

With summer approaching, horses and dogs bid beaches adieu

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Published: 12:41 p.m., Friday, March 26, 2010

Misty, who's around seven feet tall and quite hairy, was walking up Penfield Beach on Wednesday afternoon when a Dalmatian strolled into her path. She stopped in her tracks and regarded the pooch with apparent suspicion. He sniffed through some brush and cast her an upward glance. Then, without barking or leaping up her legs, he moseyed onto the beach.

With that, the reins loosened and Misty clip-clopped into the parking lot toward her trailer, her jockey beaming.

"This is my first year riding at the Fairfield beaches and I've been down here with Misty about five times," said Caroline Sicilian, a Stamford resident, as she unsaddled the 9-year-old horse and reflected on the ride. The sky was cloudless and an off-shore breeze had the water looking crystal clear. For what may have been her final ride of the season, conditions couldn't have been better.

"It's a real privilege for us to come down here and ride, and we cherish it," she said. "And we work hard to make sure other riders know the rules."

What the rules say -- aside from scoop up your horse's manure and ride below the high-tide line -- is that beach season for horses, and dogs, ends Wednesday.

With the weather warming, the animals who've braved six cold months at the shoreline will gradually be replaced by swarms of people. Their owners, of course, are welcome to stay, but they'll have to do so without their choice companions, which they seem to be taking with a mix of understanding and a twinge of annoyance.

"I wish they could cordon off an area where people can go with their dogs," said [Estella Magi](#), walking Cisco, her 2-year-old red-nosed pit bull, down Jennings Beach on Wednesday.

Reminded that dogs can run wild and cause chaos at a crowded beach -- as well as defecate in sand -- Magi said she never takes any of her three dogs off their leashes. "And I've never seen them fight here," she said. Then she turned the subject to defecation. "All summer long, people leave waste here that's not decomposable."

Magi is a self-employed real estate salesman who lives near the beach. She and Cisco turned around at Penfield and headed back to her house. When she got home, she would leash up Lola, her 3-year-old Bull Mastiff, and repeat the process. Occasionally, she'll leash up her elderly Golden Retriever after that and take him for a stroll, too.

"My lunch break," she said, "can last about four hours. And that works out well with three dogs."

According to [Gerry Lombardo](#), Fairfield's director of parks and recreation, the barring of pets from beaches in summer has been the norm in Fairfield for the entire 20 years that he's worked in town.

"We don't have enough beach space for it to be otherwise," he said. "Our beaches are packed with people, and not everyone is a dog lover."

Or a horse lover. Fairfield, in fact, is the only town in southern Connecticut that permits horses to roam the shorelines in the winter months. Lombardo said the rule has similarly been in place for decades and that there haven't been any problems with it.

That's good news for Jeanette Cicciora, who rode alongside Sicilian on Wednesday, and who figures she's rode at the beach around 700 times.

"That sounds like an impossible number," she said, perched atop Ginger, her 13-year-old steed, "but, gee, 50 times a year since 1997. It's what I do instead of housework."

Reflecting on the waning beach season, Cicciora gave a veteran's perspective. "We'll miss the beach, but it makes us enjoy it that much more when we get it back in October."

And the 50 or so trips to the beach this winter proved productive. "Ginger is very fit right now," Sicilian said. "Look at the way she's holding her head."

The horse's head appeared fit to this reporter, with a black main running down her neck and eyes that resembled glistening billiard balls. A beard of foam ringed her mouth, a result of her playing in the Long Island Sound.

The beach, Cicciora explained, is the perfect place to exercise a horse in the winter, a time when trails get slippery and icy and roads grow impassable. Dirt rings get frozen, which is hard for a horse to maneuver on. The sand, however, stays supple with the flowing tides, and it's a nice change of pace for horse and rider.

"There's nothing like cantering along Penfield Beach with a friend or by yourself at nine in the morning," said [Dorothy Porter](#), president of the [Fairfield Bridle Trail Association](#). "It's just a feeling of freedom and enjoying nature, and we've got less and less open space in Fairfield. It's a



fabulous experience to ride out in the open."

Last Sunday, Porter helped show a group of 12 youths from the [Fairfield County Hounds Pony Club](#), her daughter included, the correct way to ride at the beach with a team of five ponies.

"They took turns learning how to manage a horse in an open-air situation with distractions," Porter said. "There's wind, there's waves, there's dogs running. You have to have a horse that's equipped to deal with that mentally."

Some of the tricks, Porter said, are to turn and face a dog so that the horse doesn't kick it; to avoid areas where lots of people are playing; to only go faster than a walk when there's open space in front of you; to not come within in 20 yards of someone while the horse is moving fast; and to be "incredibly polite to everyone at the beach."

The last bit involves cleaning up after your horse. Even as out-of-towners flock to Fairfield's beaches with their horses, that's a lesson that seems to be catching on. Porter said that she's often scooped up others' remains in years past.

"There were seven trailers down there on Sunday, and when I left, there wasn't a wisp of hay or manure on the beach or parking lot," she said.

And there won't be any now, at least until October.