



# The doggy dilemma



Ground-nesting skylarks are highly sensitive to disturbance and nests can be easily destroyed.

Dogs bring love and laughter into our lives. But they can also, when not managed responsibly, have a detrimental impact on wildlife. Protecting nature whilst giving everyone equal access to our reserves is a constant balancing act for Suffolk Wildlife Trust, and we're working hard to achieve both. **BY BEN MCFARLAND**

**D**ogs bring us closer to friends, family and even strangers, are important for our mental health and help millions of us stay active. But before being persuaded to get one, I was a long way from being a dog lover. As a conservationist, all I could see were problems: the disturbance to wildlife, the poo everywhere, the bizarre spectacle of dog bags hanging from trees. Now, I struggle to remember how life was without them, they are so integral to my family life. They have also helped me to see different perspectives and think about the role dog owners have if we are going to effectively halt and reverse declines in wildlife.

At Suffolk Wildlife Trust, we could just say, 'no dogs' right across our reserves, at least for permissive trails. However, it is estimated that in the UK, 34% of households own dogs. Evidence shows that to create a groundswell of support for social norms, like caring about nature and wildlife conservation, we need 25% of people actively engaged in helping wildlife. Simply, if we can help these households be responsible dog walkers, they can have a huge positive impact for wildlife.

Most dog owners enjoy walks in their local patches, so we need to connect with them, foster their support and help them to understand what we do. On top of this,

we must help owners to understand why it is their responsibility to ensure that their dog walk doesn't impact on wildlife.

**Love is blind**

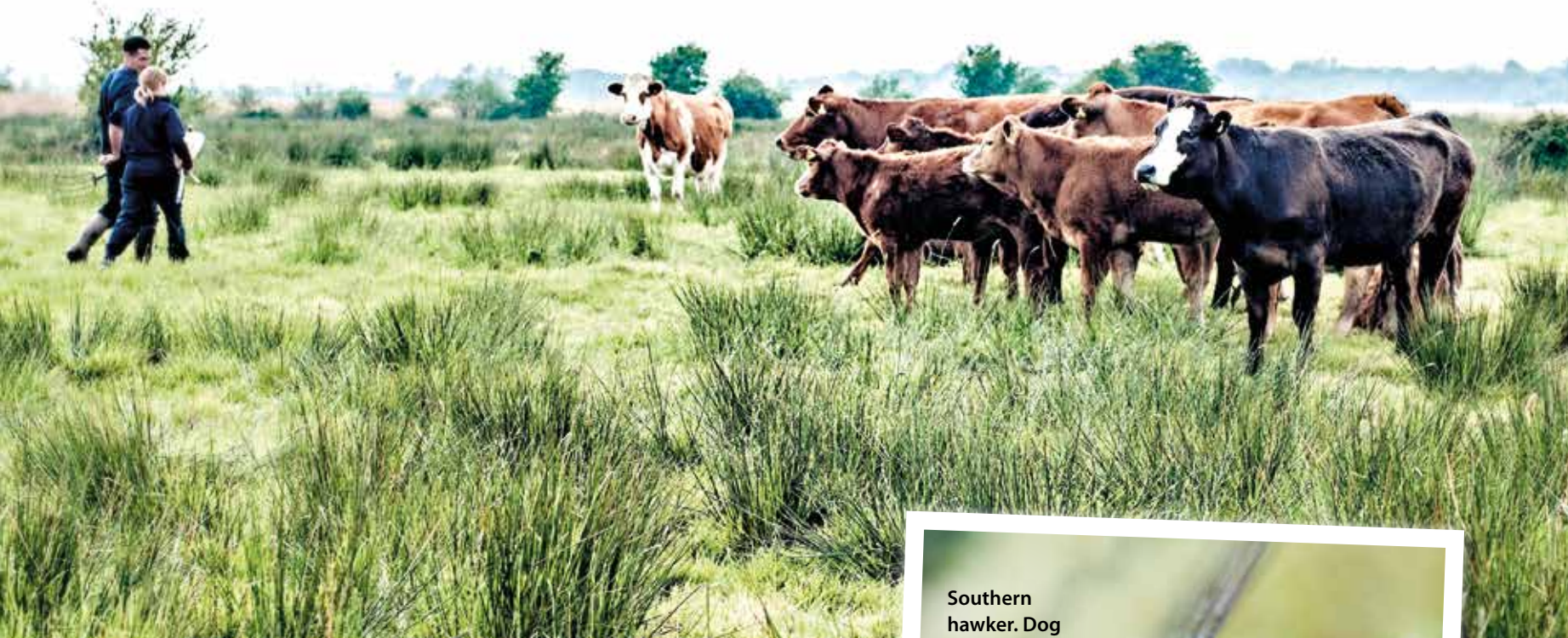
A common response from dog owners is that their dog is well behaved and doesn't disturb wildlife. This is natural. Like parents thinking their children are blameless, very few people like the idea of something they care about as having a serious negative impact. Having empathy with this is important in helping dog owners understand the relationship between them, their dogs and a nature reserve.

