



ANIMAL ANTICS

Protect Your Dog from Misunderstandings in the Countryside

The countryside is a great place to exercise dogs, but it's every owners duty to make sure their dog is not a danger or nuisance to farm animals, wildlife or other people.

"Spring is a critical time in the countryside for lambing and ground nesting birds - protect your dog from misunderstandings with anxious farmers with good training and by keeping it on the lead, says Zita Wells of Pet Patrol 365. We regularly hear of dog owners claiming that their dog is fine off the lead and it would never worry sheep or hurt a lamb. This is probably true in principle, but a wandering dog's presence is enough to cause problems without any aggressive intent".



Important Lambing Facts

- If people walk through sheep grazing areas the sheep tend to move a short distance and resume grazing, but if a dog is present, especially off the lead, the sheep's behaviour changes dramatically. They will move away at speed and flock together for protection. This rapid movement usually attracts the dogs' attention and the majority of dogs will follow their basic instincts and trot after the sheep. This moves the sheep even further from the grazing area even if the dog is called back by its owner. It will take a long time for the sheep to settle, move back and resume grazing. If this is repeated time and again the sheep may be excluded from the grazing for quite some time. Restriction of grazing on top of constant movement will eventually affect the sheep's condition which could result in difficult births and underweight, weak lambs.
- Prior to the birth the ewe will pick her spot to lamb - a quiet sheltered spot away from the main flock. If the ewe is disturbed at this critical time it can cause complications and even the death of a half-born lamb or in extreme cases the death of the ewe. The owner of a naturally curious dog may be totally unaware that their pet has caused any problems.
- If disturbance happens just after the lamb has been born the ewe will rapidly move away from the dog leaving the lamb before bonding has begun. In some cases the ewe will lose interest and abandon the lamb leaving it exposed to weather and predators.
- Motherly care and a good milk supply to the lamb is especially important over the first few days and becomes critical during bad weather. The only protection the lamb has from hypothermia is a good supply of mother's milk. During the lambs' first weeks, keeping ewe and offspring together is essential to survival. If there is disturbance due to movement from dogs, lambs become parted from mothers and feeding becomes erratic.

Zita Wells is in no doubt where the problem lies: *"Dogs chasing and worrying sheep isn't a 'dog' problem...it is very much an 'owner' problem. Dogs do what comes naturally to them given the chance and many dogs have a strong chase instinct with no outlet or control".*

General Rules

1. You do not have to put your dog on a lead on public paths, as long as it is under close control. But as a general rule, keep your dog on a lead if you cannot rely on its obedience.
2. On Open Access land, dog owners are legally required to keep their dogs on a short fixed lead between March 1st and July 31st specifically for reasons of lambing and ground nesting birds, and on a short fixed lead at all times when in the vicinity of livestock.
3. With a few exceptions, the law allows farmers to shoot dogs that are threatening livestock. If a dog worries livestock, then the dog's owner or the person responsible for it at the time is guilty of an offence under The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953 and may be sued for compensation by the farmer. The definition of livestock includes cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses and poultry. Game birds are not included (these are included under The Animals Act 1971 which includes pheasants, partridges and grouse whilst in captivity).

We recommend that owners should familiarise themselves with the Countryside Code at all times by visiting www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk and www.defra.gov.uk. Safe and happy walking!

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