



Animal Interaction

Includes:

- All animal tourism and interaction
- Farm animals and home pets
- Wild animals (e.g., dolphin rides)
- Rescue, shelter, and therapy animals

Activity Permitted for: D B J C S A

Council Approval: Required for Swimming with Dolphins and Other Interactive Experiences as per Council Policy P1; [Activity/Trip Permission \(2129\)](#)

Vendor Approval: Not Required except for **wolf, big cat, shark, or similar large animal interactions.**

Required Training: 281 GS 201 Trips & Overnights (gsLearn)

About Animal Interaction

Planned interaction with animals is a popular and desired activity for many Girl Scouts, from petting zoos to therapy dogs and rescue animals. Through these activities girls can learn about animals and have memorable experiences.

Unplanned interaction with animals can occur during other activities, such as hiking. Prepare for those ahead so girls know that not interacting with an animal will provide both safety and a valuable learning opportunity.

This activity primarily focuses on planned animal interaction under a controlled environment, including all educational programs, wildlife tourism, and farm animals.

Learn More

- [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#)
- Child safety around animals: [HealthyChildren.org](#)

Animal Safety and Health Reminders

- **Partner with reputable organizations.** Ensuring they have liability insurance helps credibility.
- **Assess your girls.** Ensure they are mature enough to follow rules and exercise self-control. Do not allow children under age five to interact with reptiles, amphibians, baby chicks, ducklings, or petting zoo animals (per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- **Control their interaction.** Let girls know that it is not okay to tease, hurt, or play roughly with any animal.

- **Keep it clean.** Make sure hands are washed before and after contact with animals, animal bedding, or waste.
- **Be vigilant.** Treat bites or scratches according to the first aider's training to avoid infection. Report animal aggression, bites, or other concerns to the authorities and to your council.

Include Girl Scout Members with Disabilities

Talk to Girl Scout members with disabilities and their caregivers. Ask about needs and accommodations. Always be sure to contact the location and/or the instructors in advance to ensure they are able to accommodate those with disabilities.

Equity. In addition to physical and social-emotional disabilities, consider the history, culture, and past experiences of the Girl Scout members in your troop that could affect their ability to equally participate in an activity. Work with members and families to understand how an activity is perceived. Ensure that all Girl Scout members and their families feel comfortable and have access to whatever is needed to fully participate, such as proper equipment, prior experiences, and the skills needed to enjoy the activity.

Infectious Disease Guidelines. Girl Scouts use a commonsense approach to health and safety. Before participating in Girl Scouting activities, members are to undergo health checks at home for any symptoms such as fever of 100.4 (or need for fever-reducing medications) chills, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, stomach aches, nausea, or vomiting. Members with any of these symptoms or in need of fever-reducing medication **MUST** stay home until fully recovered.

Emergency Action Plan (EAP). Review and document your Emergency Action Plan (EAP) before taking girls out for any activity and review it with the girls so they too are prepared. Think through scenarios of what can go wrong such as an accident, physical injury to a girl, missing girl, sudden illness, or sudden weather or water emergencies.

Animal Interaction Checkpoints

Vendor Approval Required for wolf, big cat, shark, or similar large animal interactions. Review Vendor Approval section under the Standard Safety Guidelines for vendor approval timelines. Connect with your Girl Scout council for approved vendor suggestions to ensure they are properly insured. If it is not, allow enough time to have the vendor approved. The owner operator should be able to confirm one million dollars General Liability insurance upon request. The council will request a certificate of insurance to document evidence of the insurance coverage and name the council as additional insured. Most facilities will accommodate this request if they are able to administratively. See [High Adventure Approved Vendors List \(#2147\)](#).

Required Training: Troop/Group Program leaders must complete GSUSA's online leadership courses and GSVSC's 281 GS 201 Trips & Overnights course in gsLearn. Adult volunteer chaperones must complete GSVSC's 281 GS 104 Orientation for Support Volunteers online course in gsLearn.

Review basic rules for animal interaction:

- Do not pet or otherwise disturb an animal that is sleeping or eating.
- Stay away from an animal's food.
- Do not tease or abuse an animal.
- Watch for warning signs like growling or hissing.
- Never pet an unfamiliar dog, cat, or other animal.
- Be cautious about touching animals, such as puppies and kittens, within view of their mother.

In addition, in the case of dogs for example, do not run when approached by an unfamiliar dog. Running may make the dog aggressive. Instead, slowly back away, avoid sudden movements, and avoid direct eye contact, but keep the dog within view.

