

You and Your Dog: Keeping Toronto's natural areas safe for wildlife

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Toronto's extensive parklands provide recreation and relaxation for people with a wide range of interests. Our parks also include special places with natural habitats and wildlife where city-dwellers can cultivate a personal connection with nature. These areas support a remarkable biodiversity, including vulnerable species such as wood duck, wood thrush, wild lupine and Blanding's turtle.

We are very fortunate to have such rich natural areas in the midst of our city, and that is why reasonable rules are in place to preserve them for future generations.

This is especially important in parklands identified as Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) because they contain extensive natural habitat, rare species, special landforms, and/or habitat for migratory species.

Toronto's *Dogs Off-Leash Policy* aims to balance the needs and interests of the community and the natural environment. Our parks include more than 70 designated off-leash areas where dogs can exercise and play off leash. Responsible park users, including those with dogs, can help protect vulnerable flora and fauna in our natural areas by always staying on designated paths and observing park rules.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: My dog is well behaved and never chases birds, so why can't he exercise freely in a park?

A: All wildlife perceive dogs as predators. Encounters with dogs can stress wildlife and cause them to spend less time feeding or move away to less suitable habitat.

Q: Why is it so important for both me and my dog to stay on the trail?

A: In addition to disturbing wildlife, dogs can damage habitat by digging, trampling vegetation, compacting soil and leaving urine and feces that slow the growth of young trees and ground plants. They also pick up seeds and burrs in their fur that can spread invasive plants.

Q: Can my dog be off leash when there are no wildlife around?

A: Just because you don't see wildlife doesn't mean they are not present. For example, there may be snakes in the ground-cover, or young birds in nests out of sight.



Reptiles such as DeKay's brownsnake may be feeding out of sight in the ground-cover



Thrushes feed on the ground. If disturbed, they may feed less or move to less suitable areas.

Q: Why can't I let my dog run free when no one else is in the park? I see very few people early in the morning or late in the evening.

A: Even if people are not around, the wildlife are still at risk. In fact, many species are most active during the early morning hours, while others hunt, forage or travel at night. In the low light it can also be harder to keep track of your dog.

Q. Why single out dogs? What about people whose activities may disturb natural areas, such as off-road cyclists, foragers and hikers?

A. All park users need to respect park rules and be aware of how their activities can harm wildlife and habitat. As a dog owner, you can make a big difference by observing the rules and setting a good example for others.

Q: Surely just one dog off leash is OK.

A: The impacts are cumulative. Through the day there are likely many dogs running off leash. And one dog off leash leads other people to believe it is acceptable for them to do the same.

Q. As a taxpayer and citizen of Toronto, don't I have a right to use the city's parks and natural areas freely?

A: Yes, as long as you act responsibly and respect park rules. Our parks provide recreation and relaxation for people with a variety of interests – as well as a healthy and safe habitat for wildlife. We are all enriched by living in a city that still retains some of its natural heritage.



Dog fur can pick up burrs and seeds and spread invasive plants like garlic mustard.

Q: My dog needs to run free to stay healthy and the off-leash area is not as attractive and is far too crowded.

A: You and your dog are welcome in the park, walking or running, as long as she is on leash and you both stay on the paths. If your dog goes off the trail, she may encounter hazards such as holes and sharp objects, or plants that are toxic or irritating. Contact with wildlife can also result in the spread of canine distemper virus, black-legged ticks carrying Lyme disease or gastro-intestinal parasites.

Q: Why are dogs a problem for birds? Can't they just fly away?

A: Many birds such as thrushes feed on the ground. Others such as killdeers and meadowlarks build nests, incubate eggs, and hatch chicks on the ground. Many ducks and other waterfowl feed and breed along the shoreline. If these birds are disturbed, they may feed less or even abandon their nests. Young hatchlings and birds passing through on migration can be especially vulnerable.

Thank you for taking the time to learn how you and your dog can enjoy Toronto's parks in a way that helps protect wildlife and their habitats.

Q: Don't wildlife living in Toronto learn to adapt to disturbance by people and dogs?

A. Wildlife use their survival instincts to seek out suitable places to live. Most species remaining in our city have already made significant adaptations to human disturbances and habitat loss. With all these challenges, daily encounters with off-leash dogs may be the last straw, causing wildlife populations to decline or disappear altogether.

Q: Why can't my dog cool off by swimming in a pond or creek in a natural area?

A: This disturbs the delicate shoreline edge vegetation and aquatic wildlife. Waterfowl and shorebirds are particularly vulnerable when they are migrating, nesting, raising young or molting. Keeping out of the water is also safer for your dog -- hazardous waste runoff and bacteria can cause infections, and stomach and bowel problems.

Q: What are the rules about keeping my dog on leash?

A: The City of Toronto says dogs must be on leash in public places unless otherwise posted. This is especially important in Environmentally Significant Areas. The fine for having a dog off leash is currently \$240.



Ducklings need a safe access route to the shoreline.

For more information:

City of Toronto website toronto.ca

- [Dog Off-Leash Areas](#) and [Off-Leash Locations](#)
- [Dogs in the City](#)
- [Code of Conduct for Off Leash Area](#)
- [Fines for breaking animal bylaws](#)
- [Environmentally Significant Areas](#)

High Park Nature website highparknature.org

- [Off Leash Dog Dangers: Protecting your dog and the natural environment](#), by Dr. Kate Zimmerman, DVM, 2013
- [Dog-Walking in High Park](#)

ProtectNatureTO website ProtectNatureTO.org

- [Impacts of dogs on wildlife: Excerpts from Recent Research & Reviews](#)