



How Dogs Affect Birds

It is likely hundreds of people around the state of Connecticut would classify me as a “dog hater”. I absolutely loathe the filthy vicious mutts and everything they stand for. If they ever have to come into the environment of Connecticut they had better all leashed tightly the second they leave the door and not permitted on any sorts of public properties. There is no chance my constant demands to leash the canines when outdoors and prevent them from setting paw into certain areas is due to any other reasons.

The funny thing about all of that is those people would be more wrong than you can possibly imagine. I, Scott Kruitbosch, and we, Connecticut Audubon Society, love dogs unequivocally contrary to a portion of the public belief. Personally, I would have to tell you that I care more about dogs than birds and the rest of nature. To me, the right dog for the right people means it will become a member of the family, not simply a pet, a guardian, or a play toy. However, this is at odds with the fact that I regularly must request dog owners and walkers to keep their dog on a leash, away from breeding birds, out of sensitive habitat, off dangerous areas, and so forth.

I was fortunate enough to have a wonderfully special dog for all of my teenage years well into my 20s, a Shetland Sheepdog named Molly. After a mortifying several weeks with cancer in multiple parts of her body, having gone deaf and blind, she had to be put to sleep on October 17, 2011, which will always be one of the worst days of my life. She became an enormous part of me and my every day routine, and I do and will miss her constantly forever. She was a unique part of me, irreplaceable, beside me in my formative years through the beginning of the rest of my adult life. This is what makes it so painful and difficult to have the beliefs I outlined above permeate the minds of those who oppose conservation actions that affect dogs even in the slightest way, and why I so dislike to hear anyone think Connecticut Audubon Society is being overly inconsiderate or ignorant of dogs and their owners.

Rough Encounters

While many people are more than considerate when approached concerning their dog, I cannot express to you how vitriolic the reaction from some owners can be. Being mocked and showered with expletives or physical threats of violence may not commonplace but it is far from unheard of. Sometimes I will be forced to call the local police or enforcement officers from the Connecticut DEEP or U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, within my rights and duty as I am suggesting whatever individual(s) obey the law, while other times I will try to ignore the unfortunate situation and move on with my day.

I dislike having to take on this role and be the “bad guy”, but this is an enormous problem as a vast number of people are either ignorant of or ignore easements, health codes, ordinances, land regulations, and so forth. As an example, Stratford Point allows dogs on the property provided they are on a leash at all times and remain on the mowed pathways and driveway. I would approximate that 20% of visitors with dogs follow the guideline that is posted in multiple locations.



The privately owned land has a conservation easement on it that dictates it is to be utilized for passive recreation only, the primary purpose being for the preservation of bird and wildlife habitat and education. It is not a dog park, or an open space for dogs to run through the sensitive coastal grasslands, across the dune, or up and down the potentially dangerous revetment wall.

Additionally, while many people know anything below the median high-tide water line is public property where anyone can pass, they are not aware that dogs present a health and public safety risk, and are thus not legally permitted below this line. I would have to believe many people do not bathe with their dogs, or where they go to the bathroom, so this is relatively straightforward. Even speaking to some of the worst law-breaking offenders on private land such as this makes myself and others the “bad guys”, cruel power-hungry environmental zealots bent on global domination. At least that is how we seem to be perceived. So what is the problem with dogs?

Man's Best Predator

Your little and adorable puppy or beautiful, sweet, loving full-grown enormous dog may not be a threat to anything except a bowl full of food or a squeaky toy, but guess what – birds and other wildlife do not know this (and sometimes small children or even adults do not either!). They have not met before, and all birds may see is a large predator that could be considering how best to murder them and devour their babies. I say this in a flippant manner in hopes that it hits home in a more meaningful way, but this is a major problem with dogs apart from those that do inflict actual physical harm on the environment, birds, their nestlings and fledglings, or the habitat in which they reside. Even a tiny toy breed can make a mother uneasy about her situation and, as a recent study showed, only fear is necessary to have a negative impact on breeding success.

This study, conducted by ecologist Liana Zanette of the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada and her colleagues, discovered that the reproductive success of Song Sparrows dropped when they were simply exposed to the noises of predators on their breeding grounds. Both the number of offspring and their survival rate fell when calls and sounds of predators were broadcast in constant cycles. This portion of the story that I linked to is truly revealing:

“Female birds exposed to the sounds of predators showed drastic changes in behavior. They built nests in denser and thornier plants, spent more time watching for predators and less time collecting food, and produced fewer eggs—something that has been linked to lower food consumption in the past. Once their eggs hatched, the mothers provided less food to their nestlings—making fewer than eight feedings trips an hour, on average, as opposed to the standard 11, and only straying half the distance from the nest as usual to find food—and fewer babies survived. In all, the birds exposed to predator sounds produced 40% fewer fledglings than birds exposed to nonpredator sounds, the team reports online today in Science.”



