

## Chapter 3: Darwin's Cows



To Darwin, strangers are friends he hasn't met.

One day the two of us took a break from fossil hunting in a creek that wound through a DeSoto County, FL cattle ranch where I had permission to collect. I grabbed a purple rubber ball from my truck and tossed it. Darwin took off after it like it was his sole mission in life. Once he had it firmly between his jaws, my little man pranced back to me proud as can be. So I threw it again. And again and again.

It wasn't long before I noticed we were being watched by a small white calf in the saw palmetto shrubs.

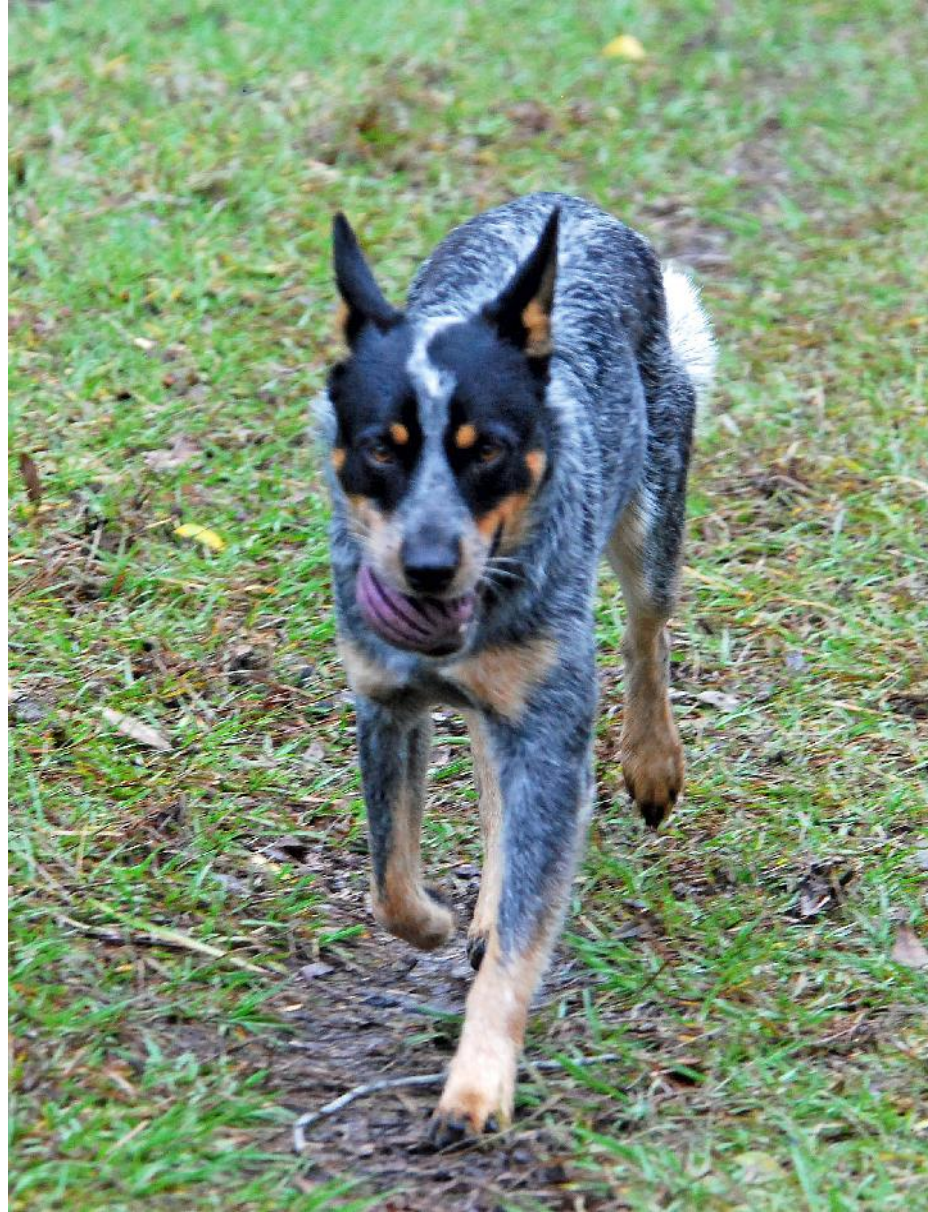


Naturally I was nervous, even though the calf only weighed about 100 pounds. My little pup was now 10 months old and beginning to replace his baby fat with muscle from playing a lot of frisbee fetch and ball. Darwin weighed 30 pounds and had yet to find himself in a situation where he had to really think and fend for himself. I had always been there...next to him or behind him, backing him up. Although he didn't look it, he was still very much a curious, innocent puppy.