Pets, Therapy Animals, and Rescue Shelters

- **Protect girls as well as hosts' house pets.** This should be taken into consideration during meetings, overnights, and activities. Secure all pets out of reach when girls are present.
- **Certified, trained service animals, like guide or hearing dogs, must be welcomed.** When engaging with service animals, be welcoming and follow the handler's instructions regarding petting or engaging with them.
- **Follow the rules.** These are often provided by the animal rescue facility or shelter.
- **Supervise girls closely.** Watch the girls and practice the buddy system.
- **Be clean.** Take care to wash hands and sanitize footwear to protect girls from disease and to prevent spreading disease from one animal to another.
- **Make it a learning experience.** Talk to girls and research the root causes that lead to animals being in shelters. Brainstorm Take Action projects the troop might be able to do to help.
- **Avoid these activities while at the rescue or shelter:**
 - eating or drinking,
 - sitting or playing on the ground,
 - feeding the animals, unless supervised by shelter personnel and animal contact is controlled with barriers,
 - contact with animals if you or the animal has an open wound, and
 - contact with animal waste.

Petting Zoos and Animal Ambassadors

- Follow rules provided by the zoo.
- Take care to wash hands and sanitize footwear, as directed.
- Do not handle bedding, food, water, or manure unless trained to do so.

Drive Through Zoos and Parks

- Drive vehicles with secure roofs and doors and windows that fully close.
- Keep windows rolled up.
- Do not get out of the vehicle.

Swimming with Dolphins and Other Interactive Experiences

- Choose a safe and responsible animal organization. See the "Choosing a Partner Organization" section below.
- Review safety management with the organization before visiting the site.
- Make sure predators are secured or separated from girls.
- *Contact your council for specific approval and guidance for **wolf, big cat, shark, or similar large animal interactions.***
- Follow any related safety activity checkpoints. For example, follow [Swimming Safety Activity Checkpoints](#) when swimming with dolphins.

Farm Animals and Husbandry

- Ask permission before entering a farm or barnyard.
- Ask if there are areas to avoid.
- Get an orientation from an on-site expert. Learn and follow their safety rules.

- See [Horseback Riding Safety Activity Checkpoints](#) if you will work with or ride horses.

Wild Animals

- Learn about the animals that live in the area you frequent or will visit.
- Never approach wild animals. Generally, animals will not attack or bite if left alone.
- Back away if you come across baby animals and assume that there is a protective mother nearby. Backing away protects you and the babies.
- Report animals that appear sick or behave strangely to the authorities.
- Take special care in snake country:
 - Do not stick your hand or foot in places you can't see.
 - Wear closed-toed shoes.
 - Use a flashlight when walking at night to avoid stepping on a snake.
 - Do not handle snakes, even if you think they are dead.
 - Back away slowly if you encounter a snake.
- Never feed wild animals.
- Store food away from tents or cabins and out of the reach of animals. If the site is in bear country, check with local authorities on precautions to take, and ask if a bear-proof canister is required for food.

Choosing Partner Organizations

Select partner organizations that have visitor safety and animal well-being as top priorities.

For visitor safety, look for organizations that:

- provide handwashing stations,
- provide an orientation or training on safety rules,
- supervise visitors,
- limit visits so animals do not get overwhelmed,
- keep the environment clean, especially manure pick up, and
- have food stations for visitors that are separate from animal enclosures.

For animal well-being, look for organizations that:

- Keep animals healthy and cared for with food, clean water, and a sheltered place to rest.
- Do not have animals that sway or pace in their enclosures, as these behaviors can be signs of stress.
- Keep exotic or wild animals only while they recover or because they can't be reintroduced into the wild.
- Do not engage in the commercial trade of animals or animal parts.
- Do not breed animals and have measures in place to prevent breeding unless the animals are part of an authorized release program.
- Do not take in more animals than they can humanely handle,
- Do not use animals for entertainment or force animals to perform acts such as rides, shows, or tricks.
- Operate in the best interest of the animals, rather than for profit.
- Do not allow venomous animals to be handled.

Note: Be wary of places that claim to be sanctuaries, especially those overseas. They often operate for profit and are likely to exploit animals. Wildlife tourism sites, including those that offer elephant rides, the opportunity to hold newborn cubs, or the chance to pet tigers, are also potentially exploitive and dangerous. Investigate these beforehand at the [Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries](#). Ethical tour operators can be found [here](#).