

Primary Sources

Tails of the Dog Park

By Kim Pearson

Goody Beagle here. You don't know me unless you have read my book *Dog Park Diary: the social round of Goody Beagle*. It's about my visits to my dog park and who I meet there and all the things we smell. It's a good book, and mostly true, but after it was published, I discovered that I have more to say about dogs. In this article I want to talk about the important skill of tail reading. All you humans should read it so you can understand us dogs better.

The first thing I want to say is that beagles have the best tails of all. Most of us have white tips at the ends of our tails, and they are so beautiful all other dogs are jealous. Well, maybe you would disagree, especially if you have a Husky with a curly tail or a Pomeranian with a bushy tail, or even a dog with no tail (because you chopped it off!). Well, that's your privilege, but I'm here to tell you that Beagles have the best tails, and that's all there is to it. All educated dogs agree.

But beauty aside, all tails are used by us dogs to communicate with each other. We try to use them to communicate with you humans, but since you gave up your tails long ago in your history, you no longer have the ability to truly understand them. What I'll give you in this article are just some basics. There's no way you'll be able to understand the subtleties, so I'm not even going to try.

If we hold our tails straight up in the air, it means we are feeling confident and relaxed. We know we are in control, and there is nothing we have to fear in the immediate vicinity. A dog who holds an important position in the pack holds his or her tail this way. If we wag our tails in long, slow sweeps, this can mean the same thing. We're saying, "This is a good place to be, and I'm glad I'm here."

If we hold our tails straight down, it means there is something around that concerns us. Maybe another dog who is being aggressive. Maybe a human who is nervous. Or just a new situation that hasn't been checked out yet.

If we're really scared, we might tuck our tail between our legs. For some of us who have had unfortunate experiences in the past, like with a vacuum cleaner that makes a horrendous noise and can suck in your feet and tail and other important body parts if you let it (a vacuum cleaner tried this with me so I know what I'm talking about), tucking our tail between our legs means we are getting out of here, just as soon as we can.

Now sometimes tucking our tail between our legs doesn't mean we are scared, but just that there's a dog (or a human) around who is more powerful, and we want to show that we'll do whatever they say.

Humans call this “submission behavior.” They can call it what they want, it just makes sense to me to make nice with the big guys.

But be aware that some dogs, like greyhounds and whippets, always hold their tail between their legs. It’s their natural way, and it doesn’t mean submission at all with them. I never said tail reading was easy!

All humans think they know what wagging tails mean. Well, think again. It is true that when we wag our tails it can mean “Hey, great to see ya, I love you.” But not always. We are way more subtle than that. For instance, if we wag our tail really fast, zip zip zip, it probably means something like “I don’t know what’s going to happen and I’m not sure I’m going to like it when it does.”

Did you know there are some human scientists in Italy who studied tail wagging and they say when we wag our tail to the left we are anxious, and when we wag it to the right we are happy? Hmm, I don’t know -- I never pay that much attention to which way my tail is going – I just let it go. But it goes to show you that tail wagging is more complex than most of you humans think. Or maybe it shows that Italian humans know more about dogs.

When you dock your dog’s tail (for the life of me I don’t see why you would do this to a fellow creature) you take away one of our important methods of communication. What if another species decreed that you no longer should have your eyebrows – just because they thought it would look better? How would you like that? You wouldn’t be able to frown, or show surprise or delight, or ask questions in the same way. I don’t think you’d like it at all.

People, people, tails are here for a reason!

Of course tails are only one part of the story. All our gestures have complex meanings, especially when we combine them with each other. But tails is a good place to start, since I don’t want to get you humans too confused. I know you can only learn one thing at a time. Maybe in another article I’ll talk about all the rest – narrow eyes, wide eyes, staring eyes, shifty eyes, ear wiggling, cocking and flattening, hackle raising, licking, rolling, nosing, pawing, head lowering, barking, growling, whining, yelping, howling, snarling, showing teeth, stalking, stiff walking, jumping, slinking, bowing – and all combinations of the above. And I didn’t even mention smell, and that’s the most important communication tool of all!

© 2008 - Kim Pearson is the author of five books, including Dog Park Diary, and a ghostwriter of more than thirty non-fiction books. Dog Park Diary is the first she has ghostwritten for a dog. For more about Dog Park Diary, visit www.dogparkdiary.net, and for more about Kim’s ghostwriting services, visit www.primary-sources.com.