

Get Wild: Beware the great spring poop melt out!

Frances Hartogh



With melting snow comes revealed dog droppings.

Frances Hartogh/Get Wild

Hungry bears aren't the only hazard to watch out for during the period locals affectionately call mud season. There are other pitfalls on our trails, and (like a bear's appetite) they've had months to build up. Yep, we are talking about what our beloved dogs deposit in the snow — while we are looking at the sky, chatting with friends, focusing on our devices, catching some backcountry turns, or just pretending not to notice that tell-“tail” crouch.

These poop deposits build up over winter, leaving pitfalls as snow accumulates. And stepping or skiing — or worse yet, postholing (it happened to me) — into one of these stinky time bombs can spoil an otherwise lovely spring outing.

In a mixture of frustration and altruism, my partner and I recently headed up a favorite Eagles Nest Wilderness trail armed with shovels and large trash bags. After scooping doggy leftovers for an hour — while thinking less-than-charitable thoughts towards neglectful dog owners — our bags were already filled and reeking. Grrr.

But other than smelling foul and looking nasty, what's the issue with dog droppings? After all, they're natural, right? And don't wild animals poop, too? Actually, it's a misconception that dog waste is natural, like wildlife waste. If our pups noshed just on leaves and tree bark, then maybe, but their actual diet of manufactured food is chock-full of added nutrients, which produce poo that's toxic to our wild environment.

Pathogens in dog waste present a health hazard to defenseless wildlife. Added nutrients encourage the growth of invasive plants, which in turn crowd out native species on which wildlife depends. And those extra nutrients cause destructive algae blooms in our Alpine waters, choking out aquatic life and making the water undrinkable for dogs, humans and wildlife.

So, what to "doo"? First, don't be "that guy." You know, the one who "forgot" the poop bags (or only brought one), "didn't see" where their dog deposited or parked the filled bag along the trail "intending" to pick it up later.

Where off-leashing is allowed, leash your dog at least until she's done her business — after all, it's harder to ignore what's happening at leash length. Always keep your dog close enough that you can see what they're doing — and where. In areas of Summit County where off-leash is allowed, the law requires that your dog must be within 10 feet of you. And if you see "that guy," perhaps gently point out that they may have missed something. One positive interaction is to say "Hey, do you need a bag? You can have this one." It's yet another reason to always bring extra bags.

Many of our favorite local trails head directly into congressionally protected wilderness areas. Leashing your dog is required at all times in our three local wilderness areas — Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak and now in Holy Cross, where the leash rule was restored this year.

Consider using compostable bags — you can't throw poop-filled bags in your compost, but they'll break down more quickly when landfilled.

So, bag up that waste, tuck the bag into a protective zip-close bag, and carry it with you — a belt bag, small backpack, or (for larger pups) a backpack on your dog is perfectly suited. If we all do this, all winter long, then our "spring surprises" will be welcome events, like spying the first bluebird or pasqueflower, rather than plunging deep into poopageddon.

After all, our wondrous lands in Summit County deserve our care. And as we celebrate Earth Day this Saturday, let's remember that reducing our dogs' impacts is an important part of caring for our planet.





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Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo

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