



Dogs in Hot Cars — and Their Rescuers —Get a Break

Attitudes & laws, are changing

By Michele Coppola

If you've never felt the one-two punch of heat and humidity in the south, it knocks you out, even in short sleeves. 75 degrees feels like 85, and any space without ventilation becomes an oven — fast.

That's why Desert Storm veteran [Michael Hammons broke the window of a parked car](#) in the lot of a south Georgia shopping mall one hot May morning when he saw a small Terrier mix panting frantically inside.

The dog's owner did not appreciate his intervention. She insisted the police file charges and Hammons was arrested. Though the charges were later dropped, the incident sparked a conversation about the need for "dogs in hot cars" laws to protect people who try to help them.

Georgia currently only shields citizens who break into cars to free people in distress — but that state's southern neighbor recently went further.

Hot state, cool law

In March of this year, Florida signed into law [House Bill 131](#), which grants private individuals immunity from civil liability for damage incurred in the course of rescuing unattended people or animals in distress. Florida became one of only three states with such a law; Wisconsin [passed its version](#) in November 2015, and Tennessee has [amended a similar statute](#) to include domestic animals.

"This bill flew through," says Kate McFall, Florida State Director of the [Humane Society of the United States](#) (HSUS). "It was a good common sense bill that addressed both vulnerable people and animals, and kudos to the sponsors — they did a great job." Indeed, including humans in the bill was key to its passage, according to McFall.

"If this had just been an animal bill, it may have had a bit more opposition here in Florida, because of the very conservative legislature," she says.

While the Florida law does protect good samaritans from civil liability, certain steps are required before breaking a window: in addition to believing an animal or person is "in imminent danger of suffering harm," they must also make sure the vehicle is locked, call 911, make reasonable effort to find the owner, and use no more force than necessary to enter the vehicle.

Though it may seem inconceivable that just three states have laws protecting so-called "hot car heroes," consider that only 20 states have statutes specifically prohibiting leaving a companion animal in a parked car under certain conditions. What makes the Florida, Wisconsin, and Tennessee laws different is that they specifically protect non-law enforcement individuals who damage property in an attempt to help a distressed animal.



It's getting hot in here

He's looking at you, his whole back end wagging. He sees the keys in your hand and knows you're going somewhere. "C'mon boy," you say, and he bounds happily to the car with you, jumps in, ready to go. It's a sunny day, only about 70 degrees. It feels good on your bare skin.

You stop at the store. You'll just be a minute, so you crack the car windows and head inside.

20 minutes later, your dog — the one wearing a fur coat who has no sweat glands except on his feet — is panting heavily and drooling. The temp in the car is near 90.

A half hour has passed, and your vehicle's interior has now reached 105 degrees. Your dog is starting to panic: pacing, whining, clawing at the doors to get out. Trying to breathe through that barely-open window.

If your dog is lucky, someone has noticed his distress and called 911.

"Yes, we as an agency have started taking those calls," says Randall Brown, Chief Field Supervisor for Multnomah County Animal Services (MCAS). "We're coming into that time of

year and it's a pretty big topic. We've already pulled one hot dog out of a car, and we've had quite a few calls that have come in."

In fact, by the end of the area's relatively mild summer, Brown expects his officers and local law enforcement will have responded to more than 300 calls about dogs overheating in parked cars.

"Here you do have to watch out for sunny days," cautions Brown. "People say 'I'm gonna take my dog and run to the grocery store.' But your car is an oven, and the animals are panting in the car so they're breathing out hot air, which raises the temperature as well. It's very dangerous."

Both animal control officers and police respond to dog in hot car calls, depending upon location. Either way it's important the caller stay on site to monitor the animal.

"Don't leave," says Brown. "That's another big problem. We get there and the caller is gone, because they don't want to chance [a confrontation] if the owner comes out. And that makes the animal really difficult to find, especially in a big parking lot."

Hot under the collar

Not surprisingly, most owners are defensive when confronted about leaving their dog in the car. However, Brown says if the pet is not in acute distress when officers arrive, they can take the heat off the animal and the situation.

