

Together Let's Make the Ribble Valley a 'No Go' Area for Dog Thieves

Dear Reader,

You are probably aware that dog theft is increasing at an alarming rate. You may not be aware though that the North West is currently a 'hot spot' and rural areas such as the Ribble Valley, including villages like Mellor, are being targeted.

Widespread concern is gathering momentum as dog owners become fearful for the safety of their dogs and also for their own safety. Over recent months there has been extensive and almost daily media coverage on tv, the radio and in the press. There has been such a public outcry about this despicable crime that it's become impossible to ignore.

The encouraging news is that a bright light is now shining on this matter and things are starting to happen at national, regional and local level. The following are some recent examples. A Taskforce has been set up by the government to take the lead on dog theft. The body involving officials from the Home Office, Ministry for Justice and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) met week commencing 21 March to consider the problem. A chief inspector has just been appointed by Nottinghamshire police force, tasked with tackling canine crime in the county. A petition to Make Pet Theft a Specific Crime in UK Law currently has over 528,000 signatures, see Stan Rawlinson on change.org. You may wish to support this petition and add your own signature. There is undoubtedly growing support for a tougher stance on dealing with the perpetrators of this abhorrent crime.

As we all know, change doesn't happen overnight and it's likely to take time. Meanwhile, however, we can all play our part to ensure the safety of our own dogs, all the other dogs within our village community, the surrounding areas and the wider Ribble Valley. Together We Can Make the Ribble Valley a 'No Go' Area for Dog Thieves.

Listed below are some of the reasons that dogs are being stolen. Please be aware that it's a shocking and upsetting read but sadly it's the reality.

- To meet the growing demand for particular breeds which are in short supply - dogs are being stolen 'to order' and they are then sold for extortionate prices
- For monetary reward on the return of the dog - no questions asked
- There is increased demand for working dogs
- For puppy farms - bitches and dogs are kept in deplorable conditions for breeding purposes - there is no regard for their welfare - poorly puppies are being sold to unsuspecting people and this often leads to heartache e.g. some pups don't survive for long after purchase or they have to be euthanised by vets
- For puppy smuggling - within and outside of the UK

- Rising puppy prices
- For fighting - this barbaric activity is still taking place despite the fact that it's illegal - stolen dogs are used as bait

The following are some recent examples of the scale of the problem. In late January this year 4 sheepdogs were stolen from kennels in rural Cumbria. The black and white border collies worth more than £13,500 were working dogs that lived in kennels and herded sheep. "They were also much-loved family pets who were greatly missed." The Times reported on February 13 2021 that "*Cruel smugglers cash in on demand for puppies*". In the article, David Bowles, RSPCA head of public affairs said, " Our frontline investigations into unscrupulous breeders and sellers has uncovered organised criminal gangs who import puppies from overseas - often from Ireland and eastern European countries such as Romania - to sell on to unsuspecting buyers here in the UK." He also said, "Gangs are bringing hundreds of puppies into the UK, where prices have doubled in a year and they could each fetch £2,000." On Sunday 21 March, it was reported on BBC Radio 2 and the BBC early evening news that 'stolen' dogs were seized in a raid in Suffolk. Further details emerged the following day when John Simpson Crime Correspondent with The Times reported that, "Six people were arrested and **83** dogs were found during a ten-hour police search...on Saturday afternoon. Suspected stolen dogs of various breeds and ages were recovered by officers. The raid is the latest action aimed at curbing a wave of dog thefts. The price of puppies has risen steeply along with the demand for lockdown pets."

I think you would agree that this paints an utterly sickening picture and we must do everything we can to keep our dogs safe. Once stolen, a dog can easily be moved miles away in a short space of time, so prevention is vital.

ID Your Dog

Ensure that your dog is microchipped by the time it's 8 weeks old and that it wears a collar with a tag on it when it's out in a public place, whether on a lead or not. Both are legal requirements in England, Scotland and Wales.

Microchip

Contact your microchip provider to check that they have your correct details e.g. you may have changed your address or mobile number and not informed them. For detailed information, go to www.Gov.UK - Get Your Dog Microchipped. You may also find the following sites helpful www.RSPCA.org.UK - Dog Microchipping All You Need To Know www.DOGSTRUST.org.uk - Dog Microchipping Questions and Answers

Collar and ID Tag

To be compliant the ID tag should include your surname, house number and postcode. Consider including your vet's telephone number as well. It's not a requirement to include your dog's name, therefore, for security reasons, it's not advisable to include it or your full address.

Photographs

Make sure that you have some recent clear photographs of your dog, including its face and ensure that you update them regularly. Take them from various angles to show any distinguishing features that would help with identification. Have photographs of yourself with your dog to help prove ownership, if necessary.

