



Do Not Disturb... Walk Your Dog In Harmony With Nature

Britain is officially a nation of dog lovers, and Cornwall is a dog walker's paradise, with amazing wild places for dogs and owners to explore. Since the start of the pandemic, dog ownership has boomed. For some, canine company has been a lifesaver in combating lockdown loneliness. Dogs can be a human's best friend, regarded as part of the family and much loved but... beware the inner WOLF! Your pooch will act on instinct, could act out of character when excited, and in worse case scenarios cause damage and death to wildlife.

Whether you are a seasoned dog owner, or new to pet parenthood, walking in harmony with nature will give you, your dog and wildlife a more relaxing experience.

If you are thinking about getting a dog, whatever breed you go for, exercise is essential. So what options are there on your doorstep?

Off-leash dog parks and paddocks dotted around Cornwall provide areas to walk safely, with no concerns of livestock stampeding or dangerous cliff edges to contend with. The worry of disturbing wildlife is greatly reduced and your dog is within a contained space, so recall is easier. Think Fenton the dog in Richmond Park. If you know, you know. If you don't know, Google it. Don't be that guy!

The Cornish coastline also provides off-lead opportunities with wide open sandy beaches. Low tide is the best time to let your dog run free. Keep an eye out for wading birds and areas where seals are present. Seals haul out for a reason; usually to rest, digest and metabolise properly. Disturbance has a big impact on their well-being and survival. From September until December, mums will leave pups in secluded coves whilst they feed. Pups are fine being left, but if disturbed will panic and be in danger of separation from their returning mothers. Earlier this year, a young seal nicknamed affectionately by

locals as Freddie Mercury, was attacked by a dog whilst basking along the Thames Path in London. Sadly, Freddie was put down because of his injuries. Wildlife can pop up anytime, anywhere, so stay vigilant whilst your dog is off-lead.

Ruth Williams, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Marine Conservation Manager has some additional advice for dog owners on beach walks.

"We have seen an increase in the number of people reporting unidentified white blobby masses or lumps washed up on the shore. Sometimes these can be small like hailstones, or much larger masses that have a waxy appearance. This is palm oil from shipping containers and is dangerous for dogs to ingest, along with other washed up polluted debris."

Cornwall also has a high number of marine strandings. If you come across a dead or live animal, keep your dog well away. Carcasses may contain dangerous pathogens or infectious diseases, which you and your dog should avoid. Live animals will already be distressed so keep a respectful distance. You can call for help via the Marine Strandings hotline on 0345 201 2626."



Penhale nature reserve, looking at wild flowers



Little egret, River Gannel



Skylark



Breney pond

Moving away from the beach into the dunes and surrounding areas you'll be doing wildlife a big favour if you keep your dog on a lead. Birds bothered off nests soon become exhausted, but disturbance doesn't just mean big flocks of birds 'flushed' off, flying away to escape a perceived threat. Disturbance can be 'invisible' too, when causing stress to an animal and increasing its heart rate.

Keeping dogs on leads also applies along estuaries. If these habitats remain undisturbed, it's of great benefit to passage (migrating) birds such as waders.

Coming inland, you may choose to dog walk through one of the Trust's nature reserves. In spring and summer, please be aware of ground nesting birds. Sites like Churchtown Farm have designated areas for ground nesters like skylarks, whose populations are dwindling. Pay attention to the signage on nature reserves and follow instructions. Wildlife is vulnerable but so is ground flora; dogs running freely contribute to trampling precious plant life and loss of species like bluebells, which can take years to recover.

One nature reserve which is a complete dog free zone with minimal disturbance from any source is Looe Island. To end on a happy tale (full on wagging tail!) Looe Island has increased the numbers of nesting Oystercatcher pairs, from just ten in 2013 to 21 pairs in 2017/2018. We believe it's due to an overall reduction in disturbance and footfall. With so few people and no dogs on the island, birds now often nest right on the main path.

It's fair to assume that these birds are comfortable and living their best Looe Island lives! It's a great success story of how wildlife can flourish when given space and left in relative peace.

So, wherever you choose to walk with your dog in Cornwall be mindful of your surroundings. Walk in step with wildlife, do not disturb and enjoy your walk!



Dog owners' wildlife awareness campaign

#taketheleadcwt

To help protect our more vulnerable flora and fauna, Cornwall Wildlife Trust is trialling a new initiative in the Perranporth area with site-specific information boards (featuring our angelic pup logo!) highlighting the potential dangers posed to our more elusive wildlife from free-roaming dogs.

As a fun way to raise awareness of the importance of responsible dog ownership at nature sensitive sites, we've also created a special beech wood 'halo disc' that can be attached to a collar or lead to show your support for the campaign – and we have 500 of them to give away to our readers!

Claim your free halo disc, by emailing: supportercare@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk

If you're one of our lucky winners, please be sure to share some pics of your perfectly behaved pooch on our social media thread #taketheleadcwt.

Be aware and show you care!



500 FREE collar discs up for grabs!

ALL PHOTOS: DAVE THOMAS