

# Pet-Focused Park Operators Don't Take Their Critter-Friendly Practices Lightly



Four Paws Kingdom in Rutherfordton, N.C., allows up to four dogs per site and features dog-friendly hiking trails, nine play parks, a doggie bathhouse with a pet grooming station and more.

**'Pets themselves really bring a lot of joy to the campground,' said Louise Soroko of The Treehouse Camp at Maple Tree Campground in Maryland. 'Guests are happy to have their pets with them, and pets are happy to be here.'**

Just how popular are pets in the RV and camping realm these days? Roughly 62% of American households own pets — and about 30 million people travel with their furry companions these days, according to available sources like the American Pet Products Association and the Travel Industry Association.

This pet-friendly trend, from all anyone can tell, will only continue to grow — an assumption on which the management staffs of many RV parks and campgrounds operate and invest their time and energies.

"Pets are a big part of many people's lives," Hope Perkins, owner of Middlebury Kamgrounds of America (KOA) in Middlebury, Ind., told *Woodall's Campground Management*. "So many campers travel with their pets because they are much like their children."

This extension of the nuclear family is exactly why an ever-increasing number of campgrounds nationwide have rolled out the welcome mat to visitors and their pets alike.

But traveling with pets can be a daunting

task, as a quick search on Google for "pet-friendly campgrounds" — yielding an astonishing 1.7 million results — attests. And one theme that's evident across the board is that the information campgrounds provide online often lacks pertinent details on pet policies and sometimes is simply outdated and inaccurate.

That's why pet travel websites like **BringFido.com** and **GoPetFriendly.com** have surfaced in recent years.

Since its launch in April of 2005, BringFido.com has helped more than a half-million people take their dogs on vacation by providing detailed pet policy information on more than 100,000 places to play, stay and eat.

BringFido.com website visitors can also make online reservations at hotels, bed-and-breakfast locations, vacation rentals and campgrounds through a partnership with Travelocity. Currently visited by more than a million people a month, this unusual site even has a toll free number (877-411-FIDO) for dog owners to call if they need assistance in locating the nearest animal hospital at 4 a.m. or in finding a restaurant that allows dogs to accompany their owners at outdoor tables.



Rod and Amy Burkert, founders of GoPetFriendly.com, said camping with pets is becoming easier as more Americans decide to take their canine companions on the road — and they would know. The full-timer RVers travel with their 35-pound Shar-Pei, Ty, and their 70-pound German shepherd, Buster.



At Castaways RV Resort & Campground in Berlin, Md., campers can take advantage of a doggie bark park, dog wash station, and the main attraction — a bark beach by the Sinepuxent Bay.

Born with a love of animals, president and founder **Melissa Halliburton** created BringFido.com after a lifetime of experience traveling with pets.

"My family traveled all over the west coast in a 1970 Travco motorhome when I was a child," said Halliburton. "No matter where we went, my mom, dad, brother and myself always traveled with our Rottweiler and two cats. I wasn't about to go anywhere without my pets in tow."

A self-proclaimed "travel junkie," Hal-

**Woodall's Campground Management**



liburton was quickly frustrated by the lack of accurate pet policy information available online when she adopted her current dog, Rocco, in 2005. And since leaving him in a kennel was not an option, she launched BringFido.com with the simple goal of making it easier for dog owners to locate pet-friendly places to stay.

When it comes to camping with pets, Haliburton said, "the very best and most enjoyable examples are campgrounds that cater to pets with amenities like dog-friendly restaurants, on-site dog parks and a host of nearby attractions that are pet-friendly."

**Rod and Amy Burkert**, full-time RVers and founders of GoPetFriendly.com, said camping with pets is becoming easier as more Americans decide to take their canine companions on the road. "I think pet-friendly camping is becoming more of a trend," said Amy Burkert.

"The camping industry really seems to understand that people who travel by RV are often very dedicated to their pets. The number of campgrounds that are welcoming pets is increasing. I would guess about two-thirds of campgrounds are pet-friendly to some degree," she said.

As avid explorers who travel with their 35-pound Shar-Pei, Ty, and their 70-pound German shepherd, Buster, the Burkerts know the domain of camping with pets. The decision to develop GoPetFriendly.com all started with a road trip to Canada.

"We experienced pure frustration and spent more than two days planning our trip," explained Amy Burkert. "It was a hassle finding pet-friendly hotels, tracking down their policies, and locating restaurants and activities we could all enjoy together."

"That's when we had our 'aha' moment. Believing that others were experiencing the same difficulties, we left behind a success-



Middlebury KOA includes a lot of open space where pets can accompany their owners, as well as a 1,500-square-foot, leash-free environment with agility equipment.



a pet-dedicated audience through their website, newsletter, travel blog and social media communities.

By submitting a starting point and destination, moreover, travelers planning extended driving vacations can utilize the site's "Roadtrip Planner" which displays the route on a map and populates campgrounds, restaurants and activities along the way.

Since they sold their Pennsylvania home in January 2011 and became full-timers, the Burkerts found that one of the most difficult parts of traveling in their Winnebago is facing breed discrimination at campgrounds.

Operators are often obliged to prohibit certain breeds of dogs at their campgrounds in order to comply with liability insurance practices. "Because German shepherds are sometimes on that list, we occasionally suffer from that breed restriction policy," Amy Burkert said. "We find that to be one of the most difficult things about camping."