Much of our wildlife, especially rare

birds that use estuaries and heathland, are so sensitive to dogs that disturbance, and the associated stress, will often go unnoticed. Curlew and shelduck will respond to a dog hundreds of metres away, well before being seen by the owner. To most birds, a dog is a predator, even though to us it might be cute, cuddly and barely able to catch a tennis ball. Constant flushing of birds on estuaries, especially when they are resting at high tides by seawalls, can have serious implications on the long-term health of the population, as they constantly expend valuable energy.

In addition, recent research has found that many flea treatments, which contain





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### Where we can, we are happy to welcome dogs on a short lead

Grazing animals can be sensitive to dogs, too.

neonicotinoids, can have a devastating impact on aquatic life. These are toxic insecticides, and it only takes a dog or two to swim in a pond to kill the entire dragonfly community.

#### The peril of poo

A responsible dog walker should always remove their dog's poo. Not only is dog mess unpleasant, but it can cause *Toxocariasis* if accidentally ingested. Although thankfully rare, it most often affects young children and can cause serious disease, including blindness.

When we think ecologically, the dog (related to the wolf) is viewed as a top predator, thus something to avoid and the smell of dog poo will affect the behaviour of other animals. To small mammals like voles and mice, dog mess is a 'don't live here' warning sign, driving them away. For larger mammals like deer and our grazing livestock, faeces carry parasites, which then requires chemical treatment. This is harmful to the wider environment and

something we are keen to minimise on our reserves. And nearly every reserve warden has been brush cutting near a path, only to find dog mess flying up over their hands, arms and sometimes faces!

Perhaps the least recognised impact of dog poo is the gradual fertilisation of low nutrient habitats, like ancient woodlands and heathlands, over many years. One ancient woodland site in Suffolk well used by dog walkers has a clear 'poo belt' around the car park, where wildflowers like wild garlic, yellow archangel and bluebell have given way to nutrient-loving nettles and dock.

#### One size doesn't fit all

Our 50 nature reserves vary hugely in size, from tiny meadows visited by barely a handful of people a day, to Carlton Marshes, a wild landscape of 405ha (1,000 acres) with upwards of 100,000 visitors a year. This means that hard and fast rules cannot be applied across all reserves. Where we can, we are happy to welcome dogs on a short lead and ask for dog mess to be responsibly removed.



Southern hawker. Dog flea treatments can be fatal in ponds.

ALAMY

There are a small number of reserves where we can't welcome dogs, perhaps due to the presence of extremely sensitive rare species, or where this was a condition of acquiring the land (like Captain's Wood).

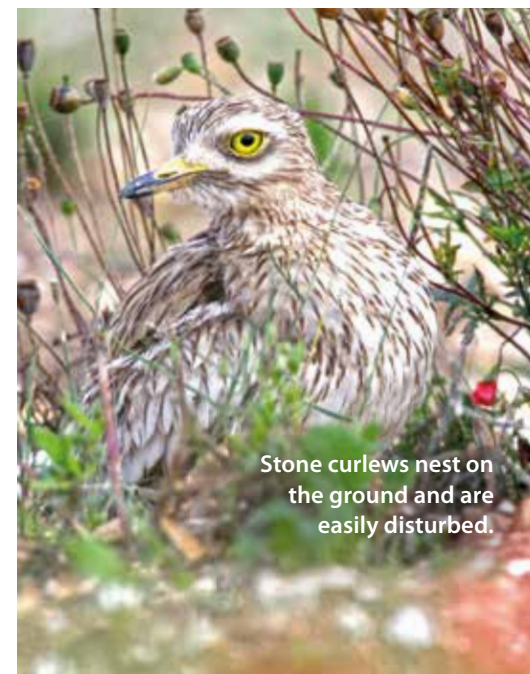
In a survey of dog walkers, 40% of respondents unsurprisingly said that walking where they could let the dog off the lead was the most important factor. However, the same survey noted that 79% were also happy to use a lead at times if given an informed choice. That's an interesting and important statistic. Most people are reasonable if they have all the information and it's our job to help people understand the challenges dogs can present.

Where we have the space and there is no significant impact on wildlife, we try



Walking through wild areas with dogs (on leads!) is good for mental health.

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Stone curlews nest on the ground and are easily disturbed.

STONE CURLEW: RSPB

to offer exercise areas where dogs can be unleashed. We adopt this approach on a small area of Knettishall Heath, effectively taking pressure off more important and sensitive parts of the reserve. This approach appears to be working, as we now have rare, ground-nesting woodlark.

Engaging with dog walkers isn't a simple fix. My own personal journey has helped me reflect that to reverse declines in wildlife, we need to connect with as many people as possible. The way to do this is through engagement and understanding of what drives people's behaviours, and in turn helping people to understand the issues better. ♡

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Keep dogs on short leads.
- Dispose of poo in bins or at home.
- Time walks near estuaries for a low tide.
- Do not let your dog swim in any pond or river on a nature reserve.
- Talk to other dog walkers about the impacts of dogs on the environment.
- Let our signs guide you.



You can pick up a 'Walking with Dogs' leaflet at our nature reserves or download a copy online. Please share with your dog-loving friends.

**Find out more** [suffolkwildlifetrust.org/dogs-nature-reserves](http://suffolkwildlifetrust.org/dogs-nature-reserves)