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Information about Feral Dogs

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An Underground Epidemic: America's Wild Street Dogs

Bringing the Feral Dog Epidemic to the Forefront of Animal Welfare

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Are you aware of the enormous feral dog problem? This country has experienced an explosion in the number of dogs that are abandoned by their owners and exponential rise in feral dogs - dogs that are born, live, and die on the streets, never having been socialized to humans. The epidemic is recent - since the 1980s - borne of a lethal combination of vastly increased dog fighting, dogs bred for aggressiveness, and reduced animal control. It is not a local problem - it is a national tragedy.

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Identifying the problem

- Los Angeles, Detroit, New Orleans, Cleveland, New York, Baltimore, Houston, Indianapolis, Santa Fe, and Pittsburgh, all report "an epidemic of feral and abandoned dogs".
Since the 1980's, the problem of breeding and training aggressive dogs has grown steadily: 40,000 Americans now take part in dog fighting.
There are an estimated 50,000 street dogs in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles County and City alone, 200,000 residents were bitten by abandoned dogs in one year. In New Orleans, estimates are placed at 120,000 stray dogs post Katrina
Says Madeline Bernstein, president of the Los Angeles SPCA: "You've got a situation where people complain that there are too many dogs out there, and the department complains that they don't have enough money to pick them up, and meanwhile the number of dogs multiplies, and it just goes on and on."
In 1999, SWAT teams of police, sheriff's deputies, and animal control officers went out on daily sweeps of the city and county where 200,000 residents were bitten. At least 47 vicious stray dogs of the hundreds caught every day had to be shot in one year. In some neighborhoods, residents carried rocks and clubs to scare off the dogs.
Bait dogs make up a good portion of urban stray populations. They are the smaller and weaker animals used to train fighting dogs.
Feral dogs are so mistreated that they defecate uncontrollably at the touch of a human hand. Many are the victims of shootings.
Feral dog expert Randy Grim, founder of Stray Rescue, says: "We can't say feral dogs are mean because it isn't true. What makes street dogs aggressive enough to attack and kill is that they were previously owned by people who purposefully mistreated them to heighten their fight instinct. When these powerful urban breeds get discarded they join the packs of ferals. I know that is the case. True feral dogs usually run away from people...."

Behavior and physical traits of the feral dog

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Feral dogs are the untouchables; they are the ones who "belong" to no one. They are the hold-outs, the animals under-funded pounds can't catch and overburdened humane shelters can't deal with. They colonize whatever neighborhoods afford them the best shelter, the most food and the least amount of contact with human beings. They exist, like genetic castaways, in the evolutionary no-man's-land between domesticity and wildness. They are completely, utterly, alone.

Dr. Michael Fox, once a psychologist at Washington University, and now a Senior Fellow of Bioethics for the Humane Society of America, studied a small pack of feral dogs in North St. Louis over the course of one summer. Not once did he see them catch a squirrel or a rat or a cat, despite all their chasing. Domestication and selective breeding are the culprits. These dogs do not, Fox concluded, know how to survive as wild animals anymore.

Bait dogs make up an alarming portion of the urban stray population. These are smaller, weaker animals used to train the fighters. They are recognizable by their missing limbs, by their surly eyes, from the attacks and the wires used to tie them down, and by their

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conditioned fear of humans and other dogs. These injured dogs are discarded as losers and leftover bait. In time, they turn into feral street dogs.

Two years ago, researchers from the University of California discovered that the domestic dog is within only 0.2 percent of being genetically identical to the gray wolf. If it were not for the thousands of years' worth of cosmetic changes caused by humans selectively breeding animals for specific characteristics (looks, size, temperament, and behavioral traits), today's domestic dogs would be wolves. The problem for the feral dog today on our cities' streets, however, is that those changes eradicated the important instincts that enable wolves in the wild to survive.

Domestic dogs are neotenic, or "forever immature", which means that even though they are genetically within the same species as wolves, adult dogs only display the physical characteristics and the brain size of very young wolf pups. When a puppy is brought into a person's home as a pet, it immediately becomes a member of the "human pack", and its only role in the human pack is to act as a subordinate -- a wolf pup - who is fed, doted upon, and generally protected from danger. This dooms feral dogs to an evolutionary purgatory where neither instinct nor selective breeding equips them for anything but professional beggary.

