

BDS Guidance for Responsible Dog Ownership, including practical advice for land Managers

Introduction

The British Dragonfly Society is passionate about protecting Britain's wetlands for dragonflies and other wildlife. We live in one of the most wildlife depleted countries in Europe, with increasing pressure on our lakes, ponds and rivers by human and pet activities. We do however appreciate that the countryside is there to be enjoyed by everyone and with many of our BDS members also being dog owners, we wish to encourage a responsible use of our wetlands.

The main issues

1 – Dogs in ponds and other waterbodies disturb aquatic plants, stir up sediment, and can dislodge and damage emerging dragonflies.

Apart from the direct impact on the disturbed plants, the stirred up sediment blocks light penetrating into the water. This reduces photosynthesis and oxygen levels, resulting in diminished biodiversity.

Dragonfly larvae hunt their prey underwater by sight. Stirred up sediment reduces visibility and their ability to feed, resulting in decreased abundance. Sediment can also block the gills and other respiratory systems of aquatic organisms such as dragonfly larvae.

Many species of dragonfly emerge on vegetation around the margins of waterbodies. They can easily be damaged and dislodged by pets entering the water. Damaged individuals may fail to emerge successfully and those that fall back into the water can drown.

Solution – BDS seeks to minimise disturbance by keeping pets out of the water at nature reserves and wildlife sites. Some wetland sites have marked areas where dogs are welcome to bathe, so please use only these areas if they exist.

Advice for Land Owners – If the site has multiple waterbodies it could be useful to identify one sacrificial area for dogs to use, while placing explanatory signs, and where appropriate fencing, at others asking the public to keep their pets on leads and away from the water. If possible the sacrificial pond should be close to normal routes and attractive to dogs and their owners. For example, including a gently sloping entry/exit point, so animals can use the area safely, will help to ensure the sacrificial pond is used preferentially.

2 – Insecticides from pet flea treatments can enter the environment and harm our wildlife.

Studies have shown high levels of insecticides such as fipronil and imidacloprid in English rivers and lakes (they have also been detected in household dust in the homes of treated pets). These harmful insecticides are banned for agricultural use, but still widely used as pet flea treatments. If they get into water they will kill small insects that are a crucial part of the aquatic food chain.

While spot-on flea treatments are easy to apply, they are also readily washed off into the environment if a dog enters the water. The more treated dogs bathe, the greater the water contamination, with the flea treatment also becoming less effective for your pets as a result.

Solution – Please keep your treated pet out of the water, especially in the first weeks after treatment.

Advice for Land Managers – Once again, restrict access to areas of water where you can and raise awareness of the issues with site visitors. Explanations as to the consequences of dogs in waterbodies are likely to be more successful than simple ‘no-go area’ type signs.

3 – Nutrient enrichment of sensitive wildlife habitats.

Research recently published in *Ecological Solutions and Evidence* found that nutrient levels, namely nitrogen and phosphorus, were significantly increased close to dog walking areas, due to the presence of pet faeces and urine. This can have an impact by reducing biodiversity, particularly in the naturally low nutrient ecosystems that are favoured by a wide range of wildlife that includes rare dragonflies. Rain can of course wash nutrients into nearby waterbodies. It should be remembered that this is not only harmful to wildlife, but can also encourage algal blooms that are toxic to pets and their owners.

Solution – Please pick up after your dog and dispose of their faeces responsibly. Dog poo bags are readily available and when disposed of correctly, can contribute to a reduction of the nutrient load impact by up to 56% for nitrogen and 97% for phosphorus, to the benefit of our declining wildlife.

Advice to Land Managers – Where possible provide suitable dog-poo bins. Add signage at site entrances asking visitors to keep their dogs on leads (this makes it easier for owners to keep an eye on what their pets are doing) and to clean up after their pets. Where irresponsible dog owners have not cleaned up their pet’s mess, endeavor to remove it. Clean areas encourage other pet owners to keep it that way.

Thank you for your consideration and responsible use of the countryside by helping to protect our wetlands and the wonderful dragonflies that are totally dependent on them.