

# Can't We All Just Get Along?

## Courteous Hiking with Your Dog on Public Lands

I've had the pleasure of hiking and backpacking with Australian Shepherds in Colorado's wilderness areas for almost 30 years. During that time, my dogs and I have encountered moose, deer, elk, porcupine, pika, bobcat, coyote, and a host of other critters. While those encounters have been interesting, it is by far more challenging to share the woods with a more curious and unpredictable species, homo sapiens.

The US Forest Service touts that our public lands are "Lands of Many Uses." That is especially true in the area of recreation. On any given summer weekend, hikers and their dogs may encounter a pack of mountain bikers careening down steep switchbacks and blind corners. Horse back riders plod along trails with steep drop-offs on either side, their mounts often ready to bolt or jump at unexpected noises or sudden appearances by our canine pals. Trail runners are "in a zone" and often don't even realize someone else may be sharing their running route.

After years of experience in the backcountry with all kinds of recreationalists, I've come to an absolutely amazing and unbelievable conclusion. A conclusion that, even now, I can't quite believe. Brace yourself.

Not everyone likes dogs.

It's true.

Now, I don't claim to understand these people. In fact, I often find myself fairly suspicious of the overall character of non-dog folks! But we all share the trails, campsites, parks, and national forests and it is definitely in the dog owner's best interest to learn to co-exist with everyone who enjoys the outdoors. Here in Larimer County, several of our newer "open space" areas have prohibited dogs. If we want to continue to enjoy the great outdoors with our pups, we need to get our collective acts together and learn how to be good citizens.

Where to start? Simple. You must train your dog. As Dr. Seuss would say:

"Train them gently on the trail. Train them in the wind and hail.  
Train them to stop on a dime. Train them to come every time.  
Train them sitting by your side. Train them even three dogs wide."

It is our responsibility to keep our dogs safe and politely share the backcountry with others, including those who don't like dogs. The worst thing we can do is let Bowser bound through the mud, jump up on a fellow hiker, while we scream "it's ok...he's friendly!!!" Bad form.

Understand that some people just don't want to be approached by any dog. Period. What's more, they have that right. Keep your dog under control and never assume folks are tickled to see your handsome boy frolicking in the forest.

With that knowledge, here are some other suggestions to help you get along with your fellow outdoor adventurers.

1. Scan ahead and look for hikers, bicyclists, and horses headed your way on the trail. Be proactive, move off the trail, sit/stay your dog, and let others pass. Don't worry about park signs indicating who has the right of way. Take the high road and move your pup off trail no matter who is coming. This will not

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only result in good will, but it will keep your dog safe from spooked equines and out-of-control mountain bikers.

2. Occasionally, check behind you to see who might be coming. Horseback riders and bicyclists can come up on you fast, surprising and startling both you and your dog. Again, be proactive, get off the trail and let them go through.
3. Be aware of blind turns on the trail. Listen for folks talking, horse hooves, or air-borne bicycles headed your way.
4. When meeting horseback riders, get to the downhill side of the trail, move at least 10 yards off if possible, and stay quiet and still. Horses are prey animals and startling them can lead to serious safety problems for everyone.
5. Clean up after your dog. On popular trails, the six feet on either side of the path gets ugly and stinky fast. It doesn't take a genius to know that the first 1/4 mile from the parking lot will have the most land mines dropped. Do your part and pick up.

Since following these guidelines, I have never had a negative encounter with other forest service users. Most people smile, compliment the well-behaved dog, and say "thanks" in return. All in all, it makes my day a whole lot better as well. Nothing can ruin a great day in the mountains faster than nasty exchanges with others. It can easily be avoided.

Now, let's move on to the controversial subject of off-leash hiking. First, look at the regulations of the area you are hiking. The more populated areas all require dogs on leash but many wilderness areas, forest service and BLM lands allow off leash hiking if a dog is under "voice control."

Again this comes back to personal responsibility and training your K9. Your dog should have an extremely reliable recall and you should be able to call him off of chasing wildlife. This takes a lot of hard work and continued practice. If you are not willing to put in that work, keep your dog on leash. If your dog cannot be called off wildlife or reliably come when called, keep her on leash.

If off leash hiking is a passion and regulations permit, here are some suggestions for finding a little solitude for you and your dog to roam.

1. Go very early in the morning when places are not as crowded. You'll be headed back for ice cream just as the parking lot fills up!
2. Choose areas that are lightly used. Usually this means trails not as convenient or close to town. The solitude and joy of seeing your dog explore and run unfettered is well worth it.
3. Hike off-season. Many very popular summer trails are totally deserted in the late fall, winter, or early spring.
4. Check the parking lot before choosing a hike. Avoid places crowded with vehicles.

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5. Understand the trade-offs for responsibly hiking with your dog off leash. You may give up the gorgeous alpine lake destination hike for a lesser known basic canyon hike without the whole babbling brook thing. For my Aussie and me, that's an easy call!
6. Finally, consider off trail hiking. Learn to use a map, compass, and GPS. Practice in areas you are familiar with before heading off-trail. Take a class in backcountry navigation. Become comfortable reading and navigating from topographic maps. Oh, the places you'll go!!!

Anyone who enjoys being in the backcountry with their puppy knows there is beauty, nourishment, and a sense of connection with our K9 pals that reaches deep and stirs the soul. Could I love or admire my dog any more than when he skillfully jumps a stream, bounds up rock outcroppings, or breezes through downed tree falls with athleticism that simply takes my breath away?

I feel his joy because he is being who he was meant to be. His nose is up, into the wind, picking up information about the natural world that I can only imagine. I give him this because it brings me great happiness to do so but I never forget the sense of responsibility to keep him, and other backcountry users safe.

Like it or not, what you do as dog owners reflects on all of us and the world gets more crowded every day. Being responsible and safe will help dog owners keep continued access to public lands. Make your adventure days fun, easy, and amicable.

See you on the trail!

Jill Reynolds

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She also hosts a radio show on KRFC 88.9 Fort Collins Public Radio called Critter Patter.