Most puppies born in the wild to domestic dogs have life expectancies of an hour or less. Those "fortunate" enough to survive, will only live for a year, maybe two.

Female relatives of the dog such as wolves and foxes, only have one breeding cycle per year, and the males have potent sperm only at that time. Domesticated dogs, however, have two or three breeding cycles every year, and the sperm of the males is potent year-round. A domestic female dog and her offspring can unleash 67,000 pups in six years' time.

If dogs manage to live long enough to breed in the wild, successive generations lose their purebred characteristics and take on the looks of the prototype feral dog: medium-length hair, medium build, pointed ears, curled tail with a white tip.

If a feral dog does not die of sheer starvation, there are always diseases such as parvovirus, heartworm, or intestinal parasites lining up for a turn. Many feral dogs have mange, which is caused by a parasite living in the skin. However, it is not the parasite that kills a dog; it is the loss of hair, and subsequent exposure to the elements, that does the job.

TVT, transmissible venereal tumors, is becoming an epidemic among street dogs.

Abuse ranges from gun shot wounds to amputated limbs - even from leghold traps.

Effective rescue methods

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Depending on time restraints, this applies especially to Animal Control; the "Havahart" humane trap can be the quickest rescue method. (To order-(203) 894-9368.)

1. When baiting this type of trap, make sure to use effectual bait, i.e., "meat" products, cheese, or canned cat food.
2. Use towels or blankets to cover the flooring grate. This way, the trap offers more "walk-in" appeal.
3. Leave a trail of "bait" approximately 6 feet around the perimeter of the trap.
4. You can also cover the trap, giving it a "den" feel.
5. Make sure to check the trap often. (Avoiding undue stress to the dog when using this method is imperative.)
6. Once the dog is caught, use your normal speaking voice or soft tone to calm the animal, then transport.

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This method is excellent for those who do not have the resources, but do have the time. Gaining their trust is key to the success of this technique.

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1. Even though many instincts have been leached from their gene pools, fear in a domestic dog is a stronger stimulus than hunger. The trick is to coax them into believing they are joining a pack, a human pack, where their inbred tendency toward subordination finds a "natural" place in the whole. Feed them, calm them, and lure them into thinking everything is right in the world.
2. Again, use "meat" products when attempting to lure the stray. Remember, first attempts are usually unsuccessful, so consistent feedings every day are necessary.

Make an effort to feed the stray on a schedule, and sit in the area while he eats. Speak in calming tones, even reading a book out loud helps. Become part of his environment.

3. Brash movements and sounds can set you back days. Try to avoid your natural instinct to force a rescue.

4. As the stray becomes more at ease in your presence, use a slip lead and your bait to finalize the rescue. Bite gloves should be used as a precautionary measure, as well as a muzzle, if you feel it necessary. With the slip lead around the dog's neck, pick up the torso, using the lead to control the head. Most feral dogs will put up a fight for about a minute before submitting. They may urinate and/or defecate out of fear. Of 5,000 rescues reported, only one minor bite has occurred using this method.

5. Now is the time to carry the dog to a safe environment, be it a crate, car, shelter, etc.

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Avoid using the pole noose as the ONLY means of catching a stray. This

usually makes teaching them to walk on lead near impossible later on.

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Rehabilitating the feral dog for adoption

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There are degrees of wildness in feral dogs. Some were dumped on the streets at early ages, while others were actually born in the urban wild. Those that were discarded early on may seem to be wild, but actually do have memories of human contact, and they usually rehab more quickly. Of course, this also depends upon the type of human contact they experienced.

Every dog is different. You will notice some of them responding very quickly, while others can take many months.

The first 24-48 hours you will want the dog to just adjust to the new surroundings. You may notice pacing, whining, whimpering, even howling. They may not eliminate for up to three to four days. They also may not eat. This is normal.

They will have a tendency to bolt because they are afraid. Use extreme caution when entering and exiting pens, or the area in which the stray is being housed.

