

Hiking with Fido

by Tom Grenell, D.V.M.

The plans have been set—you're going on a long-distance hike. Your equipment is ready, the food has been bought, and arrangements have been made for mail-drops. The car is auctioned off, the house is sold, and you quit your job. Everything seems to be progressing perfectly. But, what are you going to do with Fido?

More and more long-distance hikers are choosing to bring their Fidos along, for a variety of reasons. There is no more agreeable hiking partner than a friendly, healthy, well-behaved canine, and most dogs thoroughly enjoy the adventure. However, the Trail can be a rough place for dogs, and an experience that is supposed to be enjoyable can quickly become a disaster for both pet and owner. But, with some pretrip planning and a little knowledge and common sense, many potential problems can be avoided.

Behavior

Before bringing a dog on a hiking trip, please consider that you and your dog won't be the only ones on the Trail. The great majority of hikers are very receptive to having a friendly, well-behaved dog around. On the other hand, there is no place for an aggressive or uncooperative dog on the Trail. If a dog hasn't been trained to behave at home, don't expect that he/she will suddenly learn right from wrong on the Trail. Dogs that routinely ignore their owners' commands are best left at home.

Some dogs will enjoy staying cool underneath the shelters, while others will prefer to stay inside with their master. Most hikers don't mind if a (dry) dog stays in shelters, as long as it stays in one place and does not interfere with their possessions. If your dog has stayed in a shelter where a broom is available, make it a habit to sweep the floor before leaving.

If someone does object to your dog's being in or under the shelter, don't make a scene. Either tie the dog to a nearby tree or picnic table or set up your tent.

Wet dogs in shelters are almost guaranteed to cause problems, especially if they insist on taking a tour of the premises every five minutes. Special care and control must be exercised by dog owners in these situations.

Another potential trouble spot is mealtime. Begging for food is not usually appreciated, and stealing food is worse. Dog owners must be conscious of their pets' activities while other hikers are cooking or eating.

Age and sex suggestions

Long-distance treks can be rigorous and demanding for any dog, but dogs under 12 to 14 months of age can sustain damage to their bones and joints that might cause problems later in life. Likewise, older dogs with arthritis or other physical problems should not be taken on long hikes. Owners of younger or older dogs should follow their veterinarians' instructions while

planning a prolonged, strenuous Trail journey.

A female dog in heat on the Trail could present a problem, too. If the animal is not intended to be used for breeding purposes in the future, spaying prior to departure would be a good idea. An alternative is to use Ovaban tablets. If given at the proper time, Ovaban can be used to keep a female from going through a complete heat cycle. A minimal amount of risk is involved in using this medication, and it will only work if given at a specific time during the animal's reproductive cycle.

If possible, male dogs should be neutered before hitting the Trail. Intact males generally tend to roam more than neutered males, increasing the chances of encountering trouble with wildlife and, at certain times of the year, hunters. Intact males are also usually more aggressive toward other animals, especially other male dogs, and the Trail is not a good place for dog fights.

Hiking restrictions

Dog owners should realize that two areas of the Appalachian Trail are off-limits to dogs. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Baxter State Park, Maine, do not permit dogs inside their park boundaries. Kennel facilities are available in both places, although the cost is considerable in the case of the Smokies because the kennel is located several hours (round-trip) from the southern end of the park at Fontana Dam.

In addition, Shenandoah National Park has strict regulations concerning pets. The park requests that dogs be leashed at all times, a condition that creates a major hassle for a backpacker. A few wildlife-management areas along the Trail also have leash laws.

Towns

Hitching a ride into and out of towns can be a big problem with a dog. Pick-up trucks are your best bet. Ordinary citizens, and especially tourists, will gawk in amazement at a dog with a backpack, and they'll often comment on how cute it is. So, certainly they'd be glad to give you and the dog a ride back to the Trail, right? Not on your life.

Towns are dreamland for long-distance hikers, but, for hiking dogs, towns can be the most stressful part of their Trail experience. They usually are tied up while their owner runs around town, and, while they may be grateful for the rest, they resent the lack of freedom.

Rarely are dogs permitted inside hostels, hotels, or boarding houses, which creates a problem if the dog is not accustomed to being separated from its master. Being tied up alone in a strange place can be very upsetting to some dogs. If this is the case, time spent in towns should be kept to a minimum.

Dog packs

Most dogs will be required to carry their own supplies, so a dog pack is a necessity. Dogs adapt to these packs rapidly, but proper training is valuable. The empty pack should be strapped on at home a few times to allow the dog to become accustomed to it. A couple of practice hikes with some weight in the pack is recommended before undertaking a long trip.