Darwin noticed the calf too, but paid it no attention. He was focused 100 percent on the ball. Then a second calf showed, this one black. Still, Darwin paid no attention.

Nearby, I could see the rest of the herd with a couple of adults watching their young and Darwin attentively. I kept throwing the ball as the young calves slowly approached the spot where Darwin was retrieving the ball. I thought about intervening but knew I had to let go and test my darlin' Darwin's cross-species social skills. He was - in part - a cow herder. Did he know it? Did he care? Would those traits kick in automatically or were cattle dogs taught to herd? And how would the calves' moms react if Darwin was on the chase?

I sat back and watched, fingers crossed.



Focus, focus, focus!"



Finally the white calf spoke. "Hey stranger, whatcha doin'?"



"Playing ball!" replied Darwin excitedly.



"But I gotta run!"



Curious, the calves followed him over to where I was standing.  
"Do you wanna play too?" asked Darwin.



"Maybe..." said the black calf, staring at Darwin. "Um...We don't mean to be rude, but what are you?"



"I'm an Australian cattle dog," said Darwin. "What are you?"



"We're cows," replied the white calf.



"What do cows do?" asked Darwin.  
"We don't know yet. What do dogs do?"  
"I don't know either!"



"By the way, I'm Darwin, what's your name?"



"I'm Suki," replied the black cow.  
"Pleased to meet you Suki!"



"You don't look or smell like me, Darwin!"



"You don't taste like me either, Suki."



"Hey Suki, can you sit like this?"



"Or lie down like this?"



"C'mon, it's easy!"



"Just get your head real low to the ground and your body will follow!"



"And what's your name?"



"Delores, kind sir."



"Are you also a cow Delores?"



"Yes...and I don't think I've ever had the pleasure of meeting a dog!"



"Hey Darwin, wanna play a cow game?!"



"First, I dip my head like this..."



"Then I charge!!"



"Whoa! That was fun Delores!"



"Now what?"



"I don't know...it's the only game I know how to play!"



"C'mon Darwin...let's go eat some grass!"

## Lesson Time!

So what lessons were just learned by the calves, Darwin and me? For the calves and Darwin, it was the first time they met one of their kind. Their meeting was innocent because none of them had any preconceived notion about what a cow or dog is. Eventually, as they aged, they would figure it out. Darwin would tire of eating grass only and trying to learn how to moo. The calves would tire of rolling over, having a ball thrown at them or trying in vain to bark. They might also make the mistake of assuming the next dog or cow they met would be just as friendly and learn they were wrong the hard way. Of course, knowing a dog can nip or a calf can kick playfully, is good preparation for when it's done in a more serious and aggressive way.

I learned that Darwin was starting as an innocent. He seemed to have no genetic impulse to "herd" or hurt the calves. He was gentle and respectful. But how would he fare if confronted with a cow biggie or baddie? How long would it take for him to lose his innocence?

I would find out soon enough.



One day, Darwin meets a new stranger near the creek.



Only this bovine beast doesn't look as playful as the calves.



It gazes at Darwin as if to say, "I haven't intimidated an Australian cattle dog in at least a week."



Unfazed, Darwin faces the big rascal. I consider rescuing my little fearless one from certain death, but something about Darwin's confidence and body language tells me he knows what he's doing. And he's still being gentle. Is this part of Darwin's herding instinct, to face a cow, or more curiosity and playfulness?



