

OUT JUST A-WALKIN' THE DOG

by Lee Netzler

The first time I took my new Scottie puppy for a walk, it seemed a very natural and simple thing to do. Now, after having done thousands of "dog walks," although it still feels natural, I know that doing it right isn't as simple as it looks.

I can think back and remember many times when, through my ignorance, I exposed my dogs to danger. For instance, I didn't realize that letting my dog explore prairie dog (or other varmint) holes without restraint exposed it to mites, fleas and other parasites, and could even bring it into contact with deadly bubonic plague bacteria. Another time, while hiking, I briefly allowed my dog to trot out of sight and it began wandering alone down a very narrow section of trail where the sheer drop-off was measured in hundreds of feet. In another hiking situation, I let the dog out of my sight for a few seconds and it came face-to-face with a young marmot—a harmless creature, but the encounter could easily have been with a more dangerous animal. And, in my most idle-minded moment, I let my off-lead dog get beyond voice control where it strayed well within the striking distance of a coiled rattlesnake—not once, but twice!

I confess at one time or another as I was learning I made nearly every mistake possible. And while I have been lucky enough to escape the kinds of disasters my ignorance deserved, I am left with a reverent appreciation of my good fortune and a firm determination NOT to rely on dumb luck whenever I can do better. And, for the sake of our dogs, I would like to help other dog-walkers, like you, to avoid similar mistakes.

My advice can be summarized in one statement: A responsible person out for a dog-walk always keeps 2 things in mind—safety and health. Safety is the first concern, and it includes both the safety of your dog and the safety of others who may come in contact with your dog. Concern for health is equally important, and likewise, it includes the health of your dog, other animals, other people, and not surprisingly, your own health.

The dangers are many—from dog bites (given or received), bites from other creatures, injuries from sharp objects or falls, exposure to heat exhaustion, to freezing, or to drowning, contact with poisons, parasites, giardia, rabies, harmful organisms—and on and on. You may wonder how in the world we could ever take our dogs for a walk and be prepared for every possible threat. And while it's true that we can't prepare for everything, we can be prepared for almost everything by following a few guidelines that apply whether we are taking a walk around the block, in a park, along a beach, or hiking through a desert, a forest or a remote wilderness area.

First of all, your dog should carry identification. The most common heartbreak for dog owners is a lost dog. Don't let it happen to you. As a minimum, your dog needs a secure collar with identification tags firmly attached.

The second guideline: Keep your dog under control. Limiting how much your dog is able to become involved with activities or with the environment gives you substantial control over any risks which are present. The best method of control is to keep the dog on a leash. The standard 6 foot "training" lead is an excellent choice and works well everywhere. Longer leads or retractable

leads may also do the job in less confined areas while allowing more freedom of movement. The ability of the handler to be able to effectively control the dog and to protect it from an unexpected danger should determine the length of the lead.

In my opinion, If you intend to let your dog off lead, it must always obey, regardless of distractions, at least these two commands:

1. "WAIT." A verbal command for the dog to stop in place and to remain there motionless until the handler goes to the dog, and grasps the collar.
2. "COME." A verbal command for the dog to return immediately to the handler and to permit the handler to grasp the collar.

The "WAIT" command could have made the difference between life and death when my dog encountered the rattlesnake. It could also mean the difference for your dog when it is about to run into a street. The "COME" command can bring your dog back to you faster than you can go to your dog. And it provides the means to quickly reattach the lead when circumstances change and trouble suddenly threatens. If your dog is not trained to respond, without fail, to these two commands, keep it on lead.

Years ago the paperboy, who had previously played with my dog many many times, reached inside our unlocked screen door and was promptly bitten on the finger. When I think about how that seemingly harmless unlocked screen door at home, which was such a small loss of control, resulted in a dog bite, it makes me consider all the more seriously how a loss of control in a public place is magnified and could be so much more critical.

The third guideline is to know the rules of the area where you are walking. By doing so, you will have an idea of what situations to expect and can plan to be ready for those situations. Most cities, for example, require a dog to wear a dog license tag, a proof of rabies vaccination tag, and to be kept on a 6 foot leash. Seeing a loose dog in a city, especially one without a collar and tags, usually means that it is NOT under control and it could pose a threat to you or your dog. Beware and be ready.

In some places, such as county Open Space areas, dogs are permitted to be off lead. While you may not choose to let your dog off lead, it is important for you to know that you may encounter other unrestrained dogs who may be aggressive, or who may provoke your dog to react and become physically "protective." In locations where dogs are used for hunting, for example, you are nearly certain to encounter other dogs who are large, nosy, and almost always running free. Expect them to fearlessly trot right up to you and to start sniffing at your dog. Know the rules before you start walking in an area so that you can either prepare yourself and your dog accordingly or else avoid the area.

Yield the path to others—the fourth guideline. While this may seem to be good manners, and it is, it is also an effective way to avoid unpredictable situations which are potentially explosive. If your dog has never met a llama on the trail, standing too close as it passes by could produce surprises that you, the dog, the llama and the llama's owner never expected and wished afterward had never happened.

Don't give the unexpected an opportunity to happen. I have seen a dog who was raised with horses suddenly yip and snap when he met an unfamiliar mare on the trail. The kick and buck which followed were a real surprise to everyone, and although the incident ended without harm, it could have ended with serious consequences and sad regrets.

So, get out of the way and give plenty of room to that friendly looking pooch coming down the sidewalk toward you and your dog. Otherwise you may be surprised to discover that it snaps and bites at other dogs that are big or little or white or brown or black or tall or skinny or long-haired or whatever. And don't ever believe the owner who says "Oh, my dog would never bite." Believe me, in the right circumstance, it will. Why would you want to earn a place among the many thousands who have already proved that statement false?

Guideline number five: Pick up after your dog. Yes, that's right—pick up after your dog! Not only is this good manners, it is a health issue. I really don't want my dog nosing some other dog's droppings. I don't want to risk the potential infection and sickness that may be present there, either for the sake of my dog's health or my own, or to have to endure the sufferings that illnesses cause, or to pay for the veterinary or doctor bills to treat them. I don't think you do either, so do us all a favor and pick up after your dog.

That brings us to the last guideline—protect our access to public places. If you create a mess and don't clean it up, or your dog is threatening or aggressive toward someone, or you are involved in a dog bite or a dog fight incident, you are jeopardizing our future access to public places. It is virtually impossible, for example, to enforce park ordinances which require owners to pick up after their dogs, but it is easy (and much more effective) to simply ban dogs from the parks. If you look around, you'll see countless examples where dogs have been banned forever. Let's save what's left by our good manners, our good examples and especially by our good dogs.

I hope you enjoy your dog walks as much as I do. Any day that I can enjoy a pleasant walk with my Scottie is a good day for me. Follow these guidelines, and if by chance we should meet someday on the sidewalk or the trail, I know that it will be a good day for both of us.