

Cold Weather Pet Care: Taking Care of Dogs, Cats & Other Animals When the Temperatures Drop

By Marcia K. Elder



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About the Author: *Marcia K. Elder*

Marcia is a life-long animal lover whose sensitivity to the needs of animals has been called extraordinary. She grew up with horses and a once homeless dog, and now lives on a farm where many and varied animals receive the best of care. She is near completion in the writing of an inspiring and informative book about the care of special needs dogs and what it means to be an animal lover. She also writes for several animal support Websites and Blogs.

Marcia has headed her own consulting firm for over 26 years and serves as director of a nonprofit organization that specializes in public education and nonprofit capacity building. Part of that organization's work is providing training and other support services to nonprofits that help animals. Marcia is a dynamic public speaker and is passionate about making a difference for the good of others. She has written this short e-book toward that end.



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Cold Weather Pet Care: Taking Care of Dogs, Cats & Other Animals When the Temperatures Drop

By Marcia K. Elder

There's a saying about getting "left out in the cold". It's meant figuratively ... but when the winter season rolls around, many animals get left out in the cold, literally.

Frigid temperatures can endanger the health and safety of animals, both large and small. Extreme cold weather can lead to illness, weakness and premature death. Exposure to the cold also can result in serious discomfort, for animals of all shapes and sizes.

"Outdoor" dogs and cats typically live outside year-round, but, depending on where you live and the weather particulars, there comes a time when these animals need shelter from the elements.

My take is that kindness, consideration and informed care are prerequisites to our relationships with animals. The information that follows is intended to serve all three purposes.

“Pyr Review”

I remember years ago when the most special animal family members of my life (9 Great Pyrenees -- very big, white, long-haired dogs) loved nothing more than to sprawl out in the yard in a cold winter rain or in below freezing evening temperatures. I would look out in the morning and see frost on their fur! They had warm beds in the barn, plus other easy-access shelter. But their breed hails from the Pyrenees Mountains in France where snow and cold are a matter of course. *They even have extra claws on the sides of their lower legs (called dew claws) to help them grip the mountainous terrain. And they have an extra layer of fur (a soft “undercoat” of different texture) to insulate them from the snow’s impacts.*

In their senior years, though, things were different. Joint issues and other physical conditions much different than in their younger days meant that they no longer sought the cold and instead valued a comfy warm bed on chilly nights. Staying in the barn worked well for them in a light freeze, but coming inside was important, to me and them, when the temperatures dropped to a hard freeze.

Just like with people, their needs changed with time, both with age and the ongoing change in physical conditions. To subject them to extreme cold wouldn't have killed them. But it would have caused them pain and discomfort. *Unacceptable consequences in my book.*

And we're talking about big bodied dogs with heavy coats. Think about the dogs and cats with short hair and much lighter bodies. A below-freezing night outside can be one of true misery for many animals.

“They Can Take It”

To the people who say: "They'll be fine" or "they can take it... they have coats" (which I've heard countless times), let's send them out for an hour (much less a whole night) at 29 degrees! Think how you'd feel if you were in their paws! And what about when it's in the lower 20's or teens?

It pains me greatly to hear dogs yelping in the distance on cold nights like these. They call out for help hour after hour and no-one brings them in. These are dogs that normally don't bark like that at all – all the more “clue” that they really need some support.

Add to that dogs or cats who aren't necessarily old, but have health issues -- Diabetes, Arthritis, Kidney Disease, etc. or those recovering from a surgery, injury or illness.

One of the Pyr dogs was diagnosed with Diabetes at mid-life and it made her more sensitive to the cold. Interestingly, it also stunted her hair growth to where she no longer got a thicker winter coat. She knew she needed to be inside as the temperature dropped and she wouldn't have fared well at all if left outside.

The same doggie developed joint issues well before old age. Like with people, joint problems can result in pain when getting up and down or otherwise moving about ... and the effects are worse when it's cold outside.

One of the cats at the farm was recently diagnosed with Kidney Disease and is functioning on a quarter of his kidneys. He's actually doing great, but he wouldn't be if I left him out in the cold. He goes out during the day if the temperature is above 40 and stays in at night and otherwise during chilly weather.

Sometimes an animal can have these kinds of conditions and you don't yet know it. But leaving them in extreme cold (or heat) could tax their bodies and be harmful (or, again, very uncomfortable). Not a thing to do to a loved one (*or to anyone we can help for that matter*).

Years ago a friend left the family cat out in the freeze when the cat wanted to come in. The kitty died the next day. Turns out she had Kidney Disease and the combination of cold plus a large meal of canned food was more than her system could withstand. *Special foods are available for cats with this condition that are much more digestible and healthful.*

Icy Drinks in Icy Cold

Then comes the matter of their fluids. As with humans, water intake is vital to good health. But water bowls left outside for pets can freeze or become icy cold.

A frozen water bowl in the shade can stay frozen all day, even when the temperature goes well above 32 degrees. As a result, the dogs, cats, or other animals can be deprived of water (which, in itself, can be harmful to health and safety).