Dogs in excellent physical condition can carry up to one-third of their body weight, while those that are in less than optimum shape should carry less. Care must be taken to get an equal amount of weight on each side of the pack. Place firm, inflexible items toward the outside of the pack so that they won't dig into the dog's body.

The pack must be big enough to hold provisions for a week or more, yet must also conform to the dog's body shape and size. Because packs are available in only a limited number of sizes, it may not be possible to find a perfect fit for your dog. The straps should be adjusted so that the pack fits snugly, but not so tight as to cause discomfort.

Ticks and Trail Dogs

Ticks are a potential nuisance to all who enjoy time in the great outdoors. Besides inflicting a bite that can provoke an intense irritation and possibly a localized infection, ticks can also transmit diseases, notably Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Lyme disease. Dogs are every bit as susceptible to these diseases as humans.

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is transmitted by several types of ticks, but primarily those of the genus *Dermacentor*. The causative organism, a rickettsia, has some bacterial and some viral characteristics. RMSF can be a problem in all but the most northern A.T. states, but Virginia and North Carolina are considered to be the most heavily affected states in the eastern United States. Symptoms of the disease in dogs are often vague, usually including fever, depression, anorexia, and generalized lymphadenopathy (enlarged lymph nodes). Diagnosis can be confirmed through blood tests, and treatment with tetracycline is very successful if administered in time.

Lyme disease (see *ATN*, March/April 1989) is caused by a type of bacteria called a spirochete, which is transmitted through the tiny deer tick *Ixodes dammini*. The disease is endemic in certain areas of the country, and the A.T. travels through a region of particularly high incidence in eastern New York and western Connecticut. Signs of Lyme disease in dogs are also vague, but fever and arthritis (the arthritis can become chronic and recurrent) are often seen. Diagnosis is made through blood-testing, and long-term antibiotic therapy is necessary to treat infected dogs.

Prevention is the key to avoiding these diseases, and this involves addressing the tick problem. In areas where ticks are common, dogs should be checked at least daily, and all ticks should be removed promptly to reduce the chances of disease transmission. Hikers can carry a product called Pro-Spot to help control these pests, but Pro-Spot should not be considered a sure-fire cure-all against ticks. When hiking through heavily infested tick areas for several days, having your dog bathed or dipped is advisable. If signs of illness occur, your dog should be taken to a clinic for veterinary evaluation and treatment.

—Tom Grenell

Despite all precautions, rub sores are still possible, especially under wet or muddy conditions. The areas most likely to be affected are under the chest and abdomen, where the straps are located, and over the shoulders and upper portions of the front legs, where there is a lot of movement.

If possible, a towel or piece of cloth should be placed between the pack and the sore area to prevent further trauma and promote healing. If the sores are not bothering the dog, no treatment is necessary, and they will become calloused and heal over. In other cases, an antibiotic and/or cortisone cream, such as IPanalog, may be of benefit.

Food

Just like two-legged hikers, because of the prolonged period of increased physical activity that a long-distance hike involves, our four-legged Trail buddies often have a problem maintaining their normal body weights. It is

not unusual to see thin thru-hiking or long-distance hiking dogs, and, although they are probably very healthy, these dogs are not a pretty sight.

Some people figure they can solve this problem by feeding a high-protein dog food. However, protein isn't the critical factor. Instead, the number of kilocalories is most important.

The numbers can vary greatly, but a typical 60-pound dog, under normal conditions, will probably require about 1,300 kilocalories of food each day. This same dog, carrying a 15-pound backpack for 15 miles in 70-degree temperatures, will burn 2,000 kilocalories or more in a day. If this caloric requirement is not met, the dog will begin to utilize its fat deposits and, eventually, its muscle tissue for energy. This results in weight loss.

There are two ways to meet this increased nutritional demand. The first is to simply feed an increased amount of a regular type of dog food. Unfortunately, fitting this amount of food

into a dog pack for a seven-day period would be prohibitively heavy and bulky. There is a better way.

I recommend a good-quality, highly digestible food formulated for hard-working dogs. My personal favorite is Science Diet Performance dog food, available through certain pet stores and veterinarians. This food contains 570 kilocalories per cup, meaning that the 60-pound dog in our example would need just 3% to 4 cups per day. This amount can be increased or decreased as needed, depending on whether the dog is gaining or losing weight over a period of time.

I generally prefer to feed dogs twice a day, but not on the Trail. Serious problems can result if dogs (especially large, deep-chested breeds) are fed and then exercised vigorously, so I like to feed them only in the evening. It is best to get into camp, let the dog relax for an hour or more, and then feed the entire amount all at once.

