

Dogs and nature conservation

The increase in dogs being walked on nature reserves over recent years has raised concerns about the impact on wildlife, habitats and livestock. In this article we review the scientific evidence for the impact of dog walking on wildlife, as well as examples of problems encountered with dogs at Trust managed nature reserves.



TOM MARSHALL

Dogs are one of our best loved animals and have lived as pets with humans for thousands of years. Today millions of people own dogs and dog-walking is among the world's most popular outdoor activities, providing health benefits to both owners and their dogs. A recent report by Natural England revealed there are around 1.5 billion visits to the countryside with dogs. This may seem a very innocent past time but scientific research has shown that dog walking can actually have a significant and detrimental impact on wildlife.

As a Wildlife Trust, we recognise that there is a balance to be achieved between enjoyable dog walking and protecting wildlife. We also understand that dogs enrich people's lives (many of us are dog owners ourselves) but this also brings a level of responsibility and by understanding the impact dogs have on wildlife we hope that people can help us reduce that impact.

The numbers of dogs in the UK are increasing

According to the Pet Food Manufacturers Association there are now 8.5 million dogs in the UK compared to only 4.7 million in 1965. Unfortunately this also means an increase in the disturbance caused by dogs to wildlife and livestock.

The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust has long been concerned about the disturbance caused by dogs to nature conservation and prefers people to avoid bringing dogs to reserves. The Trust explains on its website that



Marker posts show where dog mess was found at Whisby Nature Park

dogs may be taken on short leads to parts of Gibraltar Point National Nature Reserve (although dogs are not permitted on the beach from 1 April to 1 September) Snipe Dales Country Park (not Snipe Dales Nature Reserve) and at Whisby Nature Park.

Sheep have been injured and killed by dogs on Trust nature reserves

Uncontrolled off-the-lead roaming dogs in particular have caused severe problems, not only disturbing wildlife but also attacking livestock. A recent spate of incidents at the Moor Farm Nature Reserve near Woodhall Spa involved roaming dogs attacking and killing sheep owned by the Trust that were grazing in the reserve.

Other Trust managed nature reserves have also seen dog attacks on livestock including at Whisby Nature Park, Crowle Moor NNR, Ancaster Valley, Willow Tree Fen and Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes NNR where sheep have been killed or injured by dogs.

When out walking, dogs and their owners should stay on the route that they are walking and not stray from it and dogs should be kept under control. The law makes it an offence for a dog to “be at large (that is to say not on a lead or otherwise under close control) in a field or enclosure in which there are sheep”.

Our sister Wildlife Trusts have been similarly affected by dogs. A particularly distressing incident involving a dog took place last summer in Essex on the nature reserve on Two Tree Island. A lone dog was seen on the lagoons, frantically rushing from nest to nest, killing the birds and chicks on the Island. For the 80 volunteers who had just taken part in the annual Avocet Watch, which protects the nests of the rare wading bird, this was devastating news.

Other unfortunate side effects of dog walking include dog mess, which is a hazard to children, and to staff and volunteers who mow footpaths. At Whisby Nature Park recently no less than 75 dog faeces were located in a mere 30 minute search along a 180 metre stretch of path next to the Moor Lane entrance, which has a dog waste bin at each end and also a fenced dog toilet area! People who bring dogs to nature reserves should always be prepared to pick up mess and take it home. Another cause for concern is that some children and adults have a fear of dogs and an encounter on a visit to a nature reserve may cause anxiety and panic.

The impact on both wildlife and livestock is one of the reasons that on the vast majority of Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust nature reserves, dogs are not allowed. Even though most dog walkers do behave responsibly the simple presence of a dog on a lead

may be enough to impact on wildlife, especially bird species where numbers can be severely reduced. This means that bird watchers and visitors to nature reserves may not see as many birds, detracting from their experience. The effect on endangered species is particularly worrying. Dog-walking may also affect the accuracy of wildlife surveys that are used to map bird distributions around the world.

The mere presence of a dog on a lead may be enough to impact on wildlife

In 2005 English Nature produced a comprehensive study of the impact of dogs on nature conservation, which found that amongst wildlife “dogs, especially those off a lead, stimulate a greater behavioural response than walkers” and also noted that “dogs flush incubating birds more than walkers without dogs, and dogs can kill well grown chicks”.

This correlates with a study produced in 2009 by the University of Hull for the Humber Nature Partnership, which revealed that dog walking caused significant disruption to water birds, with free roaming (off the lead) dogs causing more disruption than any other activity on the Humber coast except for low flying jet aircraft, which had the same category of severe disruption. The study noted that “the presence of free

Code of Conduct for Dog Walking

- | Please make sure you are allowed to walk a dog in the place you are visiting
- | Please keep your dog under close control at all times
- | Pick up after your dog and dispose of poo responsibly
- | Respect other visitors, especially those with children
- | Please do not allow your dog to jump up at other visitors
- | Please do not allow your dog or their lead to become entangled with other visitors
- | Please respect signs and requests from the nature reserve team



CHRIS SQUIRES

running dogs has significant negative correlations with the time a bird spends foraging for food”.

In 2007 an important study of woodland trails was produced by the University of New South Wales by Dr Peter Banks and Jessica Bryant, which showed that “dog walking caused a 41% reduction in the numbers of bird individuals detected and a 35% reduction in species richness compared with untreated controls.”

It has long been understood that human activity can disrupt wildlife but the study found that while humans walking alone induced some disturbance this was typically less than half that induced by dogs. In an interview Dr Peter Banks said “The key finding is that dog-walking certainly does have an impact on birds - and we were quite surprised by the magnitude of the impact.”

A further study conducted in New Zealand (Baudains and Lloyd, 2007) also confirmed that of all recreational activities that were monitored, dog walking caused the most disturbance to wildlife.

The presence of dogs creates anti-predatory responses in wildlife that may cause them to flee an area due to the perceived threat. On small nature reserves dogs can cause a 40% reduction in bird species across the whole reserve. However, further study is needed to understand how long birds are staying away. If they

are returning relatively quickly this is clearly better than the possibility they may stay away for long periods of time, or not even return at all.

Scientific research is essential in increasing understanding of the impact of dogs on wildlife

Inevitably the issue of dog walking in areas with wildlife is a difficult and controversial issue as many dog walkers are also nature lovers and certainly don't wish to cause any harm to the wildlife they enjoy but unfortunately this can often be the

case. Research like that conducted by English Nature, the Humber Nature Partnership and the University of New South Wales is essential in providing scientific evidence to help the general public and those working in conservation to understand the relationship between activities like dog walking and their impact on wildlife.

Written by Robert Enderby, Communications Assistant, with contributions from Dave Bromwich, Head of Reserves and Paul Learoyd, Chief Executive

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