

Body Language of Dogs: Understanding Raised Hackles (Piloerection)

Raised Hackles Can Indicate Aggression, but Not Always

By Linda Cole

All dogs have hackles that run down their back from the base of the neck to their tail. A dog who is bristling and has gotten their back up may be showing signs of an aggressive nature, but to really understand what's going on with the dog, you need to observe his entire body language. There are other reasons why a dog has raised hackles that has nothing to do with aggression.

Some dogs, like the Rhodesian Ridgeback, have a natural ridge that runs down their back. That's not the same thing as a dog raising his hackles. The hair along a dog's back will rise in much the same way we get goose bumps and the hair on our arms or back of the neck prick up in certain situations. It's an involuntary response, for both humans and dogs, when we react to an uncertain or scary situation that puts us in an uncomfortable state of mind. A rush of adrenalin through the dog's body causes what's called a piloerection - raised hackles. The hair on their back may rise at the base of their tail or their neck and sometimes go all the way down the back from neck to tail. I've only seen my dogs get their hackles raised from neck to tail once. That was the night a coyote came to visit us. It was an encounter that startled the dogs and me and made them nervous because he just appeared out of the darkness and they had no idea what the coyote's intentions were. Neither did I!

A dog's hackles can be raised for a number of reasons in just a matter of seconds. Fear, excitement, interest, aggression, nervousness, insecurity, startled or aroused feelings can cause a dog's hair to bristle. Sounds, scents or direct encounters with other dogs and stressful situations can put the dog on guard. Understanding a dog's body language isn't difficult to comprehend and it's essential for dog owners to take the time to learn what a dog is trying to say so you can grasp what his intentions or concerns are and recognize his state of mind.

Whenever I see one of my dogs with their hackles up, I watch them closely to understand what's on their mind. Since my dogs are usually all together, my first concern is to make sure there isn't a fight about to break out. A dog who is intimidated by another dog will get their hackles up if they feel uncomfortable or unsure about the other dog's intentions.

Anytime you see your dog with raised hackles, pay attention to what's going on around you. It could be nothing more than your dog feeling uncertain or apprehensive about another dog or something he's never encountered before and it's making him feel uncomfortable. His body language will tell you what you need to know. Sometimes situations you don't perceive as threatening can feel that way for your dog. Stay calm and keep his attention focused on you if he has raised hackles. Your dog trusts you and when he sees you remaining calm, he will see there's nothing to worry about and relax.

Playing with other dogs or kids can bring the hackles up on some dogs, if they become too excited. When you see the hair standing up on their neck or along the tail, keep an eye on them. If you see signs of aggression or too much excitement, it's time for everyone to take a little break and it's up to you to step in and stop the play.

Piloerection is much easier to see on a short haired dog than it is on a dog with long hair. Raised hackles gives you an early warning sign something is bothering your dog. His body language will tell you what sort of action you need to take to keep your dog under control. Most of the time, simply stepping in and removing the dog from play or an uncomfortable situation will calm him down. Not stepping in can cause a nervous or fearful dog to react with aggression if you don't defuse the situation. Raised hackles happen in a matter of seconds, but it can take a couple of minutes before the hair relaxes once the dog calms down.

Dogs give us valuable information in their body language about how they're feeling and unpleasant encounters can be averted when we pay attention to what our dogs are saying.