

Eulogy for a cattle dog



BOBBY WHITESCARVER

Winter in Swoope. I walk along the banks of Middle River on our farm in search of treasure.

Dexter, our border collie, usually walks along with me, but he passed on and I sure miss him. Cold air seeps through the opening in my collar; the brown, frozen grass crunches under my feet. The water in the river is clear today — that's because there are no cows in it upstream.

Dexter was one of my heroes. If we could all be like him: fearless at work, tireless, always happy to see you, playful and a great companion. I told people he was worth 1.5 men and 2.0 husbands. In retrospect, I think he was worth far more than that. We live and work on a beef cattle farm with 120 brood cows and their babies — he was our right arm. I saw him swing from a bull's tail one time when he was asked to bring them in.

One of the famous Dexter stories is when Jeanne asked him to bring all six bulls in from the "front field." It was June 1, the day we put the bulls in with the cows. Dexter, Jeanne and I walked through the barnyard, through the field with the round pen in it to the gate at the southwestern corner of the front field. She opened the gate and we walked through.

It was early morning, the grass was wet with dew and knee high. Dexter was smiling. I think he would rather work cattle than eat or play. His eyes were on Jeanne, eagerly waiting for a command.

"On out," she said as she pointed to the bull furthest away.

All we could see was a small wave of green grass moving because the grass was taller than Dexter. The bull was at the other end of the field, and it



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On a beef cattle farm along the Middle River in Virginia, with 120 brood cows and their babies, working dog Dexter was a farmer's right arm.

was amazing to see this little wave of grass moving toward the big black bull just standing there over 100 yards away. It took several minutes for Dexter to arrive a few feet behind the bull. There he stopped and waited for another command.

"Walk up!" Jeanne shouted. I don't know how he heard her, but he did, and a few seconds later the little green wave burst toward the bull's hind legs. Our hero nipped the leg of a bull weighing at least a ton. The bull immediately began trotting towards the gate.

It was a sight to see; Dexter working side to side to bring all six bulls through the gate and into the barnyard. He was wet, tired and happy.

Never doubt that 65 pounds of fearless enthusiasm can move 2,000 pounds of testosterone.

He passed on Jan. 28, his heart was bigger than ours will ever be.

I move on alone along the river bank. There is always treasure to be found.

A snow goose forages along with the Canada geese in a neighbor's field. That's a rare sight around here.

Thorns on the hawthorn trees wait for

shrikes to return. The loggerhead shrike is the smallest bird of prey in North America. It uses thorns to impale its prey. Our native hawthorn is excellent habitat for them. We have not seen one in since 2012. It's a mystery as to why they are gone. No doubt it's anthropogenic.

I've noticed the resurgence of Virginia wild rye along the banks of the river. When the cows were in the river I never saw this native plant. Now it has come to help anchor the soil and please the eye. It's one of the few native "cool season" grasses.

Time to go feed the cows. I feel Dexter herding me towards the truck.

Whitescarver, who lives on upper Middle River in Virginia, is a retired field conservationist with 31 years of experience with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. He has been involved with almost 500 miles of stream bank protection work and helped landowners plant almost half a million trees.

See his blog at: gettingmoreonthe ground.com.