

## ESSAY

## Travels with Poochie

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Camping with dogs is a little like hitting yourself on the big toe with a hammer because it might feel good. It doesn't.

Aside from the warm fuzzies of taking your buddy along for his enjoyment, it's not pain-free, especially if you are no longer a child.

When I was one of four kids whose mother took on family vacation responsibilities, we always took our dog along, a sturdy black and white Springer Spaniel named Skipper, my first true love.

Skip climbed with good humor into the back of our car and slept patiently beneath our restless feet until we got to the lake. Then he hung around camp like a gentleman.

We took him swimming; he rolled around in the sand and was welcomed come night into my blankets, a soft, soggy, warm presence to keep me safe from the bears that we just knew were lurking in northern Michigan.

Since then, I've taken a number of my dogs on trips. Suffice to say it has never been as easy as when my mother dried out my blankets in the morning.

None of my dogs have ever been as polite as Skip, and I am not the patient tent keeper that my mom was.

Mac's and my first family dog was a Beagle called Casey. She was a wanderer and a sneak thief, as many Beagles are. It took an eagle eye to keep track of her, and we were lax on a camping trip when she kept returning to camp with slices of bread.

Finally I followed her into a tightly zipped and secured tent, which she crawled into adroitly and came out of with

the entire loaf. I don't know what else she ate in there, but I could just hear the dinner conversation.

"Judy, where's the bread?"

"It must be in the box somewhere."

"Well, it's not. You forgot the bread!"

"Here we go again. Everything's always my fault. Let's go home. I want a divorce!"

Another of our Beagles, fat, white Dolly, was famed in the horse group we camped with for scarfing down anything that didn't eat her first. I saw her deftly remove a steak from a low grill while the griller mixed himself a cocktail.

As it was too late to rescue his meal, I sat innocently with Dolly sweetly beside me as he

came back and looked in disbelief for his vanished dinner.

Dolly was also known for making the rounds of all of the campers to see who was passing out cookies. She never forgot a generous hand and would wait patiently every weekend on their steps for a hand-out.

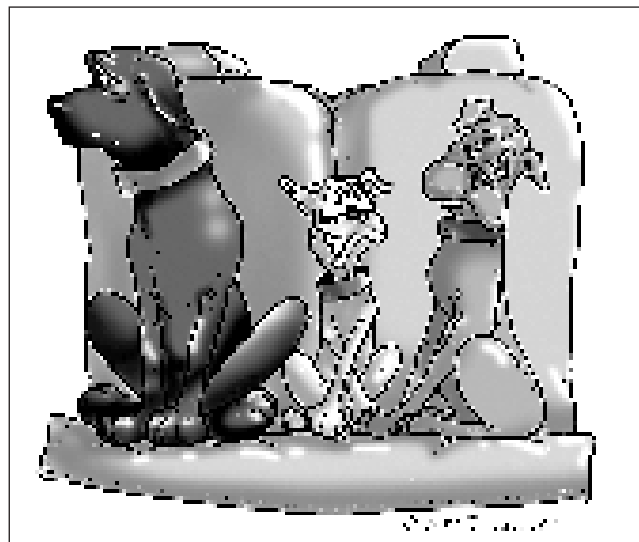
This was a dog I could never teach one single obedience command to in 12 years but who could find a potato chip in a hay field.

A friend's dog, Duffy, was one of those hair-brained Irish Setters their owners like to call "carefree."

Carefree Duffy was left inside the camper one day while we did beach things,

and he was suspiciously quiet. We discussed his finally growing up and settling down.

Then my friend opened her camper door and Duffy burst to freedom, his red coat disguised by thousands of tiny Styrofoam pellets. A further look showed that he had destroyed four pillows, and the camper was coated in those static electric balls — every single wall and surface. We laughed like fools



then and every time we saw the pellets littering the campground.

My daughter's dog is a benign, six-pound mutt, ordinarily a trouble-free camper. But she nearly lost her vacation privileges last summer.

Rich and Annie pulled into the state park and left Snoopy in the cab of the truck while they set up camp. It did not go well.

Two zippers on the big windows stuck and tore the canvas and the door snagged a hole in the awning. My normally calm son-in-law had a mild (he said) temper tantrum and went to sit in the truck to cool off.

There was little Snoopy's

eager head bounding up and down behind locked doors, the keys inside. She had pushed the lock button in her exuberance.

Annie went to a neighbor's to use their cell phone to call a lock opener while unbeknownst to her, Rich used another camper's On Star to reactivate his own On Star. The locks popped up shortly and then the garage truck arrived.

Charges: garage, \$50; On Star activation, \$250; tent canvas repairs, \$150.

Camping with canine pals is not as much fun as it once was.

The rules in parks are much more rigid, as they should be.

But it means getting up in the cold grey dawn in your long underwear to put Butchie on his leash for a walk to the dog potty place. And if

Butchie gets overanxious on the way, it's worth your life.

The potty police seem to be on duty (pun?) at all hours. Dog owners should be created with a built-in supply of paper towels and plastic bags. It sort of takes the fun out of luxuriating in a warm sleeping bag on a cold morning.

We took our three dogs, True, Bandit and Pogo, on a camping trip to the Upper Peninsula last summer.

Never again. They have all learned to look desperate while riding so that we will make frequent stops. Then none will potty as their only real interest is chipmunks or roadkill. We have become very hardhearted,

and they are learning to cross their back legs.

In every park, they pulled frantically on their leashes in pursuit of chipmunks. They barked hysterically at them and anything or anyone that moved in the trees. They shivered tied in the shade and panted in the sun. They got wet and sandy and made the trailer smell like dead fish, and they took up more room than a circus troupe.

On walks, they tangled each other in their leashes, and the two males nearly dehydrated themselves. They were not good campers.

We decided to cut our trip mercifully shorter when one morning I chanced letting small Bandit run free for a few minutes before other campers were up.

Unfortunately one early riser was enjoying some solitude of his own and he left his breakfast on his picnic table while he went into his tent for something.

In a leap, Bandit, who ordinarily has one badly crippled leg, was on the table, gobbling pancakes and bacon. I did rescue two pancakes and I don't know why the man refused to take them back.

That breakfast cost us a pound of bacon, a jar of jam, a package of Oreos and many shamefaced apologies.

I've seen those plastic dogs that sit in the back window of your car and just nod their heads pleasantly. I think five or six of them should fulfill my need to take dogs on vacation from now on.

I'm not sure what we'll do without the wet dog odor, though.

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