

Your Pet's Safety: A Northwest Priority

By Gregg Pittelkow

As pet ownership has increased over the years, so has the number of people traveling with their pets. The airline industry has acknowledged this trend, and has met the challenge by implementing new programs and procedures designed to ensure the safety and comfort of pets traveling by air. In fact, today the airline industry safely and humanely transports hundreds of thousands of pets each year.

Nevertheless, myths continue to contend that air travel is inherently unsafe for pets. Northwest Airlines, a leader in the worldwide transportation of pets by air, seeks to dispel some of the myths, and to highlight the true nature of pet transportation in the airline industry today.

Myth: Aircraft cargo compartments are not pressurized

Fact: The aircraft structure (i.e., the fuselage) is basically a pressurized tube. The passenger cabin, flight deck, and lower deck cargo compartments on all modern commercial aircraft are pressurized. The few areas that are not pressurized are those that would never conceivably hold passengers or pets. These areas include the radar compartment (or radome), the tail compartment, and the landing gear wells.

The level of pressurization is determined by the altitude of the flight. At a typical cruising altitude of 35,000 feet, the aircraft (including the cargo compartments) is pressurized to a maximum equivalent altitude of approximately 8,000 feet.

It is important to note that high altitudes have a natural sedative effect on most mammals, including people and pets, for it tends to lower both respiration and blood pressure. For this reason, routine tranquilization of pets traveling by air is **STRONGLY DISCOURAGED**, as these drugs further suppress respiration and blood pressure and make it much more difficult for your pet to adjust to the in-flight environment.

While some pet owners may feel that their pet needs to be tranquilized, numerous studies have shown that once your pet is on board the aircraft, he or she (like you) will quickly settle down and will usually sleep for the duration of the flight.

As always, consult with your veterinarian before administering any tranquilizers or sedatives to your pet.

Myth: Cargo compartments are not heated

Fact: Cargo compartments are heated through the pressurization process. At a minimum, this process maintains a cargo compartment temperature of around 38–45 degrees Fahrenheit, which is sufficient to keep luggage and cargo from freezing. These compartments are not suitable for live animals, and are conspicuously marked as a reminder to ground crews not to load animals in them.

In order to safely carry live animals, most aircraft have one or more compartments with supplemental heating systems. While the heating method will vary from one aircraft type to another, the end result is that compartments holding live animals are heated to a



level very similar to the passenger cabin, approximately 60–75 degrees Fahrenheit. These compartments are also clearly placarded as being suitable for live animals.

Myth: Unventilated cargo compartments are not safe for pets

Fact: While it is true that the cargo compartments on most aircraft do not have forced air ventilation, that does not mean that these compartments are unsafe. In fact, an unventilated cargo compartment is just as safe as a ventilated one. Ventilation, which increases the number of air exchanges per hour, only allows for a greater number of animals to be carried.

NORMAL LIMIT 3 LIVE ANIMALS
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Cargo ventilation systems add weight and are expensive to install and maintain. For these reasons, ventilation systems are either not available, or are offered as optional equipment by the aircraft manufacturer. In response to increased demand for animal transportation, Northwest is one of the few carriers that has specified this option on most of its new aircraft, including its entire fleet of new regional jets.

However, even unventilated compartments have adequate air flow. While in flight, pressurized air flows from the passenger cabin into the cargo compartments. Under pressurization, some of this air will naturally leak around the compartment doors. This air is subsequently replaced by air from the passenger cabin, thereby maintaining a constant pressure throughout the aircraft. This naturally occurring ventilation provides a safe and comfortable environment for pets.

This fact has been further supported through a study conducted by the Federal Aviation Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture, which concluded, "None of the data collected indicated a change in environment conditions in the cargo bay that would significantly threaten the life of living cargo. These data indicate that environment conditions in the class "D" (i.e., unventilated) cargo compartments remain within limits consistent for

maintenance of animal health during normally scheduled flights of the commercial transports monitored."¹

Bottom line: Your pet will be safe, whether or not the cargo compartment is ventilated.