Water

Water is another crucial factor when traveling with a dog. When the weather is hot, or when we exercise a lot, our body responds by sweating, to keep our internal temperature as close to normal as possible. Dogs are different, though. Except on the bottoms of their foot pads, dogs do not have sweat glands. The only built-in mechanism available for dogs to cool themselves is panting, a relatively inefficient process.

Water can help. Under dry conditions in hot weather, both of my dogs had the capacity to carry two quarts of water, although they rarely had to carry that much. I carried as much of the water load as possible in the intense heat, to make things a bit easier on the dogs.

Dogs can pick up many of the water-borne parasites that affect us, including *Giardia*. However, I found this hazard impossible to guard against, so, unless a water source was obviously tainted, I didn't worry about it. Telling a thirsty dog that he/she can't drink from a particular water source is a little difficult for them to understand.

Dogs do not like the taste of chemically treated water, and many will refuse to drink it. Letting them drink whenever and wherever they want, within reason, usually will not cause serious problems. Water that would send us to a doctor for treatment will often cause just some minor gastrointestinal upset in our canine partners. However, if diarrhea persists for long,



Tom Grenell, with Champagne, left, and Alexis

get off the Trail and consult a veterinarian.

When dogs are near a popular water source, please be considerate of others. Dogs should always drink downstream from where the hikers obtain their water. If this is not possible, then fill up a pan or bowl with water, and let the dog drink from there. In areas where water sources are few and far between, give your dog as much time as needed to satisfy his/her thirst.

It is critical to remember the needs of your dog during periods of extreme heat and humidity. The animals will hike as far as their masters hike, regardless of environmental conditions. Take more rest breaks when it's hot. If necessary, take the afternoon off in a cool spot, preferably near water, and hike only during the morning and evening hours.

Heat stress damages capillaries in a variety of organs, notably the lungs, kidneys, liver, and gastrointestinal tract. If the body temperature stays too high for too long, the brain becomes involved, causing neurological deficits.

The symptoms to watch for in an overheated dog are prolonged, excessive panting and hyperventilation, severe lethargy, disorientation, and possibly seizures. The body temperature is often greater than 106 degrees, and the dog will soon become comatose if immediate action is not taken. The dog should be immersed in a stream or pond for a few minutes and then taken to a veterinarian as quickly as possible.

Usually, the damage caused by heat stress is irreversible, leading to death. Be careful.

Feet

Foot problems can ruin a backpacking trip for canine hikers. As every long-distance hiker will attest, the feet take a tremendous pounding over Trail miles littered with rocks and roots. Obviously, dog feet are just as affected by such rugged terrain, although some dogs are affected to a greater degree than others.

A dog's foot pads are composed of several layers of keratin, a toughened form of epidermal (skin) cells. Some pre-trip conditioning can reduce the risk of foot problems. I recommend spraying the pads once daily with a substance called Pad-Tough for three to four weeks before embarking on a long hike. This will promote keratin production, helping to toughen the pads.

Most foot problems occur over rough, rocky terrain, especially under damp conditions. Wetness tends to soften foot pads. However, another situation must also be considered for dogs. Road walks should be avoided during the hottest parts of sunny summer days. The heat from hot pavement can blister and even ulcerate the bottoms of a dog's feet. I learned this the hard way-by personal experience. If possible, have the dog walk along the side of the road, or better yet, try to schedule the road walks early in the morning or at night.

Once on the Trail, an owner can provide a minimal amount of help when a dog has developed foot problems. For minor cuts or pad sores, dog booties can be used. These booties can be

obtained through pet stores or veterinarians, but they are not really designed to withstand the type of abuse that a rocky trail deals out. I have little confidence in these boots, but, for a minor problem, they can be useful for a day or two.

A second, slightly better alternative involves patching the defect. The wound should be cleaned as well as possible (hydrogen peroxide is good, if available), then dried. Cut a piece of leather about the size and shape of the injury. Apply the patch over the wound using Nexaband, a surgical acrylic glue. The patch does not need to be removed, as it will eventually wear off. Again, this procedure, written about by Ruth B. James, D.V.M. in the June 1986 edition of *Veterinary Medicine* magazine, is advised only for relatively minor foot wounds.

For major foot problems, such as deep lacerations, ulcerated pads, or two or more injured feet, there is only one proper solution: The dog needs to be taken off the Trail and rested, with appropriate veterinary care being provided as necessary. Most of us realize how painful a heel or toe blister can become. Imagine how much worse it would be if that injury were on the bottom of your foot and you had to put full weight on it every step of the way. Then imagine the same scenario in bare feet. It wouldn't be a lot of fun for you, and it isn't pleasant for a dog, either.

Wild animals

Wild animals are a potential hazard to hiking dogs. Be sure that your dog is current on rabies and distemper vaccinations before venturing out into the wilds.