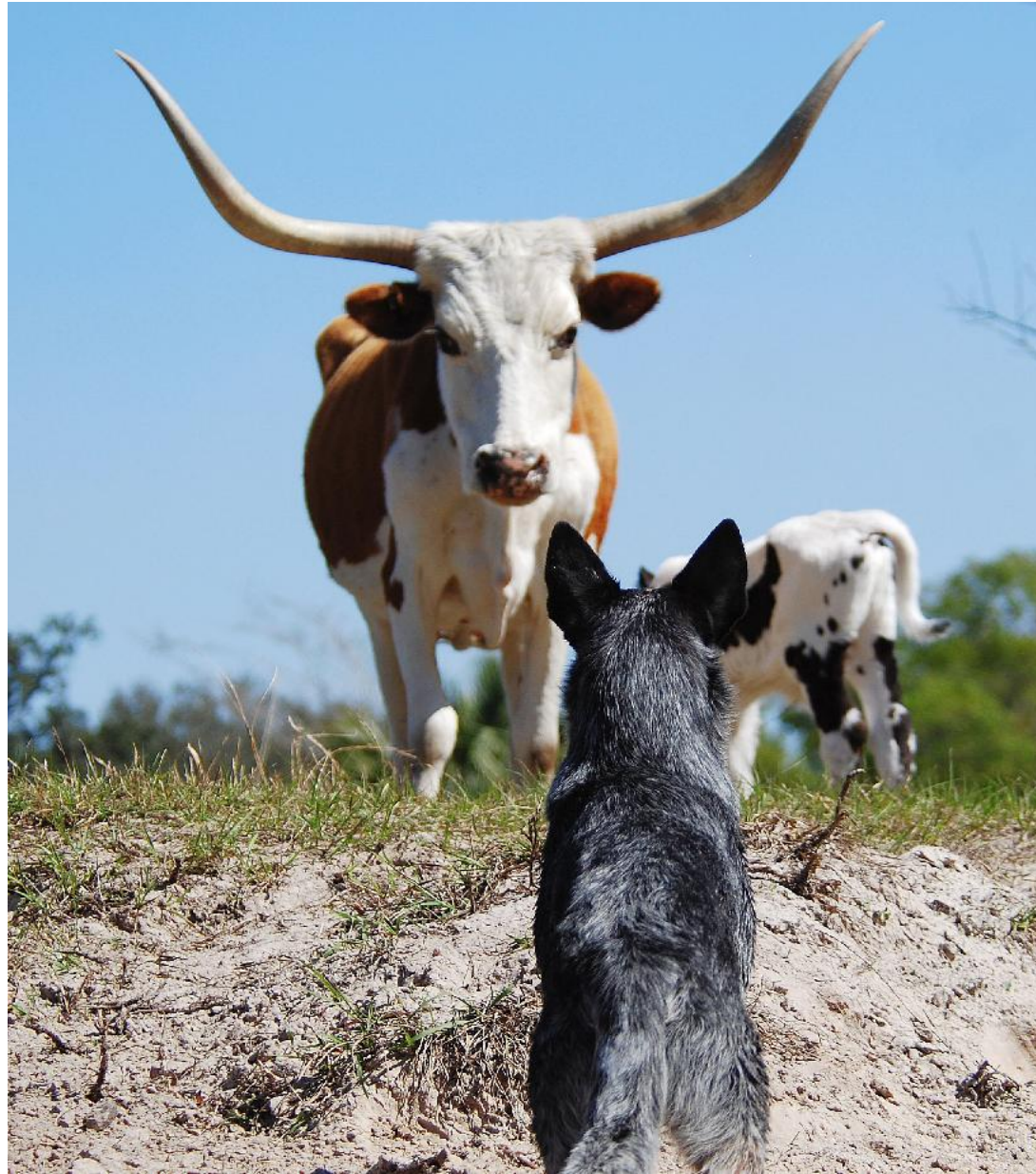
The beast dips its head preparing to charge...



and lunges at Darwin...who has played this game before and is a fast learner.  
The cow (a female with horns) saunters away defeated, sensing Darwin is not a threat anyway.



But the danger isn't over. While Darwin was busy with the cow, a bull with no horns approached. Perhaps Darwin sensed the bull's large amount of testosterone, because he immediately seemed more tense. This was as close as Darwin got. He allowed the bad boy to pass without a challenge.



But again, the danger wasn't over...



Darwin however, decided he'd had enough of cows and began to watch them from a safe distance.

My man was growing up!



It dawned on me that maybe one of the reasons dogs don't need to live as long as we humans is because they get the learning done before they're even a year old. I was over 30 years old before learning this same lesson.