Thieves Don't Care

Either sex, any type, any age and anywhere:

- opportunists who snatch and run
- organised and careful planners who watch and wait, ready to take your dog should an opportunity arise

Be Dog Theft Aware

Your dog is vulnerable if it is:

- left unattended in your garden/outdoor area, even if you think your garden/outdoor area is secure - **most dogs are stolen from gardens**
- left tied up outside a shop or supermarket
- left alone in your car, even if your car is locked and alarmed
- off lead and not under close control - wandering out of sight
- waiting by your car at the end of a walk, having run on ahead of you

Walking/Exercising Your Dog

Take action to keep your dog safe:

- train your dog to come back when called - do not let your dog off the lead if you are not sure that your dog will come back when called - if in doubt, use an appropriate extending lead, especially if you are in an area that you and your dog are not familiar with
- ensure that children/young people are accompanied by an adult when walking a dog
- vary your usual walks/routes and the times that you go
- consider walking with someone else or with a group if you usually walk alone
- carry a loud whistle/personal alarm so that you can attract attention if you need to
- avoid walking alone at night and especially in poorly lit areas
- avoid walking alone in isolated areas and unfamiliar areas
- be aware of blind spots where a thief could easily hide e.g. dense woodland
- you may be vulnerable when distracted e.g. by your mobile phone or when picking your dog's poo up - stay alert
- be aware of your surroundings at all times, including when you are visiting or staying in other parts of the UK

Stranger Danger

Be observant when you are out with your dog:

- take notice of people in vehicles, especially vans, parked up where you wouldn't expect to see them
- look out for people loitering where you wouldn't expect to see them - are they acting suspiciously?
- check regularly to make sure you are not being followed, if you are, head for the nearest occupied building or catch up with walkers ahead of you
- be suspicious of anyone showing a lot of interest in your dog, asking questions such as sex, type and age - **never disclose your dog's name or your address**
- do not let anyone take photographs of your dog

Impersonating and Attempting To Steal

Someone may try to convince you that they have authority to take your dog:

- in different areas of the country there have been reported incidents of individuals impersonating RSPCA inspectors/staff, supposedly following up claims that a dog is stolen - unsuspecting people have been targeted whilst walking their dogs or at home - **please note, the RSPCA does not investigate reports of stolen dogs**
- if you are approached by someone who may have posed as an RSPCA officer or another agency worker, please report the incident to the local police on 101
- for more information, refer to the official statement issued by the RSPCA on 16/01/21 - *Advice to the public after people impersonate RSPCA staff*
- do not let such a stranger e.g. check your dog's microchip, **it's an attempt to steal your dog**

At Home

Take action to keep your dog safe:

- ensure your garden/outdoor area is secure and check it routinely
- consider installing additional security measures
- discourage your dog from sitting on window ledges and barking as this attracts attention to your dog's location
- regularly check your gates, gateposts and walls etc. for e.g. paint or chalk marks that a 'scout' may have left to indicate to a thief that a dog lives there
- if you breed puppies for sale, take great care when inviting people in to view them - ideally have someone else with you and limit the number of people you allow in at a time - show the puppies in one secure area
- take care when choosing someone to look after your dog if you are going away from home or you need a dog walker - always do your research and use a reputable company or individual - interview and check references for people who provide dog related or house-sitting services - be wary of strangers offering such services

In Mellor

Take action to keep all dogs safe:

- be alert for anything unexpected or unusual when you are out and about in the village with your dog
- get to know our dog community and spread the word about dog theft awareness
- look out for others with dogs, especially members of our community who may be vulnerable

If the Worst Happens

If your dog is stolen or lost, it is important to act quickly:

- if your dog has been snatched or you believe it has been stolen, call 999 and report it to the local police - insist it is recorded as a theft and not a lost animal - ask for a crime reference number
- report the theft or loss to the microchip provider that your dog is registered with, this will ensure that if anyone tries to re-register the chip number, you will be informed - if and when your dog is found, it will help with identification
- use social media to post information about the theft or loss, include photographs of your dog
- report the theft or loss on the many missing animal websites as there is no single national database
- email the details to admin@dogslost.co.uk and send a photograph of your dog to photos@doglost.co.uk or call or 01633 673859
- contact local vets in case someone takes your dog in for treatment
- contact local animal shelters and rescue charities and send them posters to display
- contact Ribble Valley Borough Council's dog warden on 01200 425111 and dog wardens in neighbouring authorities
- make posters and display them in local areas and relevant places such as vets and local parks - include a recent clear photograph and details of the theft or loss
- visit places where dog walkers go and talk to people - ask them to look out for your dog
- losing a dog due to theft or other reasons is a traumatic event - Blue Cross operates the national Pet Bereavement Support Service, contact them on 0800 096 6606

We can all play our part to ensure the safety of our own dogs, all the other dogs within our village community, the surrounding areas and the wider Ribble Valley. Together We Can Make the Ribble Valley a 'No Go' Area for Dog Thieves.

Author - A lifelong dog lover/owner and Mellor resident

