

Keeping Trail Dogs Safe | A Veterinarian Interview

The freedom of the trail is what we long for as mountain bikers and so do our most loyal companions. Millions of canines enjoy their homes and lives in metropolitan areas, but there's something about the primal instinct to feel the forest floor under their paws and smelling a thousand different smells, all surrounded by the best friends one could ask for. This is a trail dog's life, one cherished by both dogs and their humans every time they head out for a ride together. It's those moments Anthill saw to capture in *A Dog's Tale*, commissioned by the dog lovers at Shimano.

While the athletic feats performed by these trail dogs is nothing short of remarkable, it's important to note that all these canines have undergone a lot of fitness and obedience training from their owners. Just like mountain bike athletes, these dogs all worked their way up to their current abilities and endurance. To shed some light on how to best take care of your trail dog, we interviewed Fraser Davidson, a licensed vet at Sea to Sky Veterinary Clinic here in Squamish, BC. Fraser has 15 years of experience working with active dogs and is also on the Board Of Directors for the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association - Society of British Columbia Veterinarians (CVMA-SVBC) Chapter.

If people are looking for a trail companion for long, fast rides, which breeds or mix of breeds would be the most suitable choice?

FD: I would go for a breed that has a "working dog" background. Border Collies have a very high level of athletic ability as do Huntaways, which are a working breed of sheep herding dogs from New Zealand. Blue Heelers are another agile working breed that possess a huge drive and massive endurance. Basically, you want a breed that's medium-sized.

If your preference is towards smaller breeds you need to consider breeds that are athletic and energetic. Terrier breeds including Jack Russell's are a good example of this. Keep in mind that these dogs have to take a lot more strides to catch up to bikes so they will tire more easily. They are also more likely to get hurt in the event of a collision, say with a big 29-inch wheel. Larger dogs such as some of the bigger Shepherd breeds are heavier and will be prone to arthritis in the long term, especially if they're running down a lot of steep hills.

If people are planning a ride with their dog, what are some of the factors to consider?

FD: Owners need to plan appropriately. Is there enough shade and places to cool off? Are there plenty of water sources along the way or are you packing extra?

For trail selection, the high speed, flowy trails with compacted dirt (such as Half Nelson here in Squamish) have the biggest impact on dogs. If you're riding more technical stuff and crawling your way down steep terrain and rock slabs, that's going to be a lot easier for them. Softer, loamier trails are always a better choice than compacted trails.

One of the big dangers for dogs is wood work and ladders/bridges. If the bridge has horizontal slats, a misstep can cause dogs to fall through and possibly break a leg, especially if they're

tired and moving fast. It's worth slowing down for those features if your dog is likely to follow you over them.

If your dog does get hurt, how are you going to transport them out of the woods? When I go on really long rides with my dog, I'll pack a [dog carrying harness](#) just like I'd pack a first aid kit.

The other factor to consider is how good your dog's recall is. This is important to not only to avoid collisions with other riders, but also in case you come across wildlife.

What are the signs and symptoms riders should look out for that their dog isn't having the best day on the trail?

FD: Fatigue and hyperthermia would be noticeable during the ride, especially if it's hot out; tongues hanging out the side of their mouth with really heavy breathing. That's definitely a cue to take a rest, slow down and maybe start heading back to the car.

Acute injuries such as punctures and lacerations are not uncommon. The forest floor has a lot of naturally sharp objects around and it's not hard for dogs to rip a nail or tear one of their paw pads. The more major injuries would be a broken bones or torn cruciate ligament.

When dogs are out there running with you, they're excited and warmed up and won't necessarily show signs of over exercise. If there's a lot of repetitive impact, you're more likely to see the effects the next day; stiff, limping and a bit lethargic. Biking down fast trails is not something you should be doing if you're trying to get your dog fit, you should only do so if your dog is already fit. You should have a good gauge of what your dog is capable of from slowly ramping up how much exercise they do.

What can owners do to ensure their dog gets as many years as possible on the trail?

FD: Dogs shouldn't start big activities like trail running or mountain biking before they're at least one year old. The bigger dogs need a bit more time than that, but you want their growth plates to be shut so the bones have finished developing. For most dogs, between year one and two is a good time to start training them up for higher impact activities. Starting too early can damage those growth plates which can lead to rapid onset arthritis, which is permanent.

Dogs are so incredibly loyal, so it's on the owner to pay attention to their dog throughout the ride. Don't just blast ahead trying to get a fast Strava time and let them catch up at the end. Get to know your dog's behaviors and how they act when they're tired, thirsty or ready to go home. Make sure dogs get a nice big meal after a longer ride and consider giving them the day off the next day. Try not to put giant rides back to back unless you're certain your dog is capable of doing that. Owners can also give their dogs joint supplements and alternative treatments such as CBD oil if they wish.

For arthritic issues, if your dog is a bit stiff and sore, you don't need to rush them down to the vet necessarily. But if this is becoming a regular thing, you may want to have a bit of a discussion with your vet on how to manage your dog's lifestyle a little differently to prevent this problem from accelerating.

A safe and healthy trail dog is a happy trail dog. Look after your companion and they will reward you with some of the best memories on your bike.

Fraser Davidson
Director of the Society of BC Veterinarians (Branch of CVMA)

