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Get Wild: Crappy consequences of leaving pet poop behind

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Stasia Stockwell
Get Wild



Stasia Stockwell's dog, Maxwell, adventuring in Summit County. Dogs eat manufactured food that's full of extra nutrients, and those excess nutrients can wreak havoc on ecosystems when their poop is left behind.

Stasia Stockwell/Get Wild

Few things bring me more joy than spending time in the mountains with my best friend — a silly mutt and mostly black and tan coonhound/Labrador mix, named Maxwell. We explore local and far-flung trails together, spend nights in the mountains, and watch him splash in the Blue River nearly every day in the summer months. Wherever I go, he is almost always by my side, and when we're out on the trails and deep in the wilderness, I remember to be extra conscious of our impact on the environment.



Maxwell poops about three times daily; your dog is probably similar. When out adventuring with him, it may be tempting at times to leave it behind, cover it with dirt and rocks, bury it in the snow, or flick it off the trail. After all, wild animals poop too, right? And who wants to walk around carrying a steamy bag until reaching a trash can? But picking up after our four-legged friends is a simple thing we can all do to keep our home happier and healthier.

If dog poop were just like moose poop, then sure, we could probably leave it behind. But our pups don't forage on willow and aspen for sustenance, and that means there's a lot more in their poop than leaves and bark. Wild animals eat what's naturally occurring in their environment, which means the pellets they leave behind are composed of natural materials. Dogs, on the other hand, eat manufactured food that's full of extra nutrients, and those excess nutrients can wreak havoc on ecosystems.

Recent studies show that areas with heavy dog traffic have excess amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil due to feces left behind. These extra nutrients are abnormal in natural environments, and they affect the ecosystem in several ways. First, they encourage a small handful of plants to grow while killing off most others, causing a decline in biodiversity of local flora. And some of those plants lost to the nutrient-dense soil are food for wild animals. If these animals lose their food source, they'll be pushed out of the area.

If those extra nutrients from our pups' poop are absorbed into the soil, and that soil is near a water source — well, you can guess what happens. Extra nutrients seep into lakes and streams, affecting oxygen levels in the water and impacting fish and other aquatic species.

The cycle eventually comes full circle: The nutrient-rich waters are more likely to produce toxic algae blooms that can be harmful and even deadly to dogs, and can cause sickness in humans. Last summer, lakes along the Front Range and Western Slope experienced toxic algae blooms, forcing people and their pets to avoid any contact with the water. Cleaning up after our pets is one way we can help to keep this from happening in our local watersheds.

So next time you're on the trail with your pup, remember how important it is to carry that bag of poop out to dispose of properly. Not just because it's the law in Summit County, but because we've got a wonderful place to call home and the land deserves our respect and care. That also means leashing our pups when necessary — in wilderness areas like Eagles Nest or if your dog likes to wander off trail. It's easier to pick up poop if it's only a leash-length away. I'll never stop adventuring with Maxwell in the mountains, but I'll be thinking about the soil and the water and wildlife while we're out, always with a dog bag in hand to help keep our ecosystem happy.



Stasia Stockwell

Stasia Stockwell is a Breckenridge local and avid backcountry skier. A true mountain dweller, she feels n
Stasia writes primarily for the outdoor adventure realm, with the desire to connect readers from all bac
meaningful way

n the Alpine.
nature in a



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