Skunks and porcupines can be pests in certain areas, especially around shelters and campsites. Keeping your dog tied while in camp, or inside your tent, can help alleviate potential disaster.

If your dog gets blasted by a skunk, you will not be a popular camper for a while. Probably the best treatment for a skunked dog is Tegrin shampoo, used many times in succession. Best of luck.

Porcupines in New England present another unique problem. If a dog is quilled, he needs prompt veterinary treatment. It would be wise to carry some Acepromazine tablets (a mild tranquilizer) when traveling through porcupine territory. If the dog will let you, after tranquilization, try to pull the quills out with a pair of pliers or whatever tool is available. If this is not possible, get the dog professional help.



Clockwise, beginning above, are "Rhode Island Red" and his dog, Ozark; Vicky Stephens and Daigo; Daryl Binney's Janson, greeting southbounder Jeff and his dog, Bear; and Clown, who travels with Daniel Bernstein.



Prevent the dog from rubbing the affected area, as this will push the quills in deeper.

No matter what, *do not* cut the quills. When cut, the barbed portion of the quills imbedded under the skin will swell, making removal extremely difficult. The veterinarian will likely anesthetize the dog, remove the quills, and put him/her on antibiotics and maybe something for pain and/or tissue edema.

Other animals, such as raccoons, woodchucks, and beavers, can inflict serious damage on a dog. Prevention is the best solution. Keeping the dog in sight and under control at all times will

go a long way toward averting disastrous confrontations with wildlife.

Another consideration is poisonous snakes, more of a threat to dogs than to humans. Dogs that wander off the Trail are particularly vulnerable. Snake bites can be a medical emergency for dogs, depending on the location of the bite, the amount of venom injected, and the size of the dog. The affected body part will swell tremendously, and the dog can lapse into a coma in just a short period of time. Veterinary attention will be required as soon as possible if these snakebite victims are to have any chance of surviving.

In many snakebite cases, however,

dogs seem to be less sensitive to the direct effects of the venom than humans. Still, medical attention is strongly advised. The venom and the swelling both can cause severe damage to the local area around the bite wound, resulting in skin sloughing and other possible undesirable results. Also, the bite wound is a puncture wound, so infection is a very real possibility. A quick trip to the veterinarian can dramatically improve the dog's chances for an uneventful recovery. The veterinarian may also recommend resting the dog for a few days.

Other dogs

When the Appalachian Trail follows country roads, it is common to encounter local dogs along the route. It was my experience that, while these dogs were sometimes a nuisance, they were rarely a serious threat to myself or to my dogs. I found that most of them were less of a problem to me than they were to other hikers, partly because I had dogs with me.

When faced with this situation, it is entirely to your benefit to keep your dog under control on a leash. Should a local dog come too close or seem too aggressive, picking up a stick or throw-

ing a rock in its general direction is usually pretty effective.

If your dog does get involved with one of the locals, do everything possible to separate the dogs without getting your hands into the middle of things. Once separated, leave the vicinity as quickly as possible, then seek veterinary medical attention if needed. Realize that bite wounds, whether from a dog fight or from a scrap with a wild creature, are often much worse underneath the skin than they appear from the surface.

Heartworms

Most dog owners in the eastern and southern portions of the United States have heard of heartworms. Much of the Appalachian Trail is located where heartworms are a problem. Dogs that have been found to be negative on a heartworm test should be on a heartworm preventative while traveling along the A.T.

Several different types of preventative are available, but the most convenient form for long-distance hiking is Heartgard, which is given just once a month. Ask your veterinarian about heartworms if you are planning to hike with your dog on the A.T.

Conclusion

Traveling with your dog on a long backpacking excursion can be rewarding for both owner and beast. However, anyone embarking on such a trip must understand that a lot of responsibility is involved. A long-distance hike can be just as exhausting for dogs as it is for people.

The quality of the experience for the dog is often in direct proportion to the care and preparation provided by the owner. Nobody heads out to the Trail with the idea of abusing his pet, but sometimes things can turn a bit sour. being ready for a variety of situations and using a little common sense can go a long way toward ensuring a safe and healthy journey for your Fido.

Veterinarian Tom Grenell thru-hiked the Trail in 1988 with Alexis, a seven-year-old mixed-breed Labrador Retriever who hiked 800 miles, and Champagne, a three-year-old Labrador who logged 1,600 Trail miles. The trio's nickname was "Toto and the Dorothies."

Dr. Grenell is willing to answer questions regarding canine care on the Trail. Write (please do not call) him at: Roanoke Animal Hospital, 824 Weldon Rd., Roanoke Rapids, N.C. 27870.