

How to Recognize Prey Drive in Your Dog

Chasing, hunting and herding other pets or wildlife are key signs that your dog is acting on his prey drive. So, while you can't - and shouldn't - try to eliminate this instinct in your pup, you can provide healthy outlets so your dog can express this behavior in an acceptable way.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Your dog is a natural predator, and although we often view our pets as docile, cuddly creatures, many will hunt and kill wildlife if given the chance
- Dogs use a chase-capture-kill sequence that's necessary in the wild to find food; domesticated dogs often engage in the first part of the sequence without progressing to an attack
- Chasing, hunting and herding other pets or wildlife are key signs that your dog is acting on his prey drive; some dogs may also chase vehicles and other moving objects
- Avoid leaving your pet outside unattended and always use a harness and fixed-length leash when going for walks; dogs with a high prey drive will run through an electric fence
- Sports and activities such as flyball, agility training, herding, K9 nose work and hunt and field trials are all excellent outlets for your dog to express this natural behavior

In the 1800s, Charles Darwin noticed that domesticated animals have specific features that set them apart from their wild counterparts. In addition to being more tame, they also tend to have floppier ears, white patches on their fur, curlier tails and smaller heads and snouts.

Known as "domestication syndrome," humans have, in many cases, tried to alter the wild appearance and behaviors of our beloved companions. The canine predatory instinct, or prey drive, is among them — but this is one behavior that most dogs act on sooner or later. In fact, it's completely natural.

So, while you can't — and shouldn't — try to eliminate this instinct in your pup, you can provide healthy outlets so your dog can express this behavior in an acceptable way.

Prey Drive Is Natural in Dogs

Your dog is a natural predator, and although we often view our pets as docile, cuddly creatures, many will hunt and kill wildlife if given the chance. Dogs use a chase-capture-kill sequence that's necessary in the wild to find food. As reported by PetMD, prey drive in dog is an instinctive behavior that typically follows this pattern:¹

- **Hunting** — Your dog may track a scent on the ground and in the air, while scanning the environment.

- **Stalking** — Your dog will fix their gaze on a target, freeze or slow down, and approach the target in a position that's low to the ground.
- **Catch** — Your dog may chase the prey, catch it and shake it. In the wild, dogs would kill the prey, but, PetMD notes, "it's not normal for domestic dogs to participate in a true "kill" phase."
- **Consumption** — In the wild, dogs would then eat the prey. Domestic dogs, however, don't typically eat the prey they catch.

Individual dogs vary in how strong their prey drive is, and prey drive may be stronger in certain breeds than others. Dogs may also participate in certain parts of the sequence, such as the hunting and stalking phase, without progressing to the attack portion. According to Positively:²

"Some dogs find it reinforcing to chase other animals or moving objects as it fulfills an instinctive need, but this is only the beginning of the predatory sequence. Humans have bred the desire to bite and kill out of the domestic dog unless it is specifically trained to do so, but occasionally a deeper instinct takes over."

Sighthounds, like greyhounds, are skilled at chasing prey while Labradors are known for their ability to retrieve prey animals. Terriers, meanwhile, are adept at hunting, chasing and killing prey. While any dog — even the most mellow, lap dog around — may be enticed to chase a squirrel in your backyard, **certain breeds** are known for a stronger prey drive. This includes:³

- Sporting dogs, such as spaniels, retrievers and pointers
- Herding breeds, such as border collies and Australian cattle dogs
- Terriers, including border terriers, Jack Russells and Westies
- Hounds, such as beagles, coonhounds and greyhounds

Northern breeds, like huskies and malamutes, also tend to have a strong prey drive that may progress through to the kill phase. Whole Dog Journal notes, "The Northern breeds have been the least genetically manipulated, which is why, in part, they most closely resemble their wolf ancestors. Thus they, and the unfortunate Wolf hybrid, are most likely to display the complete predatory sequence."⁴

Recognizing Prey Drive in Your Dog

Chasing, hunting and herding other pets or wildlife are key signs that your dog is acting on his prey drive. Some dogs may also chase vehicles and other moving objects. Other signs of prey drive in dogs include:⁵

- Chasing wildlife, other pets, bikes, cars and skateboarders
- Herding people or pets
- Digging in rodent holes
- Tracking scents
- Fixating on birds
- Killing small animals

These behaviors are normal in dogs and shouldn't be punished. However, you can take steps to manage the behaviors to keep your dog and other animals safe. Avoid leaving your pet outside unattended and always use a harness and fixed-length — **not retractable** — leash when going for walks. A fenced-in backyard can help to keep your dog contained, but supervision will also be necessary.

Do not rely on an electric fence, as dogs with a high prey drive may run right through it. Further, it won't stop potential prey from entering your yard. Also be sure that your dog knows basic training commands, including a reliable recall.

However, the best way to manage your dog's prey drive is to give him opportunities to hunt and chase in a positive environment. Without an outlet for this natural instinct, dogs may become anxious, frustrated and can even develop **canine compulsive disorder**.

Activities for Dogs With a High Prey Drive

There are many **toys**, games and organized sports that allow your dog to engage in predatory behavior. Treat-dispensing toys, puzzle toys and playing hide-and-seek with toys fall into this category, but some dogs may need a more robust outlet.

Sports and activities such as flyball, agility training, herding and hunt and field trials are all excellent options, as is **K9 nose work**, which works with your dog's natural instinct to hunt and track scents. In addition, take time each day to engage your dog's instinct to hunt and chase, which can be as simple as playing a game of fetch together. As Whole Dog Journal explains:⁶

"If you are the owner of a dog with strong predatory inclinations, it behooves you both to find an outlet for the behavior rather than simply trying to shut it off. Encourage your dog to chase and fetch balls, sticks, and toys, and take the time to engage in several fetch sessions with him per day."

Sources and References

^{1,3,5} [PetMD, Prey Drive in Dogs October 3, 2023](#)

² [Positively, Predatory Behavior](#)

^{4,6} [Whole Dog Journal, The Canine Predatory Instinct January 10, 2019](#)
