

New survey reveals Guide Dogs under attack from off-lead pet dogs

Dog owners urged to 'Take the lead' on International Guide Dog Day - 30 April 2014

Guide Dogs Australia has today released alarming new research[i] revealing that on average, three guide dogs a month were attacked by a pet dog while working over the past year.

The findings, from a national survey of more than 220 guide dog handlers who are blind or vision impaired, reveal that some guide dogs were attacked multiple times - 32 respondents reported a combined 160 attacks on their guide dogs over the past three years, including one guide dog being attacked 15 times.

The survey found that one in four (27%) guide dogs attacked sustained injuries, with two guide dogs retired as a result of the trauma. Off-lead pet dogs were the cause of most attacks.

To address this issue, Guide Dogs Australia is launching a new public education campaign today called Take the lead, calling on the country's dog owners to ensure their pet dogs are always walked on a lead in the name of responsible pet ownership.

"We're alarmed that so many guide dogs are being attacked by pet dogs and are appealing to dog owners to keep their pet dogs on leads when out and about," said Dr Graeme White, CEO of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT.

"Guide dogs play a vital role in enabling people who are blind or vision impaired to get around independently. Attacks compromise this independence and can cause serious injury and trauma to both the handler and the guide dog. In rare serious cases, attacks can result in premature retirement of a guide dog, which costs more than \$30,000 to train.

"There's no doubt Australia is a nation of dog lovers, with 4.2 million pet dogs across the country[ii], but this also means 4.2 million potential safety hazards for guide dogs.

"We're encouraging dog owners to take the lead to help create a safe community, not just for guide dogs and their handlers, but for everyone."

Other worrying results show pet dogs distracting guide dogs from their job is a major safety concern for guide dog handlers, with most saying they had experienced off-lead dogs distracting their guide dogs from their jobs on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

"Any distraction to a working guide dog can put its handler's safety at risk. For example, if a guide dog is distracted while guiding its handler across the road, the consequences could be disastrous," said Dr White.

Celebrity vet (Channel 10's Bondi Vet) and dog owner, Dr Lisa Chimes has witnessed the trauma of dog attacks first-hand and is supporting the Take the lead campaign to remind the public about the importance of responsible dog ownership.

"I've had my own pet dog attacked by another dog, which was absolutely terrifying and I can't imagine how scary that would be for someone who is vision impaired," said Dr Chimes. "And as a vet, I've seen so many pet dogs injured from being attacked by other dogs that are off leads and out of control.

"It's our responsibility as pet owners to take control of our dogs and walk them on a lead because we need to make our community safe for our pets and for guide dogs."

High profile guide dog handler and Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Graeme Innes AM, knows too well the importance of being able to travel safely and efficiently.

Graeme has been blind all his life and currently works with his second guide dog, Arrow, to navigate his way around - whether it be across the city, interstate or overseas.

However, a common inhibitor to this is other dogs distracting Arrow from her job, which can make her anxious and put Graeme's independence and safety at risk.

"The trouble is, distraction is unexpected and it happens so fast. Those situations are very disruptive to my independence. I can't see the other dog so I don't know what we are dealing with and I can become scared for myself and my guide dog as it may put her and me in danger, especially if I'm about to cross the road," said Graeme.

As part of its Take the lead public education campaign, Guide Dogs Australia has released a national TV advertisement, which will be made available from Wednesday 30 April.

Free dog leads featuring a tagline of 'I'm taking the lead to support Guide Dogs' are being distributed in some states by local councils to new dog owners and in NSW and the ACT, guide dog handlers will hand them out to students at a series of school talks about the issue. The leads have been produced in partnership with Guide Dogs Australia's newly appointed national partner, pet care provider Joseph Lyddy.

For more information about the Take the lead campaign, including access to guide dog handler case studies, survey results and images please visit www.guidedogsaustralia.com.

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Guide Dog key survey findings summary

- 40% of guide dog handlers surveyed said their guide dog had been attacked by another dog while it was working
- 43% of attacks happened in the past year, while 83% of attacks occurred in the past three years
- 27% of guide dogs attacked sustained injuries, with two retired as a result of the trauma
- 71% of attacks on a guide dog were caused by an off-lead dog, with dogs on a lead (but not controlled by their owner) responsible for the other 29% of attacks
- 42% of guide dogs attacked were attacked more than once in the past three years – 22% were attacked twice, 5% three times, 5% four times, 1% five times and 8% more than five times
- 80% of guide dog handlers said off-lead dogs had distracted their guide dogs while they were working

The extended findings and related article will be available in the 2014-2015 International Journal of Orientation & Mobility due for release in early 2015.

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ABOUT GUIDE DOGS AUSTRALIA

Guide Dogs Australia is the trading name of Royal Guide Dogs Australia which is the national organisation comprised of the state and territory based Guide Dogs organisations across Australia. Together these organisations are the leading providers of both guide dogs and orientation and mobility services assisting Australians with a vision impairment. Their services include mobility training with long canes, guide dogs and electronic travel devices such as talking GPS technology, to enable people with impaired vision to get around their communities independently. Visit www.guidedogsaustralia.com or call 1800 804 805.

[i]Survey Monkey survey of 232 guide dog handlers across Australia, representing about a quarter of the country's guide dog handlers, conducted by Guide Dogs Australia, March 2014

[ii]Pet ownership in Australia 2013, report by the Animal Health Alliance [Australia]

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