

Dog bites up over last year

Owners now can be charged with felonies

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A pit bull waits for adoption in his cage Thursday at the Amarillo Animal Control Shelter. Animal Control officials say reports of dogs biting people in the city are up over last year, and are concerned the trend may continue during the warmer summer months while children are out of school.

Complaints of dogs biting people are rising, and a new state law has some pet owners surrendering ownership of their canines after attacks.

Amarillo Animal Control officials say reports of attacks on people, particularly children, typically spike during spring and summer months, when schools are closed. There were 240 reports of dog bites in Amarillo from January to May, compared with 186 over the same period last year.

Bite prevention tips

- Never run from a dog and scream.

- Stay still when an unfamiliar dog comes up to you.
- If you're knocked over by a dog, roll into a ball and lie still.
- Do not pet a dog without letting it see and sniff you first.

Yearly bite totals

2007: 623

2008: 500

2009: 240*

*Number from Jan. 1 to May 30

Dog trouble is costly

How much does it cost if Animal Control picks up my animal?

- First impoundment: \$20 for an altered - or fixed - pet; \$50 for an unaltered pet
- Second: \$40 for an altered pet; \$80 for an unaltered pet
- Third and thereafter: \$60 for an altered pet; \$120 for an unaltered pet

Citations issued by Animal Control officers are Class C misdemeanors. The Municipal Court assesses the fines. Fines can increase for repeat offenses. If you ignore a citation, a warrant will be issued and you could be arrested.

Source: City of Amarillo, Animal Control Department

"We know a majority of them are pit bulls," said Shannon Barlow, Animal Control assistant director. "Our advice - especially for children this summer - is don't pet a dog you don't know. This is that time when attacks can occur."

Nationally, more than 4 million people are bitten annually by dogs, according to a survey by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 60 percent of bite victims are children younger than 12, and 1 in 4 bites requires medical care.

Last year, 500 dog bites were reported in Amarillo. That's down from the year before, when 623 reported bites occurred. Public sentiment statewide was high enough to pass Lillian's Law, which charges dog owners with felonies if their pets seriously injure or kill someone.

Amarillo doesn't have a pet-licensing program, so it's unclear exactly how many pit bulls and other breeds may be living in the city.

Michael Knox, president of Pit Bull Rescue of Amarillo, said it's difficult to say if Lillian's Law has had an impact on Texas dog owners. However, he believes some may have become more responsible in its wake.

"All individuals should be held accountable for the actions of their pets ... and for the care of those pets as well," he said. "There is an overwhelming number of people out there that take better care of their lawnmower than their pets."

Lillian's Law, written by state Rep. Dan Gattis, R-Georgetown, was named for Lillian Stiles, a 76-year-old Austin-area woman mauled to death in November 2005 by a neighbor's six dogs.

No one in Amarillo has been prosecuted under Lillian's Law, but Animal Control officials believe its mere existence has had some effect.

Recently, more pit bull owners have been willing to give up ownership rights of their dogs when confronted by authorities after an attack, Barlow said.

"That doesn't keep them from getting prosecuted," Barlow said. "But if the threat is gone ... that's all that matters to us."

A total of 6,309 animals, primarily dogs, have been euthanized since October 2008, compared with 11,200 from October 2007 to October 2008, Animal Control's fiscal year.