If not frozen, but ultra cold, the water may be too unappealing for them to drink. So, again, they are deprived. Or they may drink it, but it could make them feel even colder -- makes sense, right? If not, try it yourself and you'll quickly see!

Horses have been known to colic from drinking super cold water ... a painful experience for the horse and an expensive one with vet care to help them or save their lives.

Cold Weather Rain

If you were out there in the cold, with your coat on, and rain came your way you'd no doubt be even more unhappy. But that's part of the everyday life of animals too. Because they have no choice.

Animals like dogs and cats were "domesticated" and, in the process, became dependent upon humans for their care. Giving them "shelter in the storm" is part of our role in providing adequate and responsible care.

Leaving an animal sitting in the cold while soaking wet is a recipe for illness not to mention misery.

Wind Chill

Cold temperatures are one thing, but that thing called "wind chill" can make matters way worse. It's what the weather people refer to as "the temperature it feels like". What it feels like means a whole lot more to a person (or any other being facing the weather) than a number on a thermometer or weather report.

We've had hard freezes multiple times in recent weeks and on some days the wind chill has been "bone chilling". The upper 20's can feel like low 20's or even teens if weather conditions are "right".

A person heading out the door can feel the extent of cold and pop back inside to get warmer clothing. The animal left outside can do nothing but try to find a place where the wind is blocked, if they can, while still contending with the cold temperature.

Measured Doses

Some animals (and people too) become invigorated by a brisk walk in the cold or an outing to play in it outside. The cold can be energizing and fun. Horses kick up their heels, dogs run and jump, and so on. But, as in many things, having it in moderation enables the positive effects. The fun of it will soon fade if one is exposed to the frigid cold non-stop with no escape.

Also keep in mind: neither humans nor other animals always “know what’s best for them” if their health warrants doing one thing but they’re enjoying doing another. For some, running about in a hard freeze puts a strain on their bodies that a sensation of fun can’t negate, leaving them worse off for the experience.

ACTION OPTIONS

So what steps can be taken to help our furry friends and loved ones? Some of the things I’ve done, for dogs and cats in particular, are:

1. Track the Weather – Staying in-tuned to when it’s going to be cold and when that cold is to include freezing temperatures, wind and rain. Weather.com and other weather services provide hour-by-hour reports on what the temperature and other conditions will be.
2. Taking Steps at the Right Time – Knowing the temps is key to this. Preparing in advance is as well. For instance, waiting until it’s raining before getting outdoor shelters in place for the night risks the animal getting wet and not being able to dry out when it’s the coldest. If it’s windy or uncomfortably cold your outdoor work in caring for the animals may be less effective as well.
3. Using Pet Attire – Jackets and sweaters are available for dogs and cats. Even with their long hair, the Pyr doggies clearly appreciated having their jackets on when the temps dropped low and when cold and wind combined. At the same time, it’s important to gauge the temps so animals aren’t left “clothed” after temperatures are moderate and otherwise safe and comfortable. A sweater or coat can become hot and annoying if left on after the temperatures warm.
4. Pet Bedding – Beds, houses and other bedding products are available that can help spare dogs and cats from the overly cold. The doggies loved Woolrich brand beds (large size, red and black checks, odor control cedar chips, washable exterior). Or you can make your own using blankets and other warm materials. I got a great blanket at Dollar General (retail \$4, on sale for \$2!!) and draped it onto a large cushy pillow for one of the cats in an enclosed room in the barn. One of the other cats prefers a cardboard box to the store-bought cat house.

5. Shelter – Each dog and cat at the farm has always had good shelters to seek whenever they desire, including bedding, wind blocks and areas with roofs to block rain and harsh sun. Cat and dog houses (purchased and home-made) have sides and tops – and in the winter, blankets, so their “residents” can snuggle in and generate warmth as radiated from their own bodies
6. Adapting to Change – Two of the cats have for years had panic attacks if brought inside. But a rash of hard freezes, coupled with the fact that they’re both aging, meant they needed to “get over it”. Days in advance, I brought them into a large room in the barn and began the process of getting them used to the idea ... bringing them in when they were hungry, having their favorite foods ready, sitting on the floor to pet them, etc. They’re still not crazy about the idea but they accept it ... and they’re definitely better off because of it.
7. Prevent Fighting – All four cats need to be in the room and, while plenty big, the room isn’t big enough to suit the two scaredy cats. Both of them also get angry at one of the other cats and would attack him if I wasn’t standing guard. So I bring the “unpopular” cat in late (and he has an extra heavy coat so that works out well) and place him in a large cargo carrier for dogs. It gives him adequate space while keeping him safe. There’s enough room for a water bowl and a mini-litter box (a recyclable aluminum baking pan filled with litter). I also have several beds out for the others so they can each choose a good place to settle in. *A portable pet crate can be used to take a pet inside the house for the night too.*
8. Drinkable Water – Making certain that water bowls for outdoor animals are not left frozen over is super important. Ice can be removed by hand (in one large piece or several pieces). Better yet, empty the bowls and refill them. The fresh water will likely be cold too, but not as cold. If you don’t want to mess with the ice, heat some water in the microwave and add it to the bowls (assuming that it’s not too hot or too much, to where an animal drinking from it could get burned or a bowl cracked or melted). Heaters are available for water troughs of horses and other large animals where hard freezes are frequent.
9. Pain Management – Avoidance of pain is the best strategy. As one example, one of the dogs responded very well to joint supplements (which eliminated discomfort and put the “bounce” back in her step). Before discovering this I sometimes gave her a canine buffered aspirin at doggie bedtime so she would rest comfortably and not experience pain.
10. Health Care – Watching for signs of problems and getting the dog, cat or other animal checked out where they occur is a year-round need. Preventive checks by the vet are also a plus in avoiding the development of health issues. Ask about any special needs, of the individual animal, related to weather extremes.

