



Backcountry Skiing With Dogs

How to Set Everyone Up for Success

BY LAURA LIEFF

Depending on when and where you go, the backcountry can provide a stunning, peaceful environment that offers solitude away from the winter resort crowds. One way people enjoy the backcountry is touring, which encompasses splitboarding, skinning and

alpine touring skiing. Each season, this type of recreation gains popularity and, for many locals, taking their dogs with them is a bonus. For others, dogs are the catalyst for humans getting into backcountry riding in the first place. “My dog Shakes, a beagle-dachshund-terrier-labrador mix, is the reason I got a touring

setup,” says longtime local Theresa Kennedy. “I hated leaving him behind all day while riding at the resort. He absolutely loves wearing his coats, following us up the skin track and racing behind us on the descent. It’s pure joy.”

Both Kennedy and longtime local and backcountry enthusiast Brian Fleming agree that the noticeable upswing in touring over the last few years is the result of accessibility and quality. “For many years, splitboards were in the development stages and now they are everywhere because enough companies make them — like Weston Backcountry which started in Minturn and is now global,” says Fleming. “Also, since you’re usually riding powder in the backcountry, the equipment lasts longer than daily driver snowboards used on the resort.”

KNOW YOUR PUP + THE TERRAIN

With equipment readily available, and people realizing that touring with their dogs is an unforgettable experience, an issue that can arise is pups getting injured during backcountry outings. Fleming says that owners need to really know their dogs and avoid taking them on adventures they aren’t ready for and/or will not enjoy. He says people should ask themselves: Is my dog strong enough? Have I taught them how to safely run next to me rather than chase me? Will my dog listen off-leash? Fleming also notes that paying attention to the snow conditions is imperative. “You don’t want to put dogs in a situation where there is hollow snow because they end up post-holing and can get seriously injured,” he explains.

Kennedy agrees that terrain choice is important — she and her husband only tour with their pup “on the gentle hills around Minturn and usually on clear, bluebird days,” she says. She also says that they trained Shakes to “maintain a safe distance from their skis and boards, as well as those of other people, and that he learned to stay between them while climbing the skin track.”

BE PREPARED

Fleming has practiced the same routine with both of his German shepherd-hus-

ky mixes over the years. This includes bringing food and water, using reflective vests and taking breaks when needed, as dogs frequently exert twice as much energy as humans on these adventures. Sedona (who passed away in 2024) led the charge for many years and Zephyr, who is now 7 years old, became a seasoned backcountry dog when she was a puppy. Fleming often splitboards in the evenings, which means being mindful of wildlife and bringing a headlamp. For those new to the backcountry, he recommends touring in the daytime first and then trying it at night. "The first time I took my wife splitboarding was with Sedona at night in a snowstorm," he remembers with a grin. "She was ready to ride in the daytime after that!"

Both Kennedy and Fleming put their dogs in bright colors to make them easy to spot in the snow, and Kennedy's pup uses Musher's Secret dog paw wax on his paw pads for protection. Even though Shakes and Zephyr are well-

trained off-leash, both owners keep a leash handy for the transitions to and from the car and when gearing up and down. Fleming emphasizes the importance of prioritizing your dog's safety when making terrain choices. That way, he says, "Everyone enjoys their time and gets out safely. They rely on you to show them the way." Kennedy adds, "Minimize your risk. Accidents happen even to the most experienced backcountry travelers. Low angle pow is fun and safe for everyone, especially our four-legged companions."

Although there are a variety of touring trails to choose from, Fleming points out that they're meant for all kinds of recreation, which means owners need to pick up after their pups. He adds, "Spending time in the backcountry with your dog is a privilege for those who have built that strong bond with them. For those who are new to the adventure, I recommend going with people whose dogs know what to do so they can learn. Also, pack it in and pack it out!" +



BACKCOUNTRY SKI DOGS CHECKLIST:

- Water and food
- Bright colored vest, harness or coat
- Musher's Secret wax
- Leash for transitions to and from the car
- Know the terrain
- Prioritize your dog
- Be safe and have fun

