

Trail and Wilderness First Aid Tips for you and your dog!

South West Montana boasts some of the best back country trails in the nation for hikers and their dogs. Besides this being mentioned in numerous magazines, I have personally lived, hiked and worked with my dogs in five different mountain ranges, this is by far the best!

One of the main differences that makes SW Montana trails unique is the fact that they are all 'multi' use trails, meaning you will see backpackers, fishermen, horse packers, bikers and hikers with off leash dogs. With such diverse activity on any given trail it is important for you and your dog to be responsible and polite trail users, so everyone can have a great back country experience.

When hiking with an off leash dog it is important to remember that back country trails are not dog parks, your dog should not be blasting around the trail, chasing wild life, barking at horses or bikers, or running into other hikers space. It is the owner's responsibility to teach their dog, long before they ever hit the trail, what their job is going to be while in the back country.

Calm in the car is the first step, if you don't have calm before you start, you most certainly aren't going to get it once the car door opens. This should be practiced at home and then at the trail head. The second is taking the time to teach your dog directionals; go right, go left, go behind, back and hold. This gives you a great opportunity to get your dog into a space so other trail users can pass (right of way), or to give your dog enough space so they don't feel pressured. The third step is creating an interactive hike. Pick up a stick at the trail head and use this to play fetch with your dog while hiking, not just any fetch, but 'trail fetch'. Throw the stick behind you down the trail as you are walking so you send your dog behind you so your dog works on catching up. When on a trail with an off leash dog it is never good to send them ahead, as you don't know who might be coming down the trail, that's why 'trail fetch' works so well, you are in front and can monitor the trail for you and your dog. The fourth step, well if your dog does not have a good recall yet, or has pretty high prey drive and chases small animals, it is best to have your dog on a long line to start, on a low volume off the beaten path type of trail. Work up to your goal of off leash hiking, but do this at your dogs pace with good training while at home.

SW Montana trails can be miles and/or hours from the nearest town, so it is recommended that hikers with dogs carry some essential items for safety and well being. A small pack can hold water, energy snacks for you, good nutritious snacks for your dog, weather gear and hat, a long line to use during more distracting sections of your hike, and a baggy with first aid items. Should something go terribly wrong on the trail, I do not recommend doing triage in the back country, you just need to have the essential first aid items to stabilize and get you and your dog out to your car. Your first aid baggy should include; 1 roll of Vet Wrap or COVEX, 3-4 Benedryl, 2 large padded band aids with self adhesive sides, and a bandana. Check with your veterinarian on what dose of Benadryl would be appropriate for your size dog (this is super handy when honey bees and wasps come out to play!) I have found that vet wrap has 101 uses in the back country, most commonly for cut or ripped pads from scree filled trails. Protecting your dog's pads is essential to them being able to walk out with you, because it is not easy carrying a 75 lb. dog.

Enjoy all that Montana's trails have to offer, but please remember to train at home with your dog, always be polite on trails and have your dog with you, give the right of way to anything bigger, faster or louder, be prepared with a well stocked day pack... and make sure to take lots of photos!

Nancy Tanner is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer and owner of Paws & People, LLC in Bozeman Montana. When she is not working with her puppy clients she can be found happily hiking away in the back country with her four dogs, Franny, Ocean, Story and \$eeker. Her information can be found at www.pawsandpeople.com or 406-522-1558