

Rocky Mountain News

Harsh realities accompany dog treks

By Janet Reese, Special to the News
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Dogs love to be with their owners on winter sports outings in the mountains. Romping in fluffy powder, these snow hounds appear to be in "dog heaven."

Winter brings special challenges for owners in keeping their dogs safe and healthy. Freezing temperature, wind, deep snow and ice are potential hazards. Keeping a watchful eye on your dog and taking a few precautions can minimize the risks and keep them happy and healthy in winter weather.

Breed

Brenna, a border collie, plays Frisbee with her snowshoeing owners.

"She was bred to travel 75 miles a day, even in bad weather," owner Mark Brodie said. "Brenna requires no special winter maintenance except for us to be aware if the snow is too deep for her to navigate, and to keep an eye on her paws for ice and snowballs that accumulate. All we need to do is occasionally remove snowballs from her pads."

Ginger, a Labrador retriever, also joins her owner, Kathleen Overcash, on snowshoeing trips.

"She loves it," Overcash said. "What you need to do to keep your dog safe depends a lot on the breed. Since Labs are from Newfoundland, they're bred for cold weather, including cold water, as they worked for fishermen. Ginger's paws are almost weblike, which helps in the water but also helps in snow - it keeps snow from freezing and balling up in her pads."

Certain breeds are more adaptable to colder weather.

"The best snow dogs are those breeds that originated in cold, snowy, mountainous places and are generally quite furry," said Dr. Vicki Campbell, a veterinarian and assistant professor of Critical Care at Colorado State University. Examples are Akitas, huskies, malamutes, Great Pyrenees, Saint Bernards, Bernese mountain dogs and greater Swiss mountain dogs (though these dogs are shorthaired). In addition, golden retrievers and Labrador retrievers usually do well in the snow.

Small dog breeds, very shorthaired dogs, skinny dogs or dogs with little fat reserves tend to do poorly in the cold over a long period of time, Campbell said. Breeds that fit this description are the Chihuahua, pointer, Maltese, toy poodle, Yorkshire terrier and greyhound.

Dog sweaters can aid in keeping these types of breeds warm in the cold.

Condition, exposure

"One of the biggest problems dog owners face is the physical condition of their animals," said Dr. Kevin Fitzgerald of Alameda East Veterinary Hospital in Denver. "Many dogs are couch potatoes. Sixty percent of Americans are overweight. That's true of dogs."

Another problem is owners who underestimate how cold it is and overexpose their pets as a result, he said. Hypothermia, frostbite, dehydration and overexertion can occur in animals. Owners regularly should check their dogs for these conditions.



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With their daughter Carly tucked away in a sled, Eric Tunkey, right, and his wife Anne cross-country ski in Crested Butte.

"Caring for your dog in the snow comes down to common sense," he said. "Match exercise with age, breed and condition of your dog. Consider the air temperature, including wind chill and duration of your outing."

Dogs have fur, but they still can get frostbite at below-freezing temperatures. Frostbite is most likely to occur at the paws, ears, tail, nose, lips and eyelids. You should suspect frostbite if any of these areas on your dog feel cold to the touch and appear to be unusually pale.

Hypothermia is another exposure problem. Symptoms of hypothermia in a dog are a decreased breathing rate, shivering and low body temperature.

"Dogs sweat through panting in supercooled air, a source of hypothermia," Fitzgerald said. "Owners are often surprised at how fast their dogs can get cold. The smaller the dog, the greater the heat loss."

In case of hypothermia or frostbite, move your dog to a sheltered area and wrap it in a sleeping bag or blanket. Move it indoors, if possible. Gently rub the affected areas. Never put an electric pad on your dog - it can burn them, advises Cindy Hirschfeld in her book *Canine Colorado*.

Give your dog plenty of food and water on the trail.

"In Colorado, the humidity is so low that dehydration, especially with extreme exercise, is a major concern," Campbell said. "Eating snow will not provide adequate water intake for these animals. In addition, dogs exert a lot of energy while exercising in the cold, so they need a good food supply."

Injuries

Common injuries are wounds to the paw pads caused by ice and snow buildup, Campbell said.

"Booties can protect the feet but should probably only be used in extreme conditions. Dogs wearing booties can lose their footing more easily because they can't dig their claws into the snow or ice."

Said Fitzgerald: "Routinely examine your dog's feet. Recognize the normal structure of its foot so you can tell if it looks abnormal. Check for ice crystals between toes and lacerations caused by ice."

Owners should consider having a basic first-aid kit with them, including a hypothermia blanket, emergency food and water, fire-starting supplies, a pan for melting snow, as well as bandage material for pad cuts. Booties should be available if they are needed. Doggie backpacks are available so your pet can carry its own supplies.

Snow blindness

"Dogs' eyes can be affected by reflected sun off the snow," said Dr. Jennifer Fontanelle, a veterinary ophthalmology resident at CSU. "But I'm not sure we clinically recognize 'snow blindness' in dogs."

Dogs prone to inflammatory eye disorders, such as pannus, are particularly sensitive to the ultraviolet rays in sunlight, she said. Some breeds predisposed to pannus are the German shepherd, greyhound, Belgian Tervuren and Belgian Malinois. Doggles (www.doggles.com), "sunglasses" for dogs, can protect their eyes from wind and UV light.

Dog care in the snow is much like people care. Taking a few simple precautions can result in a fun and safe winter adventure for you and your pet.

Tips from experts and owners

- Keep your dog out of deep snow. Damage to joints can occur when a dog makes postholes through deep snow.
- Make sure your dog's booties are properly sized - not too large or too small - and that they are made of water-repellent material.
- If your dog is not using booties, try spraying PAM cooking spray or putting Vaseline in between the "toes" and on the hair in the pad to keep snow from building up and freezing inside their pads.
- Products for protecting and treating paws include Musher's Secret (www.handsnpaws.com) and Paw Pro De-Icer (www.dog.com).
- Trim long-haired dogs so snow doesn't accumulate and form snowballs that will weigh the dog down and be painful to remove.
- Keep your dog close by and away from potential predators. Use a tag or microchip on your dog to track it if it gets lost.
- Use a leash to control and supervise your dog in hazardous areas such as lakes, where it could break through the ice.
- In general, most healthy, active dogs should do well at altitude. But if your dog has asthma, altitude and chilly air will make it worse.

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