

Dog Park violence on the rise

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Robin Hunt used to walk her pets up to three miles a day at a Libertyville dog park. But she hasn't since July, when two Akitas mauled her 12-pound Chihuahua mix, Deardra, and left her with \$5,000 in veterinarian bills.

Deardra is among dozens of dogs bitten or attacked in the past year at the region's dog parks, according to data kept by various agencies. Some veterinarians and trainers worry that too few owners take responsibility for their pets in the free-for-all environment in which dogs frolic off-leash.

In response, some dog park operators are strengthening rules or creating "adjustment areas"—smaller spaces where dogs may get accustomed to socializing before entering the larger park. Among them is Lake in the Hills' Bark Park, where a pack of young dogs killed a Pomeranian last year.

Advocates who enumerate the benefits of exercise and socialization say the majority of dogs safely use parks.

But as dedicated dog parks proliferate in the Chicago area, others say the problem of dog attacks is just emerging. Even the most docile animals, they say, can raise another pup's hackles or skirmish over a toy.

"Dog parks are a great idea, but I honestly don't think there's enough control," said Cathie Sabin, owner of B.C. Dog Training in Mundelein. "I have seen people pull up to a dog park, open the gates, let the dogs in and go back in their car and read a newspaper."

Most dog parks require permits and proof that the animal is vaccinated. Sabin wonders if the permit holders should also be tested on whether their dog responds by name and if the owner can recognize menacing signs, such as a dog that assumes an aggressive stance.

Dr. Kristen Temo, a veterinarian who treated Deardra at the Animal Emergency and Treatment Center in Grayslake, said she often treats dogs for scrapes after they visit Libertyville's Independence Grove Dog Exercise Area. Temo rarely takes her 95-pound dog there.

"That's because I don't like sewing up cuts on my day off," she said.

When the Akitas cornered Deardra, the two women who brought them had walked around a bend, deep in conversation. Hunt said one of the Akitas had started "death shaking" Deardra by the time she was able to get the women's attention by screaming. Deardra underwent surgery to fix a gaping hole in her abdomen.

It is difficult to estimate the numbers of injuries at the parks because they are often lumped into broader categories of dog bites. It's likely that some aren't reported at all.

Chicago and Cook County officials declined to provide statistics but said they have received very few reports.

Lake County Animal Control Supervisor Len Hackl estimates that he receives 20 to 25 reports annually of dog-on-dog bites at the four dog parks owned by the Forest Preserve District.

"We just had a discussion with some of the forest preserve staff, because we found out there were incidents being reported to them and not to us and vice versa," Hackl said. "We are going to keep better track of that, especially with spring and summer coming."

The DuPage County Forest Preserve District recorded 26 dog-on-dog incidents at its seven off-leash dog parks in 2006, spokesman Bill Weidner said.

In McHenry County, dog parks are overseen by municipalities, and no such statistics are available. But Bark Park in Lake in the Hills instituted new rules after the Pomeranian's death. The park now prohibits dogs that are aggressive, in heat or younger than 6 months.

No statistics were available for the two dog parks operated by Will County's Forest Preserve District. The district has rescinded several permits because of aggressive dog behavior over six years, said spokesman Bruce Hodgdon.

He recalls easily the most serious incident, on the opening day of Hammel Woods, in which a small dog died.

Even the people who love dog parks and seldom have problems say they understand the need to tend to their animals.

"I've had maybe two incidents where I've come across an aggressive dog," said Selina Carpenter of Grayslake, a regular at Independence Grove park. In one case, she said a yellow lab growled at her Great Dane, Hampton, when he tried to play with the lab's toy.

In most dog parks, regulars develop friendships and form a self-policing community, she said. Authorities say regulars often report park violations.

Trainer Toriano Sanzone, owner of DOPA Dogs in Chicago, said he advises clients to run through training commands with their dogs at the parks and then reward them by letting them run off-leash.

"You shouldn't just let them go," said Sanzone, who said that too many owners talk on cell phones or socialize with others while their dogs play.

He likened it to parents ignoring preschoolers at a park.

"Eventually someone is going to fall off a slide or get into it over a particular swing," he said.

He advises owners to keep a short 4-inch leash on their dogs so they can restrain them if necessary. Other trainers suggest bringing an air horn to scare off an aggressive dog.

If there is a fight between dogs, experts say it will be difficult to step in without getting hurt. Some advise pulling a dog's hind legs to get it away from another animal; others suggest wedging a large stick in the dog's mouth.

Maggie Ross, 25, of Lake Villa said she was terrified when a stocky white dog—she is not sure of the breed—latched onto the neck of her yellow Labrador retriever at Independence Grove last month. Her 9-month-old dog, Payton, wasn't injured badly because he was wearing a collar that became entangled in the attacker's teeth, she said.

"My dog was gasping for air. His eyes were bulging out," Ross said. "From the sounds of it, I thought my dog was dying."

The woman who owned the attacking dog was fined \$300 and prohibited from returning to the park because there was a prior record of her two pets fighting, officials said.

"Dogs won't fight unless there's an issue," Sabin said. "But like people with their kids, it's never *my* kid [who started it]. It's never *my* dog."

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