"Typically, if the animal doesn't die, it's going to be animal abuse in the second degree, a Class B Misdemeanor in Oregon," he explains. "But most of time if we're able to get the animal out of the car and cooled off, we can do some owner education. Some people just don't realize how quickly a car heats up."

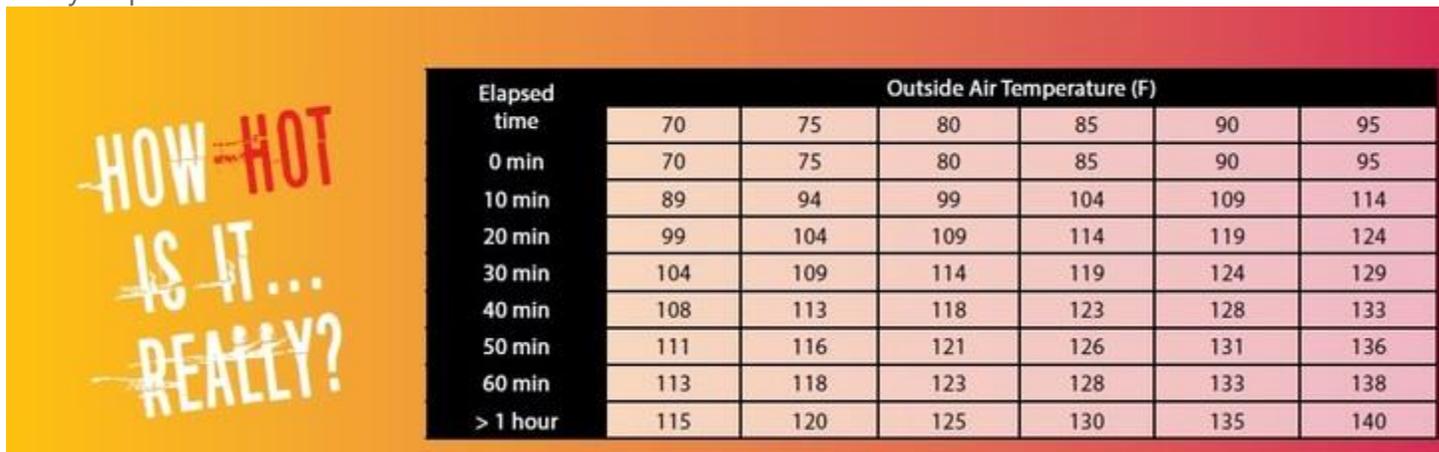
Getting an overheated dog out of a locked vehicle has also recently become easier for Oregon and Washington's animal control officers, thanks to new laws passed in both states.

"As of January, [Oregon] [Senate Bill 614](#) was signed, allowing us to breach a window if an animal is in distress," says Brown. "Prior to that, we had to call in law enforcement to pop the window." Washington's recently passed [bill has a similar provision](#).

Still, neither state has a law or proposed bill to protect private citizens from arrest or liability if they bust a window to free a pet from a hot car. But the most important action people can take to save a pet from vehicular heat stroke doesn't involve damaging property at all: turn on Animal Planet, and leave your dog at home.

If you find a dog in a hot car

1. Check the locks. Authorities often arrive only to discover the vehicle unlocked.
2. Call 911 or animal control. An officer should be quickly dispatched.
3. Attempt to find the owner. Go inside and have the owner paged with car description and license plate number.
4. DON'T LEAVE. Officers need help locating the animal; the animal needs to be monitored to ensure an accurate report.
5. If the owner returns before officers arrive, try to get them to stay. Explain your concerns as nicely as possible and let the officers take it from there.



Symptoms of heatstroke

All dogs pant, even in cooler weather. However, heavy panting with drool, dark tongue and gums signal urgent concern.

Dogs are unique, just like people. While some seem lethargic or unresponsive when in distress, others get restless. In later stages of heat stroke, a dog may vomit, have bloody diarrhea, lose coordination, or go into seizure. A dog's body temperature can rise rapidly; a consistent high temperature can cause organ failure.

Flat-nosed dogs like Pugs, Boxers, Bulldogs, and Pekingese — are at GREAT RISK of heat stroke at much lower temperatures than other breeds.