

Get Wild: Dogs in the wilderness

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Frances Hartogh
Get Wild



Tyler Kanaval and his dog Kuma explore the wilderness.

Photo by Tom Copper

It's an incredible privilege to bring our canine companions into our local Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak wilderness areas, but what's their impact and how can we minimize it?

What is wilderness?

A 2019 survey of hikers in the Eagles Nest Wilderness revealed that most didn't realize they were in a wilderness area or know what wilderness is. The 1964 Wilderness Act defines wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Backyard wilderness

No dog lover wants to think their dog is hurting our beautiful wilderness. But with 100,000 people in Summit and Eagle counties, the Front Range's population of 3 million and tons of other visitors, the cumulative impact of daily and overnight use is taking its toll. One important regulation used by the U.S. Forest Service to limit impact requires that dogs be on a 6-foot, hand-held leash at all times in the Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak wilderness areas.

The Forest Service website reads, "Pets are required to be on a leash to protect wildlife, other visitor's experience and your privilege to have them with you."

Leashing your pup helps protect wildlife and plants, keeps streams and lakes clean, preserves others' wilderness experience and protects you and your dog — here's how.

Where's the wildlife?

Sad but true, dogs negatively impact wildlife. Studies show that people with dogs are more detrimental to wildlife than people without dogs, and off-leash dogs are far worse, especially those off trail. Dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) are a subspecies of wolves (*Canis lupus*), and wildlife perceive dogs as predators. Even if you don't see your dog chase wildlife, your dog's impacts include:

1. Displacement – The presence of dogs causes wildlife to move away, reducing available habitat to feed, breed and rest.
2. Stress – Even if your dog doesn't chase wildlife, wildlife is aware of your dog. Dogs, especially if unleashed, cause animals to stop routine activities, which increases the amount of energy used and reduces feeding opportunities. Repeated stress suppresses animals' immune systems, increases vulnerability to disease and parasites and reduces reproduction and growth.
3. Wildlife mortality – Unleashed dogs routinely kill or injure wildlife, and dogs can transmit diseases to and from wildlife.
4. Ecological harm – Off-leash dogs disperse seeds from invasive plants, which diminishes food for wildlife and harms delicate wilderness ecology.

The real scoop

It's a common misconception that dog waste is just like wildlife waste. In reality, dog poop presents a health hazard for wildlife, pollutes water, transmits parasites and diseases and contains excess nutrients that cause destructive algae blooms in our lakes.

Bag up waste and carry it with you. When backpacking, bury waste in a 6- to 8-inch hole that's at least 100 feet from water, or use a wag bag to dispose of canine and human waste.

On the other paw

Leashing your pup is in your dog's interest — and yours. A leash helps your pup from becoming lost and provides protection from moose, porcupines, mountain lions, bears and rabid or injured animals. It also protects you from attacks by disturbed wildlife. And of course there's the "hammer:" Failure to leash your dog can result in a stiff fine of up to \$5,000.

Leashing your dog helps ensure the wilderness experience for other users. And remember, before bringing your dog on overnight trips, be sure you are willing to comply with the leash rules 24/7.

Let's all do our part to help keep wilderness wild!



Frances Hartogh

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a board member and volunteer wilderness ranger for the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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