Myth: Cargo compartments are unsafe and inhumane



Fact: While the cargo compartment may not have comfortable seats and in-flight entertainment, it is heated and pressurized and will provide a safe and humane environment for your pet. In fact, on many long-haul aircraft (such as Northwest's

new Airbus A330s) the crew rest-bunks are located in the lower deck cargo compartment. Your pet could very well be right next door to an off-duty crew member!

Myth: The airlines kill, injure or lose thousands of pets every year

Fact: This myth has been relentlessly quoted by certain animal welfare groups, and is a gross misstatement of the facts. In the early 90s, the Air Transport Association (ATA) issued a press release stating:

"The airlines have an excellent record in transporting pets, which they consider an important part of their business. More than 99% of the estimated 500,000 dogs and cats that the airlines handle each year reach their destination in good health and without any problems."

Critics have erroneously inferred that the remaining one percent, or 5,000 dogs and cats, were subsequently injured, lost or died during air transportation.

When the ATA stated, "Without any problems," they meant just that. It clearly did not mean that "problems" inevitably meant the death, injury or loss of an animal. The problems referred to by the ATA concerned unfavorable weather conditions at the time of acceptance, kennels that did not meet USDA regulations, the lack of proper documents (e.g., health certificates), etc.

One of the chief proponents of the 5,000 injured, lost or dead dogs and cats' statistic was a major national animal welfare organization. The ATA invited the Senior Vice President-Government Affairs and the Director-National Legislative Office from this organization to a meeting at ATA headquarters on June 28, 2000. Also represented at the meeting was the Deputy Administrator of USDA-APHIS-Animal Care, a staff officer of USDA-APHIS-Animal Care, the Federal Liaison of the American Kennel Club (AKC), the Veterinary Director of the American Veterinary Medical Association's Government Affairs Division (AVMA), and the Legislative Director of the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC).

Representatives of the animal welfare organization were advised that the airlines were very concerned that the organization apparently had knowledge of large numbers of dogs and cats that were injured, lost or killed during air transport,

and were asked to provide evidence of their claims. In response, the organization produced a white paper enumerating approximately nine incidents. The organization admitted that it had only anecdotal evidence based on telephone conversations, and did not have dates, times, locations or other details of the other alleged incidents.

Sadly, this issue has been blown way out of proportion (from 9 incidences to 5,000), and does not represent the true state of animal transportation on the nation's airlines. Nevertheless, the 5,000 injured, lost or dead dogs and cats statistic continues to be used by organizations opposed to the air transport of animals.

Myth: No one at the airlines seems to care about my pet

Fact: Airlines are well aware of the fact their customer's pets are very dear to them, and have gone to great measures to ensure that pets are handled in a safe, humane and expeditious manner.

Northwest was the first carrier to acknowledge the deep bond between people and their pets when they introduced their industry-leading Priority Pet[®] program in 1991. Priority Pet brought a number of firsts to the industry, including dedicated pet-handling teams and facilities at its main hubs, special training for employees, specific temperature guidelines designed to ensure animal safety in all weather conditions, and a unique written notification to the passenger advising that their pet was safely on board the aircraft.

Northwest Airlines has led the industry in improving the health and safety of animals entrusted to its care. We never lose sight of the fact that we're carrying not just someone's pet, but rather we're carrying an important member of their family.

Air travel has proven to be a safe and reliable means of transporting live animals. Through close cooperation with passengers, commercial shippers, government agencies and others it will remain so in the future.

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Further information on transporting your pets by air can be found on the following web sites:

- Northwest Airlines Cargo www.nwacargo.com
- American Kennel Club www.akc.org
- USDA-APHIS-AC www.aphis.usda.gov/ac/publications.html

¹ Environment Conditions in the Class "D" Cargo Compartment, May 1999 Final Report, Federal Aviation Administration

