

Kid's KOrner

Why Do Dogs Bark? No One Knows For Sure

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Woof! Woof! Woof! There it goes again, your neighbor's loud-mouthed dog. It's enough to drive you crazy.

Well, you may as well stop complaining, because nobody has figured out a fool-proof way to keep a raucous dog quiet. In fact, scientists can't even agree on why most dogs bark.

"It's because they're immature characters, like teen-agers, very hard to train," says dog expert Raymond Coppinger, a biologist at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass.

Unlike their wild wolf relatives, which stop barking as they mature, dogs develop into noisemakers because of domestication, Coppinger theorizes. Instead of achieving "a rich adult repertoire of wolflike guttural growls and snarls," he says, "they became perpetual adolescents and come out with something we affectionately call the bark."

Coppinger once clocked a sheep dog in a remote Minnesota field that barked non-stop for seven hours. "I don't know if the dog is a record-holder, but I'm certainly the record-holder for listening without interrupting," he says with a rueful grin.

Even Coppinger stands in awe of the researcher who timed a

cocker spaniel that yapped 907 times in 10 minutes.

Almost anything can set off a canine barking jab. "Dogs can bark at the moon, the wind or the rustling of trees," says Mark Feinstein, a professor of cognitive science at Hampshire.

"Sometimes they bark when there appears to be nothing happening at all. There seem to be an astonishing number of reasons, and it's unusual in the animal kingdom, where most creatures tend to vocalize for a few specifics such as defending territories or finding mates."

Dogs that sound off because they have nothing better to do are called "boredom barkers," says Bonnie V. Beaver, chief of small-animal medicine and surgery at Texas A&M University.

"Dogs are social," she tells National Geographic. "Keeping a pet shut up in the back yard without any human interaction isn't realistic. They're going to do something. They'll dig, bark, jump over the fence or run in circles. That's basically all they can do. You've got to look for what's driving the animal to a particular behavior."

The secret of dogs' communication lies in the pitch and frequency of their barking, says Stanley Coren, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia who has studied canine intelligence.



Harsh training elicits menacing snarls from a dog in Kenya. Some experts think dogs communicate through the pitch and frequency of their barks. Lower tones convey threats, and rapid-fire sounds warn of approaching strangers. Dogs may bark at anything, and nobody has figured out how to keep them quiet.

"A higher-pitched bark can mean a dog's frightened, and a lower tone can convey a threat," he says. "A quick burst of four or five barks, the kind you hear when someone comes to the door, means 'Come over herd, someone's invading our territory.' Then there's the bark with a stutter to it that's an invitation to play."

Some owners inadvertently turn Bowser into a loudmouth. The pet starts howling in the yard about midnight. "Shut up, you stupid mutt!" someone shouts.

"The dog gets rewarded with a voice response, so it barks even more," Beaver explains, "and eventually it gets to come inside. That dog's training its owners very well."

Reacting to complaints, many communities have passed anti-barking laws. "Of course they don't stop dogs from barking," Beavers says, "but all of a sudden

you've got a lot of frustrated owners looking for quick fixes instead of trying to deal with the initial problem of why their animals are barking."

Seeking instant cures, some dog owners have gone to such lengths as noise-activated devices that emit offensive odors or squirt water on offenders. A British inventor recently came up with a gadget that hangs around a dog's neck and emits a pungent lemon aroma every time the animal barks. Typical anti-bark collars produce unpleasant sounds or mild electric shocks.

Most such contraptions have one thing in common, the experts say: They don't work.

"Almost nothing will keep terriers from barking; it's in their genes," says Coren. "Everybody who owns a little terrier will tell you that its favorite game of all time is imaginary burglar. And it's

always played between two or three o'clock in the morning, when in fact the dog is announcing that a leaf has fallen against the wall of the house."

But Coren is also convinced that canine heroes have saved many human lives with their clamor. "I tend to believe that barking dogs are often called for help or alerting people, whom they consider members of their pack, that something is going on," he says.

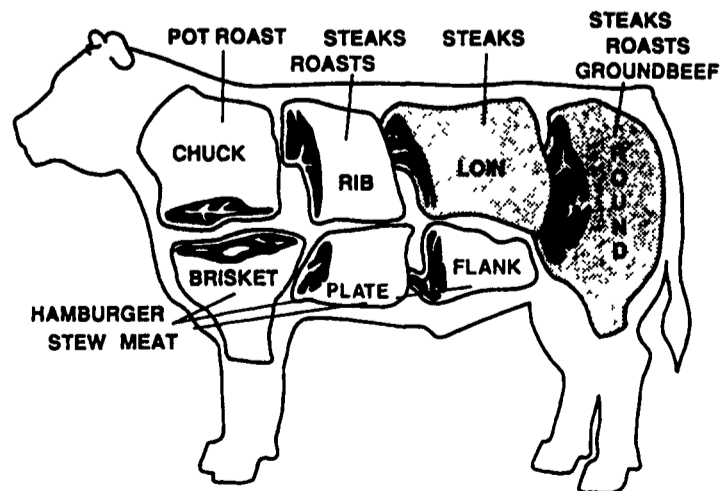
Heroes aside, how do you silence a noisy dog? Coren has a soothing solution: "No yelling; you don't say a word. Instead, you just stroke the dog, sort of run your hands along his head, down along the side of his chest and maybe a bit along the back. The dog will interpret that as meaning 'All's well, there must not be anything to bark about.'"

You hope.



A pooch voices displeasure at a painter. Many dogs need little or no excuse to bark, an exercise that may last for hours. Scientists don't agree on the reasons dogs vocalize. Animals that sound off for no apparent cause are frequently called "boredom barkers," but training failures by their owners may be to blame.







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