

# The Hazards of Air Travel with Animals

By Nancy Blaney Illustration by Nancy Nimoy

**T**he Doris Day Animal League recently asked the federal government to investigate the deaths of two companion animals involving two different airlines, Delta and American. In 2000, Congress told the airlines to start filing reports about animal deaths and injuries; these reports are to be available to the public so that travelers can evaluate each airline's record for handling animals. However, the Department of Transportation has yet to finalize the rules implementing this reporting system.

Other serious mishaps occur: animals have been left sitting on the tarmac for hours, sometimes days; they've been abandoned in cargo areas; they've been put on the wrong flight or no flight at all; and they have escaped and have never been recovered.

Given this record, DDAL recommends against flying with companion animals if they will have to be put in the plane's cargo hold; it is simply too dangerous. Small animals who can fit under the seat in their carrier may be allowed in the passenger cabin, but there are restrictions and you must make a reservation in advance. If you have absolutely no choice whatsoever but to take your companion animal on a commercial flight where he or she will be put in the cargo compartment, be sure to comply with all of the USDA's (see sidebar) and the airline's requirements. Use a hard-sided carrier that is marked as suitable for air travel. Make sure it is assembled correctly, that all nuts, bolts, screws, etc. are as tight as possible and that the door closes securely. When you check on your pet, inspect the kennel for any loose or broken parts.

Do not fly during the coldest or hottest months. Make sure your pet is wearing a breakaway collar with tags indicating not only your name and contact information, but also the address and phone number of your destination. Before leaving, get the name of a vet in every city in which the plane lands. And never ship an animal unaccompanied.

What about sedating or tranquilizing your companion animal? As a rule, don't do it. The physical effects under

travel conditions can be unpredictable, and if the sedation wears off while the animal is still traveling, the stress and anxiety could be worse than it would otherwise have been. In fact, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and even some in the airline industry advise against this practice. In a statement on its Web site (see sidebar), the AVMA notes, "Whether flying in the cabin or with cargo, animals are exposed to increased altitude pressures of approximately 8,000 feet. Increased altitude...can create respiratory and cardiovascular problems for dogs

and cats who are sedated or tranquilized." If you approach your vet about using a tranquilizer, thoroughly discuss all the potential hazards.

If you do put your companion animal on a plane, you must be a fierce guardian of his or her welfare. Make sure he or she actually gets on the right plane, and inform the flight crew that an animal is in the cargo hold.

Mindful of security precautions, ask to check on him if you have a stop, especially if you are changing planes. Do not accept an airline employee's word that "your dog [or cat] is fine, we just looked in on him." When you arrive at your destination, ask that your pet be brought to you immediately and examine him thoroughly then for any signs of injury, trauma, distress, etc. Make sure the travel kennel is intact. If you have any doubts, take him to a vet immediately. If the worst happens and your pet is seriously injured or has died, insist that he be returned to you so that you—and NOT the airline—can take him for treatment or for a necropsy. File a complaint with the airline immediately. Finally, let us know; we will ask the USDA to investigate. Airlines are subject to the Animal Welfare Act and can be fined if found to have caused an animal's serious injury or death. 🐾

*Nancy Blaney is a legislative and regulatory consultant for DDAL with more than 20 years of Capitol Hill and animal welfare organization experience. She was the primary lobbyist for the 2000 amendment to protect traveling pets.*

