



7 Myths About Deaf Dogs

Introduction

This is a slightly tongue-in-cheek blog about just a few of the common myths that deaf dog owners are confronted with on a regular basis. Before we get into dispelling these, it's worth remembering that one of the fastest ways to irritate the owner of a deaf dog is to ask us if we're sure they're really deaf – and then snap your fingers behind the dog's head. Because we definitely have never tried that one! As you can tell I'm an owner and guardian of deaf dogs myself as well as a trainer who specialises in working with deaf and visually impaired dogs of all ages.



MYTH 1

“Deaf dogs don’t bark”

Ah – if only this were true! While it is often the case that a dog that has been deaf from birth may have an unusual range of barks and other vocalisations, they definitely do bark. Some dogs have residual hearing, while others appear to react to the vibrations or have realised that humans/other dogs respond to their barks. My two deaf dogs are by far the noisiest of my canine family and like to express themselves as much as possible.

a family group, but this is always more about the individual dog and breed characteristics rather than the deafness. Deaf dogs as a generic group are not more or less likely to need to live with/without other dogs. In fact, relying on a ‘hearing’ dog can mean missing out on vital check-in training for the deaf one. The focus should be on building a great relationship with the deaf dog, rather than relying on another dog to mediate this.

while we work on their training – but this would be the same for a hearing dog in a new home too.

MYTH 2

“Deaf dogs must live with another hearing dog OR deaf dogs can’t live with other dogs”

This kind of absolute statement is sometimes seen on rehoming adverts for deaf dogs. It's best thought of as unhelpful and tends to interfere with the rehoming process when deaf dogs come into rescue. Some deaf dogs prefer to live in

MYTH 3:

“Deaf dogs can’t go off leash (and this is a terrible thing)”

Firstly, staying on leash for safety or behavioural reasons isn't that bad, and good use of harnesses plus long lines, or canicross™ equipment can hugely improve the quality of life for a dog that must stay on leash. Secondly, most deaf dogs can learn an excellent check-in and recall, and are frequently better at staying close to their humans than hearing dogs! We do tend to keep our deaf dogs on long lines for the first few months

MYTH 4:

“Deaf dogs are more likely to be aggressive (and should be PTS)”

There has been a tradition of some breed clubs within the UK and the USA suggesting that deaf dogs are inherently more likely to be aggressive, particularly when touched or woken unexpectedly, and therefore they should never be placed in homes. There is little hard data to support this opinion, and the experience of those of us who work regularly with deaf dogs including those from breeders is that very few react aggressively despite living in what must be a very confusing world of unexpected surprises. While there are some deaf dogs who startle when touched, and the lack of hearing does mean this is more likely, aggressive responses are very rare. Indeed, carrying out frequent assessments on rescue dogs has shown me that rather a lot of dogs

struggle to tolerate unexpected touch, and this is no more likely in deaf dogs. Deaf dogs are often very tactile and enjoy being physically close to other human and canine family members

MYTH 5:

“All deaf dogs are white”

Deafness in dogs occurs for various reasons (hereditary, acquired, conductive, sensorineural, late onset) but hereditary deafness is most commonly linked to the genes which influence pigmentation of the coat and eyes. If the inner ear is unpigmented then development can be interrupted resulting in deafness. White, merle and piebald coated dogs are most prone to this, and since the same genes influence eye colour, many have blue eyes. Non-white dogs can also be prone to deafness due to hair cell loss such as Dobermanns. Breeding two white, merle or piebald coated dogs together in incredibly risk and irresponsible, risking large portions of the litter being born with hearing and/or eye sight problems.

MYTH 6:

“Deaf dogs will have other health problems (and this is why they should be euthanised)”

There is relatively little data to back this assertion up, and it can be difficult to disentangle any associations from breed specific health conditions. While deaf and blind dogs may sometimes show signs of abnormal development (either physically or mentally), dogs which are only deaf are generally no more or less healthy than their hearing counterparts unless the breeding itself is particularly poor. Despite this, some pet insurance companies will refuse to insure deaf dogs for ear problems or infections.

MYTH 7:

“Deaf dogs can only be trained with a vibration collar”

One of the most common questions asked on the Deaf Dog Network facebook group by people new to living with a deaf dog is whether they should purchase a vibrating collar, or other gadget. While this sounds like an appealing idea where the dog learns to respond to the vibration as a hearing dog might recall to a whistle, experienced deaf dog guardians tend to discourage it as an unnecessary expense. It is still relatively difficult to source a good quality vibrating collar in the UK that does not include any unwanted side effects such as spray/shock, or that is not bark activated. Based on my experience moderating on deaf dog discussion groups, and with my own dogs, many dogs find even gently vibrating collars quite unpleasant. Conversely a reasonable number of deaf dogs appear to deliberately ignore the sensations. It is impossible to predict the reaction without purchasing a unit unfortunately. Even those guardians who use vibrating collars would be quick to emphasise that these are in addition to excellent check-in and recall training rather than as a replacement. The same principles apply as when working with a dog who is never going to be let off lead, you still want to train a basic recall just in case management/leads/harnesses or collars fail!

Morag Heirs *PhD, MSc, MA(SocSci)(hons)* is a companion animal behaviour counsellor at Well Connected Canine
www.wellconnectedcanine.co.uk

Resources:

The DDEAF (Deaf Dog Education Action Fund) website and resource centre – USA based but very accessible and fantastic information, also sells bandanas to alert people to your dog's deafness. <http://www.deafdogs.org/>

Deaf Dog Network (DDN) a facebook group and website, UK based, includes a collection of videos of teaching signs
<http://thedeafdognetwork.webs.com/>
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/thedeafdognetwork>

Barry Eaton (2005) “Hear Hear” (most easily available direct via <http://www.deaf-dogs-help.co.uk/help/dogbookshop.htm>) The best available book on living with and training a deaf dog

Susan Cope Becker (1997) “Living with a deaf dog” (from online booksellers)
Note that some of the training advice in this booklet is sadly out of date particularly in regards to the idea of punishment or discipline, and not allowing deaf dogs off leash

Any on-line sign language dictionary – great for getting ideas for signs and seeing the visual of how to move your hands. My favourite is: <http://www.aslpro.com/>

“Basic Sign Language” a leaflet written for the APBC by Morag (https://www.apbc.org.uk/system/files/private/advice_sheet_5_-_teaching_ba...)

<http://www.nonlinedogs.com/DeafDogsManifesto.html> A comprehensive and frequently updated collection of information and discussion about all things relating to deaf dogs