A typical reaction to that would be that it is not only obvious but normal as well since predators are a natural part of life for birds. This is true, and they have evolved to cope with such threats, though not to the point of overcoming the overwhelming number of dangers in our changed world. Millions of dogs were not roaming the woods with their owners 500 years ago. There was not forest fragmentation on a continental scale allowing predators easier access to a smaller number of birds in a limited or already sub-par habitat, and humans were not helping some of these predators survive – raccoons, feral cats, and so on.

Protecting Natural Habitats

This means that it is incumbent upon us to ensure our actions match the best management practices we recommend at a given location. A constant stream of loose dogs on one path in the woods at the Aspetuck Land Trust's Trout Brook Valley Conservation Area is going to discourage much, if not all, of the bird life from nesting there or using it as a foraging area while damaging the habitat to a severe degree. Why would they inhabit an area full of potential predators running amok? Even if they did nest there their success would be far less than it would be in an area with less intrusion as the above study concluded. This in effect destroys the productivity of enormous blocks of potentially suitable, and perhaps pristine, habitat in multiple ways. It may still look appealing to the eye but it is nothing more than a scenic background with little life.

Certainly, some people will say they saw an American Robin here or a Gray Squirrel there, but these are exceptionally common species well suited to human development and intrusion. This is a common argument that misses the point entirely and focuses on backyard creatures that we are not concerned about in the least. What you do not see is most important – many of the more rare and/or conservation priority species, perhaps dozens or hundreds of forms of life – displaced by the unchecked dog and human activity. I am not even beginning to address issues like protecting critically important vernal pools that an expert like Twan would be able to detail much more appropriately.

However, this does not mean there is nowhere to walk a dog in the woods. We have to balance human usage and what is best for the environment, and as always, there is a peaceful middle ground to be found. It is likely that parts of Trout Brook Valley will be found suitable for dogs as they are not deemed critical habitat or lack important species that we are most concerned with. Again, any dogs on leash or roaming through those woods will disturb the native habitat in a multitude of ways, but we are realistic about discovering a healthy balance of recreation and conservation and certainly not ignorant or cruel enough to desire all of nature fenced-off to everyone who is not a scientist or researcher.

Let's Shake

My intent in writing this piece was to express my (and our!) true feelings towards dogs, their actual impacts on the natural world, and to hopefully come to an agreement in nearly every regard when it comes to allowing those wonderful companions their rightful place in our lives. When I am monitoring Piping Plovers, Least Terns, and other threatened beach-nesting Connecticut waterbirds this summer I hope to be able to speak to people about how much they need our



help and consideration, why their protection is important, and how such simple actions like picking up litter, giving the birds some space, and keeping dogs leashed can be a tremendous help. I do not want to have to call law enforcement officers, wasting everyone's time, energy, and money, and doing something I really dislike in a job that I otherwise thoroughly enjoy. The phrase 'there is a time and place for everything' has never been more apropos than it is in this case in regards to loose and roaming dogs.

The day after my Molly had to be put to sleep, I went out with Twan to survey much of the Trout Brook Valley Conservation Area. While this seems inappropriate and unfeeling considering all I said, after those horrific weeks, I needed to get out of the house and do something I otherwise would have enjoyed with my boss and friend. We encountered many people walking dogs or letting them run loose despite the temporary ban on it. We received some disgusted looks and discourteous responses to our good wishes, though many people were polite or quickly leashed up their dogs (despite the fact we did not ask anyone to do so). It was startling to realize how no one involved knew one another, and to see how presumptions can be blown out of proportion, as no one knew what had happened to me the day before when they likely saw me as someone who despised their dogs. I can admittedly at times be quick to assume some folks are being intentionally malicious instead of ignorant as often as they assume I am outraged by their mere presence.

It was disturbing to live every day without a dog by my side, though equally disconcerting to think of having another companion that was not Molly. Nevertheless, I came up with a solution that filled all of my emotional needs, and two months ago took home a puppy who is her grand nephew. I named him Zach, and he is very much like his great aunt in some ways, though the complete opposite in many others. While nothing will ever replace her, I love all of him already. He will be accompanying me for hopefully many years of field and stewardship work, helping to find some birds and bridge the gap of knowledge between dog owners and environmentalists who disregard our four-legged family members. If you see us in the field somewhere, in the woods or on the beach, or at the office at Stratford Point, please come up and introduce yourself, especially if you have a dog as well.

Thank you to everyone who is already so very considerate with their dogs and to those who are willing to have a listen to why we have to be careful with our furry children. Education and communication, in this case and many others, seems to be the answer to all of our collective dilemmas. Your careful and balanced conservation efforts matter more I can possibly impart to you here.

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