



We continually update our skills and knowledge so that we stay current with the best practices that can help you and your dog.

cheerfuldogs chronicles

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Issue 77

A World of Dogs: Understanding Fear in Dogs

When we think of a scared dog, what usually comes to mind is a trembling animal hiding in a dark corner or under the bed, whining, his tail tucked. Nonstop barking doesn't often make the list. Nor does shredding of clothes, gnawing through window frames, or growling and lunging at visitors. But these can all be symptoms of fear in dogs. Fear-based behaviours vary so widely that we frequently don't recognize them as such. Instead, we think of the dog as stubborn or naughty or trying to run the household (the long-discredited dominance theory), which means we end up trying to solve the wrong problem. Clues in canine body language can help us identify fear and anxiety—fear-based behaviours always come with some physical, postural giveaways. It might be muscle tension, a tightly closed mouth, crouching, dilated pupils, yawning, or ears held back, among many others.

Why dogs develop fear-related conditions is a complex question without an easy answer. Genetics play a role (experiments have shown you can breed for fear of people, for example), and so does proper socialisation, the all-important early exposure to new people, places, animals, sounds, and objects. Puppies who have positive experiences with new things in the



Dog quotes

"The dog's tail wagged. It was his tail's job: to synchronise all nearby moods to the measure of his joy. A metronome of happiness."

A small fiction



... fear in dogs

environment are much less likely to develop fear later in life. But that isn't the whole picture, because some well-socialised dogs do develop fear disorders. And again, bad experiences (abuse, accidents) can explain some of those cases, but not all.

Helping a fearful dog takes patience and effort on the part of human companions. Once a visit to a veterinarian has excluded pain or illness as the source of a problematic behaviour, a qualified force-free trainer or behaviourist can assess the situation and design a behaviour modification plan. Treatment might include desensitisation (exposing the dog to something he fears at such a low level it doesn't trigger his anxiety) and classical counterconditioning (pairing something the dog fears with something he loves). The less-than-good news is the amount of time it can take to see improvement. But the good news is that many dogs can and do overcome fear.



Dogs In Action: In defence of penguins

If you're keen for some heartening viewing, you might want to check out the 2015 film *Oddball*, inspired by some real life canine superstars. *Oddball* is the name of the first dog who came to Middle Island in Australia in an attempt to save a rapidly declining population of little penguins. This diminutive species of penguin had been residents on the small uninhabited island for many years, but after foxes were introduced to the island, the penguins were almost entirely wiped out. Their numbers plummeted from the hundreds to single digits in the space of just a few years.

Enter *Oddball*, a Maremma owned by local chicken farmer Allan "Swampy" Marsh. Allan suggested sending his dog to the island to protect the birds, and the programme has been a huge success ever since. Not a single penguin has been killed since the programme was introduced around 10 years ago. Maremmas now patrol the area, keep an eye on the penguins and deter any curious foxes. These dogs are livestock guardians, originally bred to protect animals such as sheep and goats from predators. A team of Maremmas continues to be used on the island, and tourists can even take a visit to meet these special dogs and marvel at their penguin saving skills.



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