

Over the Back Fence
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Beach etiquette
By Alva Wood

Scientists say that laboratory rats get along very well together, as long as they're not crowded. But restrict their space, and those rats turn snarly and gnarly.

It certainly seems to work on the beach along our lake.

Ray Hiebert takes his dog Snork up to the lake most days for exercise. Snork gets the exercise. Ray throws the sticks. As a Labrador retriever, the only thing Snork enjoys more than fetching sticks is rolling in something stinky.

A signpost near the launching ramp says, "Dogs permitted on leash." But most of the year, no one gives Ray a bad time about allowing Snork to swim free.

Except at the height of summer. When a large portion of River City decides that this is THEIR lake, and THEIR beach. They stake out their towelled territory on the beach like homesteaders hitting the prairie.

Ray knew he was in trouble the day he took Snork to the lake one crowded afternoon.

There's not much beach at the lake. Most of the shoreline is heavily wooded. Or marshy, rocky, or covered with poison ivy.

Ray found there was hardly space to pass between the spread-out towels.

As he neared one family, he could hear the mom defending her turf. "Hey, you, keep your kids on your own towels! I didn't come up here to have sand kicked in my face by a bunch of hooligan kids!"

As Ray approached, she started in on him. "Keep that dog away from me! I don't want him dripping on my towels!"

Ray threw a stick way out into the water, and then walked around to the far side, so Snork wouldn't come near them.

"You're not allowed to have dogs on this beach!" she grumbled.

She was wrong. But so was Ray. Snork should have been on a leash, and he knew it.

Ray's a bit of a technology genius. When he goes home, he figures out how to put a miniature battery-powered motor inside a trolling reel with several hundred yards of monofilament wound onto it.

Next afternoon, the snarky lady is there again, with her family, sitting in her folding chair, under her umbrella, reading a Danielle Steele novel.

Ray takes Snork along the beach, tossing sticks as he goes.

"Hey, I thought I told you dogs weren't allowed on this beach," River City mom snaps as she sees him coming.

Snork pads up to her towels. He finds a dirty diaper lying on the ground, and flops onto it, wriggling in ecstasy.

"Get that disgusting creature out of here," she yelps.

"Actually, you're wrong," says Ray, carefully standing on one of her towels. "This is a public beach, and anyone's allowed on it," he says, flipping a stick out into the water.

Snork hits the water in a welter of foam, chasing the stick.

"Dogs aren't!" she insists.

"Go read the bylaws," replies Ray. "Better yet, read the sign over there. It says dogs are permitted, if they're on a leash."

"Yours isn't," she retorts.

Ray calmly shows her the fishing reel, which is busy rewinding itself as Snork grabs the stick and heads for shore.

"You can't call that a leash!" she snarls.

"The bylaw doesn't specify how long a leash can be," says Ray calmly.

Snork surges out of the water. He galumphs happily up to where Ray is still standing on the woman's towel, drops the stick, and shakes himself vigorously.

The woman screams. She tries to avoid the shower of spray. Her lawn chair tips over backwards. The chair knocks over her beach umbrella, which topples into a TV table, which spills her cucumber-and-cream-cheese sandwiches onto the ground.

Snork takes advantage of the hubbub to gobble a sandwich.

Several nearby families burst into applause.