



Animal Interaction

Includes:

- All animal tourism and interaction
- Farm animals and home pets
- Wild animals (e.g., dolphin rides)
- Rescue, shelter, and therapy animals

Council Approval: Not required

Activity Permitted For: D B J C S A

About Animal Interaction

Planned interaction with animals is a popular and desired activity for many Girl Scouts. From petting zoos to therapy dogs to rescue animals. Girls can learn about animals and have memorable experiences.

Unplanned interaction with animals can occur during other activities, such as hiking. Making a decision not to interact with an animal may provide a valuable learning opportunity as well.

This activity primarily focuses on planned animal interaction under a controlled environment, including all educational programs, wildlife tourism, and farm animals.

Learn More:

- [International Union for the Conservation of Nature](#)
- Benefits of interacting with animals: [UVA School of Medicine study](#)
- Child safety around animals: [HealthyChildren.org](#)

Animal Safety and Health Reminders

Partner with reputable organizations. Ensuring they have liability insurance helps credibility.

Assess your girls. Ensure they are mature enough to follow rules and exercise self-control. Do not allow children under age five to interact with reptiles, amphibians, baby chicks, ducklings, or petting zoo animals (per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Control their interaction. Let girls know that it's not okay to tease, hurt, or play roughly with any animal.

Keep it clean. Have girls wash hands before and after contact with animals, animal bedding, or waste.

Be vigilant. Treat bites or scratches according to the first-aider's training to avoid infection. Report animal aggression, bites, or other concerns to the authorities and to your council.

Include Girls with Disabilities

Talk to girls with disabilities and their caregivers. Ask about needs and accommodations. Always be sure to contact the location in advance to ensure they are able to accommodate those with disabilities.

Safety Activity Checkpoints

Review some basic animal interaction rules:

- Do not pet or otherwise disturb an animal that is sleeping or eating.
- Stay away from an animal's food.
- Do not tease or abuse an animal.
- Watch for warning signs like growling or hissing.
- Never pet an unfamiliar dog, cat, or other animal.
- Be cautious about touching animals, such as puppies and kittens, within view of their mother.

In addition, in the case of dogs for example, don't run when approached by an unfamiliar one. Running may make the dog aggressive. Instead, slowly back away, avoid sudden movements, and avoid direct eye contact, but keep the dog within view.

Pets, Therapy Animals, and Rescue Shelters

Protect girls as well as hosts' house pets. This should be taken into consideration during meetings, overnights, and activities. Secure all pets out of reach when girls are present.

Certified, trained service animals like guide or hearing dogs must be welcomed. Please be welcoming whenever their handler is present.

Follow rules. These are often provided by animal rescue facilities and shelters.

Supervise girls closely. Watch the girls, and practice the buddy system.

Be clean. Take care to wash hands and sanitize footwear to protect girls from disease and to prevent spreading disease from one animal to another.

Make it a learning experience. Talk to girls and research the root causes that lead to animals being in shelters. Brainstorm Take Action projects the troop might plan to help.

Avoid these activities while at the rescue or shelter:

- Eating or drinking
- Sitting or playing on the ground
- Feeding the animals, unless shelter personnel supervise and contact is controlled with barriers
- Coming in contact with animals if you have an open wound
- Coming in contact with animal waste

Petting Zoos and Animal Ambassadors

- Follow rules provided by the zoo.
- Take care to wash hands and sanitize footwear, as directed.
- Do not handle bedding, food, water, or manure unless trained to do so.

Drive-Through Zoos and Parks

- Drive vehicles with secure roofs and with doors and windows that fully close.
- Keep windows rolled up.
- Do not get out of the vehicle.

Swimming with Dolphins and Other Interactive Experiences

- Choose a safe and responsible animal organization. See the “Selecting a Partner Organization” section below.
- Review safety management with the organization before visiting the site.
- Make sure predators are secured or separated from girls.
- Contact your council for specific approval and guidance for wolf, big cat, shark, or similar interactions.
- Follow any related safety activity checkpoints. For example, follow the swimming checkpoints when swimming with dolphins.

Farm Animals and Husbandry

- Ask permission before entering a farm or barnyard.
- Ask if there are areas to avoid.
- Get an orientation from an on-site expert. Learn and follow their safety rules.
- See the safety activity checkpoints for horseback riding or vaulting on horseback, if you will work with or ride horses.

Wild Animals

- Learn about the animals that live in the area you frequent or will visit.
- Never approach wild animals. Generally, animals will not attack or bite if left alone.
- Back away if you come across baby animals and assume that there is a protective mother nearby. Backing away protects you and the babies.
- Report animals that appear sick or that behave strangely to the authorities.
- Take care in snake country:
 - Don't stick your hand or foot in places you can't see.
 - Wear closed-toed shoes.
 - Use a flashlight when walking on hot nights to avoid stepping on a snake.
 - Do not handle snakes, even if you think they are dead.
 - Back away slowly if you encounter a snake.
- Never feed wild animals.

- Store food well away from tents and out of the reach of animals. If the site is in bear country, check with local authorities on precautions to take, and ask if a bear-proof canister is required for food.

Choosing Partner Organizations

Select those that have visitor safety and animal well-being as top priorities.

For visitor safety, look for organizations that:

- Provide handwashing stations
- Provide an orientation or training on safety rules
- Supervise visitors
- Limit visits so that animals don't get overwhelmed
- Keep the environment clean, especially with manure picked up
- Have food stations for visitors that are separate from animal enclosures

For animal well-being, look for organizations that:

- Keep animals healthy and cared for with food, clean water, and a sheltered place to rest
- Don't have animals that sway or pace in their enclosures, as these behaviors can be signs of stress
- Keep exotic or wild animals only while they recover or because they can't be reintroduced into the wild
- Don't engage in the commercial trade of animals or animal parts
- Don't breed animals and have measures in place to prevent breeding, unless the animals are part of an authorized release program
- Don't take in more animals than they can humanely handle
- Don't use animals for entertainment, forcing animals to perform acts such as rides, shows, or tricks
- Operate in the best interest of the animals, rather than for profit
- Don't allow venomous animals to be handled

Note: Be wary of places that claim to be sanctuaries, especially those overseas. They often operate for profit and are likely to exploit animals. Wildlife tourism sites, including those that offer elephant rides, the opportunity to hold newborn cubs, or the chance to pet tigers, are also potentially exploitive and dangerous. Investigate these beforehand at the [Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries](#) or [WASP](#). Ethical tour operators can be found [here](#).

Help girls learn about animal exploitation in the cub petting or elephant riding industries. Share [this National Geographic article](#) that explains why girls may want to forgo activities that include wild animal interaction.

These checkpoints should be reviewed with the vendor, facility, or your council as appropriate.