Body language and tone of voice is crucial. Use slow, non-threatening movements. Always use a calm monotone voice, avoiding the high baby voice or a stern voice, for these tones can actually frighten the dog more.

Let the dog accept you in the pen before you move about, and avoid direct eye contact. Crouching down low with your arm extended in a closed hand fashion is a good way to begin a greeting.

Spending time in the pen reading, doing work, etc., is crucial. The more human contact, the faster the rehab.

Try not to force petting, as fear can lead to a bite. Read the dog's body language. If ears are back, you stay back.

Bring the incredible treats with you such as hot dogs. Gaining their trust includes proving you are the better hunter. They will start to see that this human is a great hunter, and non-threatening.

It may be a full month or longer before leash training can even begin; this means lots of clean up. Do the clean up slowly and calmly. Loud strange noises can incite the dog to panic.

When sufficient trust is gained to use a leash, only walk the dog in the building, until it is certain he will not panic on the lead. A harness is preferable in the beginning, as it is non-threatening.

Habituating the feral to other dogs (especially well-adjusted dogs and you interacting with this dog) also helps them adjust quicker and see how great humans can be.

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The process is long, but very successful. Many former feral dogs have gone on to become therapy dogs, and all have been adopted as normal household pets.

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The involvement of all of us in animal welfare is essential to solving this problem. Through sterilization and rehabilitation the feral dog problem can be contained, but first we must acknowledge its existence. All of us must work together to include these stray, feral dogs in the no-kill solution.

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Caring for Feral Dogs

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The following information is based upon Randyâ€™s numerous years of experience of working with feral dogs to help them enter the Human Pack!

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1)ÃÃÃÃ Feral dogs may vary in their degree of â€wildnessâ€™.Ã Some were dumped on the streets at an early age, while others were actually born on the street/urban wild.Ã Those dumped early on may still have memories of human contact.Ã Depending on the type of human contact, they usually rehabilitate more quickly.

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2)ÃÃÃÃ Feral dogs make wonderful companion pets.

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3)ÃÃÃÃ Feral dog rehabilitation can vary in time, some may take several months.

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4)ÃÃÃÃ Upon arrival at the shelter, it is common for the feral dogs to pace, whine, whimper and howl.Ã They may not eliminate (potty) for up to 3-4 days.Ã They may not eat as well.Ã This is normal.

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5)ÃÃÃÃ Due to fear, they have a strong tendency to bolt, use caution when entering and leaving their apartment.

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6)ÃÃÃÃ Most feral dogs may not be walked for a full month or longer.Ã Do not attempt to walk a feral dog unless the white board says it is okay.

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7)ÃÃÃÃ While adjusting to a leash, initial walks are done only inside the shelter.

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8)ÃÃÃÃ When able to be walked outside, the feral dog is walked with another well-socialized dog initially.Ã

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9)ÃÃÃÃ Many feral dogs tend to stay at the back of their apartment as you come and go and rarely are aggressive.

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10)Ã Body language and voice tone is important.Ã Use slow non-threatening movements and a calm, monotone voice.Ã Avoid high-pitched baby tones or a stern voice as these sounds may increase the dogs fear.

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11)Ã Upon entering the apartment, stand still for a minute or so and let the feral dog accept that you are there before cleaning, etc.Ã

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12)Ã Avoid direct eye contact.Ã Crouching down low with your arm extended in a closed hand fashion is a good way to begin a greeting.

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13)Ã Hanging out in their apartment such as reading a book is crucial to their rehabilitation and socialization.Ã The more time they are around humans, the quicker their rehabilitation.

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14)Ã Ã Try not to force a feral dog as fear can lead to a bite.

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15)Ã Ã Super good food such as hotdogs is helpful.Ã Gaining their trust also means proving you are the better hunter.Ã With repetition, they will learn that this human is a great hunter and non-threatening.

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16)Ã Ã The above statements are just a guide and not based on any scientific data.Ã Your actions and reactions have a profound impact on the feral dogâ€™s rehabilitation.Ã Thank you for caring for these incredible dogs.

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