

# Dog Days of Winter

by Jen Reeder

Durango is famous for year-round recreational activities. But many people don't realize it's also the perfect place for playing outdoors with pets – especially dogs – even in winter.

“Durango is a great dog town,” says Mayor Christina Rinderle. Rinderle speaks from experience; she and her mixed-breed dog, Baxter, have been running and snowshoeing together on the trails in the area for some 11 years. Rinderle and Baxter are both especially

big fans of Durango’s designated dog park.

“The dog park is a great outlet for everybody to just let their dogs run free and play. It’s such an expansive area,” she says.

Expansive is right: the city’s off-leash dog park covers 23.6 acres at the base of Smelter Mountain along the Animas, with trails and river access for dogs. It’s a popular place to socialize near downtown, just west of the Hwy. 160/550 intersection.

While most of the trails at the dog park are typically packed down in the winter, other sites might require snowshoes – another winter activity to enjoy with canine companions. Mayor Rinderle says she is partial to the packed areas of

Horse Gulch on the southeast side of town near Eighth Avenue and Third Street, where the city owns 1,000 acres of open space. Other sites near town include the Colorado Trail area at the terminus of Junction Creek Road and Animas Mountain at 32nd Street’s west end.

On most weekends in the winter, Durango resident

Shireen Symonds loves to snowshoe with her German shepherd, Fritz. She heads to national forest areas where it’s legal for dogs to be off-leash (when under voice control). Her favorite is La Plata Canyon, a few miles west of Durango, where snowshoers can break trail in the trees or opt for ease on the



packed snowmobile trails. North of town, Haviland Lake and the Elbert Creek Trail offer views; while Purgatory Flats, Andrews Lake and Molas Pass are favorites in the ski resort neighborhood.

Cross-country skiers enjoy 15 kilometers of groomed trails at Vallecito Lake, thanks to the Vallecito Nordic Club, which welcomes non-aggressive dogs, and owners who clean up after their pets. The nonprofit group requests a day-use fee of at least \$5 for humans, but just \$5 per dog per season.

“I’m very much an animal lover and wanted to have a place where people – families – can get out with their four-legged friends too,” says Diane Legner, club president and owner of two golden retrievers.

When exercising in snow, dogs need additional calories. There are two dedicated pet-supply stores in Durango (Pet Haus and Creature Comforts), as well as a pet-treat manufacturer called Zuke’s (named for founder Patrick Meiering’s chocolate Lab,





Zuke). The special line of energy treats designed for active dogs is called Power Bones. And if something goes wrong, the Durango area is also well populated with professional veterinarians, as well as nearly a dozen clinics or animal hospitals providing the latest in medical care.

DURANGO HOTELS ARE PET-FRIENDLY, too, including the Rochester and the Doubletree. The Doubletree famously provides cookies to both human and canine guests. There are also a number of daycare and boarding options in town, like Healthy Hounds & Fat Cats, Paws 'N Playtime, and the new Durango Pet Resort, a facility with 2,000 square feet of indoor play space.

Traveling dog lovers leaving their companions at home can fill the void by taking a dog-sled tour with Durango Dog Ranch, which offers half- and full-day sled rides pulled by Alaskan and Siberian huskies. Owners Gregg and Gretchen Dubit let customers work hands-on with the sled dogs.



Koster

People always fall in love with the puppies at La Plata County Humane Society's animal shelter and Annie's Orphans, with volunteer opportunities at both shelters.

Recently, some 400 passionate dog lovers rallied in downtown Durango to participate in filming an application video to encourage *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* to rebuild Annie's Orphans, the no-kill sanctuary for abandoned, neglected and abused dogs. "We won't know for some months if we'll be selected, but we have a great story, a great community, and we know ABC will see that in the video," says Jola Schraub, Annie's Orphans board member.

Mayor Rinderle says visitors who travel to Durango with their dogs are in for a special experience. "People appreciate that our pets are family too, and when we go on vacation, it's great to bring them along," she says. "Durango is a dog-friendly place." ■

*Freelance journalist Jen Reeder loves exploring the trails in and around Durango with her Lab mix, Rio.*

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