

# Off-leash Hikes & Walks



Letting our dogs run off-leash to play and explore the environment can be of great benefit to them, but it can also be risky. We need to balance the risks and the benefits. Only take your dog off-leash:

- if your dog is friendly with other people and dogs; and
- after extensive training in safely fenced areas;
- in safe areas, away from traffic and other dangers; and
- where dogs are permitted to be off-leash.

## Pet Trackers

Losing our dog is the stuff of nightmares. Every day, there are multiple postings on the [FLED facebook page](#) about lost dogs on Vancouver Island. We can mitigate this risk with extensive training and, in case the worst were to happen, by equipping our dogs with a pet tracker. GPS trackers require GPS signal, and, if you are tracking with your smart phone, cellphone signal. After extensive research, I decided to use the [Tractive pet tracker](#) for my dogs, but there are several brands. Do your own research. And, of course, make sure your dog has a collar tag with your phone number.



## Training

The best time to practice and establish good off-leash behaviour is to start immediately when your puppy is young, 8 weeks or thereabouts. At this age, the puppy's instinct is to stay with you, so you will have plenty of time and opportunity to reward your puppy every time he or she checks in with you. Once your puppy becomes a teenager, that instinct is lessened (just like in human teenagers!).

To transfer an older puppy or dog to reliable off-leash behaviour, first install a solid Come When Called-behaviour, as well as the [Emergency Recall](#) protocol, and keep them current (i.e. continue rewarding your dog for coming when called for the rest of your dog's life). Puppies should also learn the [Emergency Recall](#).

Practice off-leash in a large and safely fenced area, rewarding your dog every time he or she checks in with you (comes within a few feet of you) and then let your dog run off again, as well as every time you call your dog. Avoid calling your dog for "bad news" (being put on leash, etc). If you need to put your dog on leash, simply go up and put the leash on and give a dozen treats, one after the other, to make up for taking your dog's freedom away.

Practice daily until you feel safe to walk your dog in an off-leash area but with a long line (ca 10') dragging from your dog's harness (not the collar). Keep a close eye on your dog to avoid snagging. Once you are comfortable that this is going well, let your dog drag a 6' leash, before going full off-leash.

Understand that when you take your dog off-leash, you do so at your own risk and responsibility. Be aware of local bylaws. Keep an eye out for other dogs that may not be as friendly as your own dog is. Hike in areas where other friendly dogs are known to go. Understand that accidents may still happen. Balance the risk and the benefits. Be polite to other hikers and make a habit of calling your dog away before he/she can rush people and dogs. Not everyone is comfortable around dogs, but still love to hike.

For more advice on hiking with your dog, go to [The ultimate guide to hiking with your dog](#) by the BC SPCA.

*If your dog tends to get into trouble with other dogs, ask us how we can help.*

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