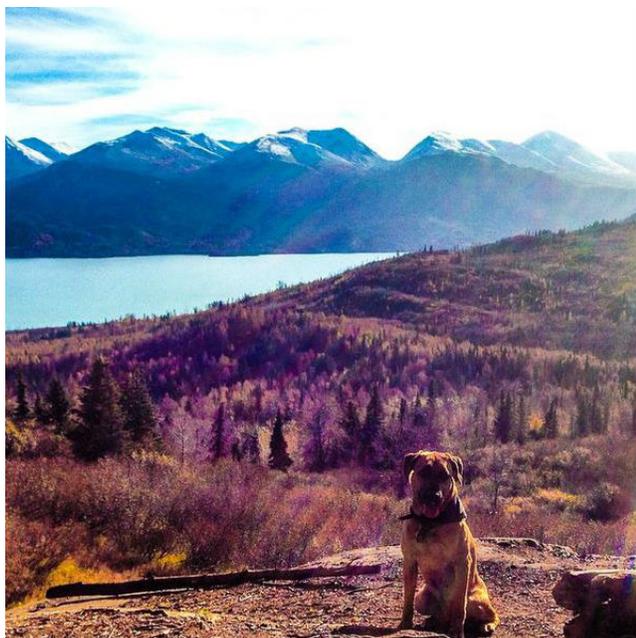


## Dogs on the Wildlife Refuge

by Candace Ward



*A canine companion on a hike up Bear Mountain*

To dog or not to dog, that is the question. Whether it is nobler to leave “Spot” home or take him on an outing—that is a perpetual quandary that all dog owners face.

When heading out for adventures on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, we need to remember that the refuge was established to conserve wildlife and the habitat it needs to survive. I often hear dog lovers say, “but dogs are people too!” Well, not exactly, though your dog is an animal, it is as a domestic one and is therefore a guest visiting the Refuge. Like all guests there is acceptable behavior when visiting someone else’s home (in this case the home of wild animals). Here are some helpful guidelines for outdoor experiences with your dog on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

**Areas Closed to Dogs**—The Keen Eye Nature Trail and Cross-Country Ski Trails at the Headquarters/Visitor Center are closed to dogs. One of the major purposes of these trails is to promote wildlife observation while hiking, skiing, and snowshoeing. These trails experience periods of heavy usage, and the no-dogs policy reduces conflicts and safety problems between dogs and people, and gives trail users a better

chance to see wildlife.

**Refuge Campgrounds**—Dogs are required to be on a leash no longer than nine ft. in all refuge campgrounds. Campgrounds are high-density use areas. Noisy, uncontrolled dogs can cause safety problems and serious strife between campers. Leashed dogs make good neighbors in these busy places and give the smaller wildlife like squirrels and hares the space they need to live.

**Areas Open to Dogs with their Owners**—The rest of the refuge is open to dogs, but they are required to be under the control of their owners. It’s important to assess your dog’s training when choosing the method of control that works best in an outdoor setting. Many hikers find that using a six-ft. leash and harness combination works well for dogs accompanying them. Others suggest if you have a well-trained dog that responds consistently to voice command, the dog should stay by your side to avoid surprising bears, people, horses, porcupines, and other wildlife on the trail.

Uncontrolled dogs are easily injured by porcupines or moose. A dog encountering a bear will often aggravate it and even attract the bear back to its master. It goes without saying that dogs should not be allowed to chase, disturb, or injure wildlife; moose-chasing dogs are best left at home or else kept on a stout leash.

Here are some tips that make your dog happier on any outing. Be sure to give your dog opportunities to drink water during increased physical activity. It may be difficult to find water in upland areas (for both dogs and humans) during dry periods in the summer, so you may need to carry extra water.

Dogs with high metabolisms and those out on cold days often need to be fed more frequently than usual, so bring appropriate amounts of food for them.

Think about your dog’s first aid as well as your own. A clean sock in your first aid kit makes a great bandage to hold a dressing in place on a dog’s cut footpad. Since many of us humans care for our dogs like they were our kids, remember to think about hazards that can hurt our dogs: Devil’s club spines, cow parsnip sap (on the nose), and sharp talus rock all pose hazards for dogs as well as people.

In the final analysis, when planning an outing that includes your dog, think about whether what you have in mind really fits your dog's personality and training. Is your dog happy around boats and water? If not, a trip on Skilak Lake may not be a good experience. Does your dog bark or whimper for long periods when other dogs are close by? Then a camping trip to a busy campground may be misery for both of you, as well as other campers. Does your dog tend to run off and get lost? This can be a real heartbreak on any trip, especially if the dog can't be found or gets caught in a trap.

On the flip side, does your dog love to hike, following your instructions and staying close by you on

the trail? If so, go out and enjoy your adventures on the almost two million acres of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge open to you. Just remember to follow the Refuge's dog policies and regulations, and please put wildlife first!

*Candace Ward has worked as park ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for over 15 years specializing in refuge information and education programs. She enjoys outdoor adventures with her husband Walter and chocolate Lab, Taiga. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*