

What should I know before taking my dog to an 'off-leash' area?



Tweed Shire Council has established new off-leash dog parks in the Tweed. Off-leash dog areas are a vital aspect of urban animal management. Due to increasing housing densities, it has resulted in more people living with their dogs in apartments or homes without yards.

What are the benefits of off-leash dog parks?

- They provide the opportunity for dogs to exercise, socialise with other dogs, enjoy the fresh air, practice training techniques, play games and generally race around and burn off energy. These activities are important for physical health, preventing problems such as obesity.
- They also provide essential mental stimulation and prevent the development of problem behaviours such as destructiveness or excessive barking.
- For owners, it's fun to meet other owners, swap tips and even make new friends.



Are off-leash dog areas suitable for all dogs?

Despite their growing popularity, off-leash dog areas are not suitable for all dogs. To ensure that you, your dog and others can safely enjoy the experience of an off-leash park, please consider the following:

- Off-leash areas are public areas that are not supervised by trained staff in a controlled environment. There is no screening process to determine which dogs (or owners) may visit. This means the safety of both people and dogs depends on owners being responsible and adhering to the rules.
- Do not take your dog to an off-leash area until they have undergone basic training, such as the training offered at puppy preschools, followed by more advanced training.
- You need to be confident that your dog will reliably come to you when called. If you feel unable to keep your dog under control, he or she is not ready for an off-leash area.

- You also need to be confident that your dog will relate to other dogs without becoming fearful or aggressive. Off-leash areas are stimulating to all dogs due to the physical environment and the presence of other dogs. The stimulation of sudden contact with unfamiliar dogs of varying breeds, sizes and temperaments can be overwhelming for some dogs.
- If your dog has not learned to socialise with other dogs, the interactions in an off-leash park could be perceived as threats. This could include being approached by a group of dogs, being exposed to rough and tumble play, mounting, sniffing, chasing and barking.
- Another risk is that your dog may fail to read warning cues from other dogs to 'back off', which could lead to being bitten.
- A negative experience in an off-leash area has the potential to reinforce behavioural problems, especially for dogs who are not well socialised or have had traumatic experiences. It is recommended not to visit off-leash areas until your dog is used to having social experiences with other dogs. This can be achieved by mixing with known dogs who are well socialised, attending reputable training classes, daily walks and doggie day care centres where dogs are screened before attendance.

How can I make visiting an off-leash area a positive experience for my dog?

- Observe and follow Council rules in relation to the use of the off-leash area. Off-leash areas are clearly signposted. It is an offence to allow your dog to be off-leash outside these areas. It is also an offence to allow dogs to be within 10m of a children's playground.
- If your dog is unwell or is being treated by any medication that suppresses their immune system, avoid taking them to an off-leash area without first seeking advice from a veterinarian.
- Protect your dog from heatstroke. Avoid outings to off-leash dog areas in very hot or humid weather or plan visits in the mornings or evenings when temperatures are lower. If you see your dog panting or salivating excessively, take them to a shaded area, offer water and consult a veterinarian if you see any signs of developing heatstroke.
- When visiting an off-leash dog area, always bring a leash and monitor your dog continually. This means keeping them within your sight, rather than socialising and being unaware of what your dog is doing. Observe their interactions with other dogs and be alert to cues from your dog such as posture or body language to indicate they may be experiencing stress. If this occurs, end the outing by calmly retrieving your dog and walking them away from the area on-leash.
- There are risks to human safety if people try to separate dogs during a fight or if children are left unsupervised with dogs in off-leash areas. Even if you are confident of your own dog's behaviour and ability to socialise with others, observe the off-leash area before entering and avoid areas that are overcrowded or where dogs are obviously out of control or behaving aggressively.
- Some off-leash areas have segregated areas for smaller and larger dogs. Use the area that is appropriate for your dog's size. Always closely supervise any children in your care and do not visit off-leash dog areas with more dogs than you can safely manage (preferably 2 small dogs or 1 large dog at a maximum).

Other things to remember

- Off-leash areas vary in their design - some are totally fenced but many are not. If dogs escape, they could run away and encounter hazards such as traffic.
- Ensure your dog is microchipped, registered with Council and has identifying details (including the owner's phone number and address) attached to their collar.
- All dogs should be de-sexed before being let in off-leash areas to meet with other dogs.
- The risk of contracting infectious diseases caused by viruses, bacteria or parasites increases when dogs congregate together. To reduce this risk, your dog must be fully vaccinated, wormed and treated for external parasites (such as fleas) before visiting an off-leash area.
- It is crucial that owners pick up their dog's waste and dispose of it in bins. Failure to clean up after your dog can result in being fined by a Ranger.

Reference

Source: (1) Government of South Australia. Dog and Cat Management Board (2013). *Unleashed: A Guide to Successful Dog Parks* cited on the RSPA website.



Please contact Council's Parks and Active Communities unit on 02 6670 2400 for more information.