

Are dogs and wildlife compatible?

by John Karter

Concern is growing over the small minority of dog owners who allow their pets to run out of control and threaten the Park's wide variety of animal inhabitants. Ron Crompton, Chairman of the Friends of Richmond Park, says: "Dog walking in the park is on the increase and the conflict between dogs and Park wildlife is becoming a real problem."

Three cases of attacks on animals in recent months, two of which resulted in prosecutions, have highlighted the situation. The most serious case, heard at Richmond Magistrates Court in August, involved a dog attacking a deer and biting it on the side of the face and the ear, resulting in the deer having to be humanely destroyed. The dog-walker was convicted under the Dangerous Dogs Act but given an absolute discharge. In another dog attack on a deer, the owner escaped with a caution as the deer was not seriously injured and the dog was under control when the police arrived.

In August, another dog owner was cautioned after allowing a dog into Bishop's Pond, where it chased ducks. This was despite the notices around many Park ponds asking people to keep their dogs out of the water in the late spring and summer months to protect young birds, especially swans. Last year all the cygnets born in the park were lost, killed by foxes and dogs – but dogs can still frequently be seen swimming and playing in the ponds and some of the notices have been removed or damaged.

Over the years, dogs rooting around in the undergrowth are thought to have

been responsible for the loss of several species in Richmond Park, including hares, weasels and stoats. They are also thought to have caused a drop in the bird population, especially skylarks, which nest on the ground. However, notices asking dog owners to restrain their dogs in areas of the Park where the skylarks nest have been effective and numbers have increased recently.

Park Manager Simon Richards, a dog owner, makes it clear that the Royal Parks are not mounting an anti-dog campaign: "Everyone is welcome in Richmond Park but we expect them to behave responsibly and thoughtfully. As far as dog owners are concerned that means keeping your dog under control at all times. Observing seasonal notices has been shown to be of considerable benefit to wildlife."

John Karter is the new Friends Publicity Officer, and an item based on this article appeared in Richmond & Twickenham Times.



Lewis Blakey, aged 14: "Harmony of the pond" – a harmony easily disturbed