

Operating Guideline # 229

Animal Threats

September 30, 2019



PURPOSE:

The purpose of this Operating Guideline (OG) is to create an awareness of the threats that some animals pose to firefighters.

ISSUE/RATIONALE:

Providing fire protection services in Muskoka will expose staff to a variety of situations where they may encounter domestic and wild animals that can pose a threat. This OG is to be used as a guide for staff in selecting the most appropriate protective measures in order to minimize the risks and prevent injuries when animals are encountered. These practices are equally applicable to fire prevention staff conducting public education, inspection and enforcement activities as well as operational staff providing emergency response or while engaged in certain training evolutions.

GUIDELINE:

General

1. All staff must be aware that animals possess powerful hunting, protective and defensive instincts that will impact their behavior, especially in situations that are unfamiliar to them (i.e. – being caught in a structure or wildfire situation). Domestic animals that are normally considered “friendly” can respond in unpredictable ways and may lash out and bite or scratch. Wild animals can never be considered “safe”.
2. As societal norms have changed in recent years, so has the definition of “pet”. Expect to encounter reptiles (snakes, lizards etc), spiders, monkeys, pigs and other exotic animals (tigers, alligators) in residential settings. Expect the unexpected.

Canines

3. One of the most commonly encountered animals in a domestic sense is the dog. Upon approach to any emergency incident, be on the lookout for signs that a potentially aggressive animal is on site. “Beware of Dog” signs, a large fenced in yard with a kennel, a leash/lead tied to a sturdy post or other clues may warn of the presence of a dog.
4. Upon approaching the structure, continue your size-up, looking and listening for other indicators (barking, dog dish). If you identify a threatening dog is present, quickly take control of the door even if an occupant has already done so as a large dog can easily break away from its owner and push its way through a screen door.
5. Always ask the occupant to secure the pet by placing it away in a closed room if this is an option.
6. Watch for signs of aggression – head held low/level with its body, hair along the neck/back raised, ears back, tail tucked in, eyes locked with your own, with a stiff or rigid posture. A potentially threatening dog is one that displays aggressive behavior toward you and cannot be “shooed” away.
7. Though not a sure method of assessing the potential aggression/threat risk, assess the breed. Some canines are more aggressive by nature.

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8. Avoid exposure to any aggressive canine, but if you are caught in a situation where a dog with an unknown temperament approaches you, follow these steps:

a) Hold your position. **DO NOT RUN** as the dog will interpret you as prey and its natural hunting instincts may cause it to attack.

b) Use commands such as “STAY”, “SIT” and “LIE DOWN”.

c) Place something between you and the dog (i.e. – chair, helmet, clipboard) and wave it around if the dog is committed to biting; it will most likely go for the item that’s moving.

d) Try backing away from the dog, though do not turn your back to it.

9. If attacked, an oft-referenced tactic to stave off an attack initially is to kick the dog in the chest. Use of a hand tool (axe, pike pole etc) as a defensive tool is a last resort. If the dog bites and latches on:

a) Strike under the throat as hard as you can.

b) Strike the dog in the middle of the shoulders, on the spine if possible. Avoid striking the dog on the head.

c) As a last resort, target the dog’s eyes – remember this is a potentially life-threatening situation for you.

10. Any dog bite should be treated by a physician and reported to police. Document the incident fully and follow all departmental injury reporting protocols. (SEE OG 231 – Hazard, Incident, Illness Reporting)

Wildfire Response

11. When conducting operations in wildfire situations, firefighters must be cognizant of the threat that wild animals present. In Muskoka, it should not be unexpected to encounter a moose or a bear that has been “put on the run” by a wildfire. In most cases, these animals are in “flight”, not “attack” mode – get out of their way.

12. In the event of a bear attack, remember, the bear attacks you because it sees you as a threat - when it's feeding, protecting it's young or because you've surprised it — use bear spray if you have it, and play dead if it makes contact with you.

13. If you do need to play dead, the recommended position to minimize injury is to:

a) Lie flat on the ground, face down, hands clasped behind your neck and with your legs apart. This provides some protection and makes it harder for the bear to flip you over if it does approach.

b) Remain in this position for several minutes, even if you think the bear has gone away.

NOTE: According to Parks Canada, if a bear is acting defensively then an attack should last no more than a couple of minutes.

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14. If a bear attack continues and turns from defensive to predatory, or if the bear's behaviour shows it clearly regards you as prey, don't play dead. Instead, the best thing to do is fight back. Recommended ways to fight back with a black bear grizzly that regards you as prey:

- a) Use bear spray.
- b) Act aggressively.
- c) Defend yourself with whatever is available (axe, Pulaski).
- d) Try to appear dominant.
- e) Shout, jump up and down, wave your arms, hold up your jacket or backpack to make yourself look bigger.

RESPONSIBILITY:

It is the responsibility of all members to comply with the provisions of this OG and particularly that Company Officers (supervisors), and firefighters or other staff (workers) ensure that they adhere to their duties in accordance with the provisions of this document and the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

REFERENCES:

- Occupational Health and Safety Act (RSO 1990, c. 0.1)
- MLFD OG 224 Warm Weather Hazards - Bugs Snakes and Plants
- MLFD OG 231 Hazard, Incident, Illness Reporting