

Get Wild: Sharing the winter wilderness with our pups

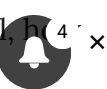
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Frances Hartogh
Get Wild



Pam Harper and her dog Piper walk along a trail.
Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance/Get Wild


What's better than crisp winter air and the feel of fresh snow under your skis or snowshoes on our local backcountry trails? Well, [4](#) x



- Start with short outings to see how your dog fares.
- Protect those paws: Ice balls can build up between your dog's pads — these are uncomfortable and can lead to frostbite. Icy snow can cut into pads. Booties anyone?
- Love post holing in deep snow? It's exhausting to plunge knee-deep with each step, especially at our higher elevation. Your pup's paws will sink into new or soft snow, expending a lot of energy. Keep an eye on your dog for signs of exhaustion.
- That fur coat may not be warm enough for our coldest days. Some pups need an insulating or moisture-protection layer for protection from hypothermia and frostbite.
- Leash your pup — for their safety and yours. In the Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak wilderness areas, home to most of our favorite local backcountry trails, federal regulations require leashing year-round: Pets are required to be on a leash to protect wildlife, other visitors' experience and your privilege to have them with you. Elsewhere in Summit County, check the rules — where leashing isn't specifically required, county regulations require keeping dogs within 10 feet and under control at all times.
- Keeping your dog close or leashed helps protect them from multiple hazards, including encounters with fast-moving skiers and boarders coming downhill in varying conditions where encountering a loose barking dog could result in a serious crash.

Why do veterinarians and wildlife experts stress the importance of leashing your dog, especially in the backcountry? A leash helps protect your dog from becoming lost, stuck in tree wells, straying onto avalanche terrain or falling through thin ice.

Leashing also provides protection from close encounters with moose, mountain lions, coyotes, porcupines and rabid or injured animals — and protects you from attacks by wildlife your dog might disturb and bring back to you. Winter is tough for our wildlife neighbors, who perceive your pup as a predator — or prey — causing them to expend precious calories that can make the difference between surviving to spring.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife [website says](#)  “Moose see dogs as predators and will attack aggressively” and owners should “Always keep your dog on a short leash and under control.” Even if your dog sticks to the trail, remember that wildlife also use those trails, since trail travel expends fewer calories than traveling through deep snow.

Failure to leash your dog can result in a stiff fine (up to \$5,000 in the Eagles Nest Wilderness). Our U.S. Forest Service rangers patrol year-round.

Speaking of leashes, owners are more likely to clean up after a leashed dog. Dog poop sickens wildlife and is a serious source of pollutants in streams and lakes — not to mention an unpleasant hazard to fellow outdoor users. So, clean up after your pet, stow that bag in a zip-close bag and carry it with you.

Haven't trained your dog not to pull on the leash? Check out the many free training tips online.

So the next time you head out to ski or snowshoe with your best furry friend, first check your safety list. If in a wilderness area, will you leash at all times? If outside a wilderness area, will you be willing and able to focus on your pet to ensure their safety? Check, check? Have a fantastic time!



Frances Hartogh

| Frances Hartogh is a volunteer wilderness ranger for the [Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance](#)[↗].

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