown up with," he says. "It's in your blood."

You don't do anything with sheep without the dogs; they do everything. It's something I've grown up with. It's in my blood

Farm favourites

If you're interested in seeing the dogs at work, learning more about how they are trained, and trying your own hand at being a shepherd, take a trip to Atlantic Sheepdogs.

You will also learn about breeds of heritage sheep. One of the first creatures to greet visitors is Molly – a pet Dorset sheep who likes to be patted on the head. She's in a pen with rare breeds such as Soay, from the island of the same name in Scotland, Teeswater, which looks like its wool has been permed, and the dark brown Zwartbles, with white stripes down their faces. There are also horned Jacob sheep, an ancient breed, and Scottish blackface, the most popular breed in the west of Ireland.

Martin Feeney introduces visitors to the different breeds and their uses – some are bred for milk production, some are for grazing on cliffs. Visitors will also see a demonstration of the sheepdogs working the sheep in the field and learn about how they are trained. You can also see a demonstration of sheep shearing by hand and get to bottle-feed a lamb.

The farm is open seven days a week, but advance booking is essential. Adults €15 and



Kidding around fun with goats on Cape Clear Island

children are free. Visit Atlantic Sheepdogs on Facebook or call 085 7402 836.

If being a shepherd doesn't sound like your thing, what about a little goat husbandry at Cleire Goats on Cape Clear Island in Co Cork? There, you can get to milk the nannies and learn how to breed these fascinating creatures. emara.com/goats/; discoverireland.ie/Arts-Culture-Heritage/cleire-goats/47370

"There's nothing better than being outside working, it's enjoyable. It doesn't matter if you're having a bad day or a good day with the dogs, you'll chat to them and have fun with them, they'll always put you in good humour. Then there's the competitive side, we're always trying to improve the dogs and work with them. Mainly it's just the enjoyment."

Jack and Feeney are part of the team that will represent Ireland at the International Sheepdog Trials in Lockerbie, Dumfriesshire, Scotland, from September 10 to 12. facebook.com/atlanticsheepdogs

Having a blast Gordon takes a while to get to grips with the dog whistle, while Jack, below, goes through his paces on Streedagh beach



ONE WOMAN AND HER DOG