Four-legged friend or foe? Dog walking displaces native birds from natural areas

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NEW DATA PROVIDE EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE, previously lacking, of the ecological impacts of dog walking in natural areas where this activity is allowed or prohibited. On public lands near Sydney, Australia, including two national parks, investigators monitored the responses of multispecies assemblages of birds to (1) walkers (of varying heights) with dogs (or varying breeds and ages), (2) walkers (single and multiple) without dogs, and (3) no

walkers and no dogs (control). Dogs were always on leads. For 10 minutes after the "treatment" passed, a single observer surveyed the 820-foot (250 m) transect for all birds seen and heard within 160 feet (50 m) of the trail segment. These data show that dog walking in wooded areas results in a 35% reduction in bird diversity and a 41% reduction in bird abundance. Additionally, dog walking leads to a 50% reduction in ground-dwelling birds. Another significant finding is that the effects of dogs occur even where dog walking is frequent, suggesting that local wildlife does not become habituated to continued disturbance. These results support the long-term prohibition of dog walking in sensitive conservation areas.

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