Campground operators thinking of making the switch to a pet-friendly park — or maybe just improving the pet systems they already have in place — have plenty to consider, said certified professional dog trainer **Genie Tuttle**, owner of **Dog Genie** training company and a blogger for a renowned, positive dog training website called **DogStarDaily.com**.

Finding answers isn't all that complicated, according to Tuttle, who recommended that campground owners use peer research and simple exit surveys of guests to provide insight as to what qualities and amenities travelers are looking for in pet-friendly parks.

"Pet water fountains and waste stations — with both waste-bag dispensers and trash receptacles — are important to have on-site," said Tuttle, who is based in Camarillo, Calif. "And a self-serve dog wash area with access to warm water is a great amenity in case a guest's dog gets extra dirty along the way. Doggie pools, fountains, and play equipment are great ideas, too, as is a fenced-in area for off-leash play. Lots of shady trees are also a must-have."

What do park operators have to say about all this?

The parks consulted by WCM seemed to agree on at least one thing: The benefits of inviting pets into your park undoubtedly outweigh the drawbacks. Here are a few noteworthy takes from some of the country's more pet-focused parks:

- Perkins of Middlebury KOA welcomes pets to her campground by offering biscuits and cat treats upon arrival. The park does not limit the number of pets allowed per site and offers a 1,500-square-foot, leash-free

environment with agility equipment.

"We've had very little negative experiences as a pet-friendly campground," said Perkins. "The biggest challenge would probably be addressing the camper who does not appreciate the fact that he's even in the vicinity of a four-legged friend."

Middlebury KOA has embraced such obscure animal guests as parakeets, wolves and even a retired movie-star mountain lion — who, of course, remained in his cage during his stay.

- "The main thing that operators need to understand today is that campers consider their pets their children," explained **Kathleen Walsh**, owner of **Castaways RV Resort**



A dog wash station such as this one at Castaways RV Resort & Campground is a great amenity for campers to clean up their four-legged fellow travelers after a day spent exploring new campsite territories.

- **& Campground** in Berlin, Md. "So, in the same way that we provide activities and amenities for kids, we need to take into account that these four-legged family members also need activities and amenities."

To that end, Castaways offers a doggie bark park, dog wash station, and the main attraction — a bark beach by the Sinepuxent Bay. "We enjoy having people who would not otherwise vacation because they don't want to kennel their pets," Walsh said. "They appreciate the fact that their pets can come with them on vacation, so I think it actually yields a higher occupancy rate for us."

Her best advice? Just make sure there's sufficient staff in place to assure proper monitoring and cleanup of the grounds.

- **Four Paws Kingdom** in Rutherfordton, N.C. bills itself as the first and only "dog-dedicated" campground in the U.S. Located

on 34 acres in the foothills of the North Carolina mountains, Four Paws Kingdom allows up to four dogs per site and features dog-friendly hiking trails, nine play parks, a doggie bathroom with a pet grooming station and more.

"We have a very specific skill set here," explained **Meik Bartoscheck**, who, with his spouse, **Birgit**, owns Four Paws. "My wife is a dog trainer. Both of us have worked in the hospitality industry for almost 40 years, and we have a passion for dogs. We brought all that down to an environment that is catering primarily to dog-related events — agility courses, ready obedience, dog Olympics, and so forth."

"These things distinguish us from other parks," he added. "We are very unique and very special. The basic advice here is 'if you do it, do it right' — don't just do it because it's in fashion."

- Situated on the scenic northern Oregon coast, **Cannon Beach RV Resort** in Cannon Beach, Ore., is home to popular, pet-friendly Cannon Beach. And contrary to what one might guess in such a critter-rich environment, Manager **Michelle Alexander** said she's observed no major drawbacks associated with on-site pets in her 12 years on the job.

"When people feel more welcome to bring their animals, you'll get a lot more people coming," said Alexander.

Alexander estimated that on average, guests who stay at the park have at least one or two dogs and pet owners regularly adhere to the campground's rules. "We just ask that guests clean up after their pets, leave them on a leash and refrain from leaving pets unattended," she explained. "We find that by not charging an additional fee to have pets in the park, people take more responsibility in cleaning up after their animals instead of assuming that they're paying for someone else to do the job for them."

- **The Treehouse Camp at Maple Tree Campground** in Rohrer'sville, Md., is located on 20 acres of beautiful woodland and backs right up to the dog-friendly Appalachian Trail on South Mountain. Park guests can stay in typical tent sites, cottages, or real tree houses, and owner **Louise Soroko** likes things just the way they are.

"Pets themselves really bring a lot of joy to the campground," she said. "Guests are happy to have their pets with them, and pets are happy to be here."

To avoid liability issues, Soroko requires that dogs be on leashes at all times. "We do have a fine if people don't pick up after their pets and I think that's a good deterrent," she said. "Guests sign an agreement and put their credit cards on file upon arrival and that seems to make them more likely to take responsibility of that chore."

— **Dannic Bova** WCM



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ful business appraisal firm to change the word of pet travel," she said.

Today their site, logging an impressive average of 53,000 page views per month, provides travelers with up-to-date pet policies for more than 4,000 pet-friendly RV parks and campgrounds and more than 20,000 hotels and bed-and-breakfasts throughout the U.S. and Canada by reaching