Other Animals

A word about other animals ... "visitors", horses and more. "Visitors" here means homeless or lost dogs and cats who may be hanging around your home, as well as raccoons, rabbits and other small animals.

Cats and dogs in the area may be "just passing through" when the coldest of the cold sets in and they have nowhere to take shelter. When a stray animal has arrived at the farm, our policy has been to have a heart and establish a warm area for him/her (while also calling around to see if the animal has been lost). The weather- casters regularly warn that pets should be brought inside in a cold freeze for good reason -- the cold can be harmful to them.

Lining a large box with blankets or other bedding is an option or putting bedding down in another area with shelter (a porch, carport, etc.) and setting some food beside it (so they're sure to see it). Water can be put in a paper bowl (for an animal you don't know). A "wild" animal may not feel comfortable using the shelter but a dog or cat will if the temperature dictates.

If you have a shed, garage or other building that's appropriate (where damage won't be done to the property), you may decide to open it to them for temporary shelter (assuming there's no access to chemicals, sharp tools, etc. that could harm the animal – think through the specifics on that).

We've hosted a family of possums and being on a farm provides many great places for them to burrow in when harsh weather hits. Food is their top priority and I put a bowl out for them at night. They can be feisty and have sharp teeth, plus poor vision, so we keep our distance from each other!

About Horses

Just because they're big and coated doesn't mean horses don't get cold, too. That's what horse blankets are for! If it's below 27-28 degrees, my practice has been to blanket them. If it's windy, I take the wind chill factor into account and blanket sooner.

On occasion, when a rain occurs while it's very cold, the horses will get a chill to the point of shivering and obvious discomfort. I've brought them into the barn and dried them off with towels in such circumstances. Putting a blanket on during the rain can make things worse rather than help. The goal is to get them dried off and then blanket them. Providing a shelter with a wind block is also important for them. Giving them hay to munch on keeps them more comfortable as well.

On the farm, other animals also can get cold in weather extremes. The goats, as an example, don't like to be out in the rain (at anytime) and also dislike the extreme cold. They, too, will shiver when the temperatures get real low. Putting hay in a stall and fluffing it up so they can settle down into it is one way to help keep them warmer. I also

close the top of their stall door and partially close the bottom door to block wind from coming in. This has helped a good bit, although I do wish the stores sold goat blankets!

Shelter Animals

One of the solid waste facilities in our area includes a recycle center and garbage “dump”. I was there first of the year with a big load of recycles and heard an unexpected sound: lots of dogs barking. I went around the corner to discover a series of outdoor dog pens. Turned out, it was the County animal shelter. Nine pit bull dogs had been taken away from an abusive “owner”. We were about to have almost two weeks of hard freezes. So, after clearing it with the County official, off to the store I went to get blankets and rugs for each of the pups (plus some hay from the feed store). Given how cold it had to have been in those pens, I replenished the bedding every other day. Their caretakers were happy to have the support and I know it made a difference to the dogs. They were expected to be put to sleep but not for weeks (which turned into months). It was challenging for me at the time but way well worth the effort.

Closing Thoughts

Many steps can be taken to help shield animals from the negative effects of cold weather. Most important to me is approaching the matter from a place of sensitivity to their needs and loving care on their behalf. In most cases, they are not animals in the wild in a “survival of the fittest”. Instead, they are confined, domesticated animals who are dependent on us for food, shelter, health care, comfort and emotional connection. Each of us can help one or more animals – those we live with and others still.

As in so many areas of life, each small step can make a huge difference for others. I hope this e-book helps readers take further steps in support of animals.

To learn more about sensitive and effective animal care, visit www.CareForCanines.com.

For training events to help animal support nonprofits, and education for the public, also check out: www.AnimalAwakenings.org.

Thank you for your interest and best wishes for the best in animal care.

Proceeds from the sale of this publication will go to the Future Is Now Foundation, a 501 (c) 3 charitable nonprofit organization, for its animal support services.

The information contained in this document is based on the experience of the author and not a veterinarian or other medical doctor. It is not presented as advice or recommendations and is instead meant to provide insights and options to help animals in need during cold weather times. Consult animal health care professionals for health care diagnoses and information specific to the animals in your care.