



2 Chartwell Place
4 Robinson Road
Kenilworth, 7708

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Dear Fallen Angels Team

Following the recent SPCA mandate, I have completed behaviour assessments for the dogs Rusty and Jakkals on 23 August 2026 and am writing to share my findings and recommendations.

Rusty

General observations:

Rusty had an unwelcoming posture when I approached his general area with his tail raised up and wagging in a fan-like motion combined with fixated barking. He however showed no displacement behaviours in response to my presence. He is a little underweight (despite his food portions having been increased) and has a limp on his back left leg. His coat is shiny with no obvious signs of ritualised stress-induced over-grooming. Typically, this indicates weight loss from over-activity due to environmental stress rather than persistent anxiety-based compulsive behaviour that a dog might perform at all times, not just during pockets of time when stress is high.

Observing high emotional arousal while I was sitting outside his camp a few meters away:

Rusty was constantly triggered by normal shelter activity around him, such as the public walking among the camps where dogs are kept, shelter employees walking past the camps and most significantly when other dogs were being collected from their camps to be taken for an outing. He would run around the interior boundaries of his camp and sometimes jump up against them. He would bark frantically while doing so and would be one of the last dogs in that area to settle down after the stimuli had passed. While in this state of emotional arousal he ignored me when I approached his fence, indicating an inability to redirect or self-regulate in this situation.

Observing a relaxed state while I was sitting in the same place:

While Rusty would eventually settle down after a trigger, it would be very short-lived because these environmental triggers happened almost constantly. It was not possible for me to observe him in a prolonged state of calm, such as playing with a toy or resting. I interviewed a staff member who lives on the premises, and they advised that Rusty is quiet and relaxed at night when there is no routine shelter activity. However, while cortisol (stress hormone) levels do subside somewhat over a good night's rest, the immense reactivity during the day means he will have persistent high cortisol levels and will be in a near-permanent state of alert.

Observing in a state of medium emotional arousal during an outing at “Central Park”.

Rusty was happy for Obert to take him for his walk and was eagerly pulling towards the play area while mostly ignoring the dogs in the camps on the way. Inside, he sniffed around, showed curiosity and his attention was easily gained with treats from Linda. When I approached the fence directly, Rusty was much more relaxed and did not show the same unfriendly behaviour when I had approached his camp. This tells us that the reactivity towards me at his camp was a product of the stress in that area compared to the relative calm of “Central Park”. On his way back, Rusty was much more relaxed even with dogs from neighbouring camps barking at him. As soon as Obert closed the gate to his camp, however, he immediately started running around the perimeter while barking frantically. This again demonstrates the immense stress-related association that this camp has for him.

Recommended actions for Rusty

From Rusty’s corner camp he can see more than 10 other camp entrances directly and another 4 indirectly (partially obstructed such as by a water tank). The number of dogs per camp can vary, but he could easily have more than 30 dogs in his field of view. This creates an immense amount of stimulation whenever there is activity inside or outside those camps such as when the dogs within them are being taken for a walk or are about to be fed. I recommend moving Rusty from this corner camp to one that has less activity in his field of view. Other dogs in the general area have as few as 4 other camps in their direct field of view. If moving Rusty is not possible, I recommend installing dense shade cloth across the entire side of his camp that is facing in the direction of the “Central Park” play field, as that is where most of the stimulation is coming from. A more long-term option that would also benefit other dogs in the area would be to install a shade cloth screen wide enough to act as a divider between the area where Rusty and Jakkals are, and the walkway leading to “Central Park”.

Jakkals

General observations:

Jakkals was friendly and engaging when I approached his camp, which he shares with Pablo. He is a healthy weight and has a shiny coat with no signs of stress-related over-grooming or tail-chasing or injury.

Observing high emotional arousal while I was sitting outside his camp a few meters away:

Like most dogs in the area, Jakkals was also triggered by every activity in or outside the camps around him. He however runs much smaller circles when compared to Rusty, does not bark frantically or jump up at the sides of the camp and I was able to redirect him to focus on me when he was running circles. The ability to redirect him is encouraging as it shows that he can self-regulate to a certain degree. I very much got the impression that Jakkals is especially triggered by Rusty’s activity right next door to him.

Observing a relaxed state while I was sitting in the same place:

While Jakkals also reacted to every major commotion in or around the camps in the area, he did so later than most due to only being able to see 4 other camps in his field of view. This enabled him to stay settled for longer in between triggering episodes. At one stage I observed him lying in the shade looking sleepy. However, the gaps between triggers are not long enough to realistically expect any sleep during a busy day at the shelter.

Observing in a state of medium emotional arousal during an outing at “Central Park”.

Jakkals was also thrilled to see Obert coming to take him for an outing and was very relaxed on his way to “Central Park”, sniffing and urinating as he went along rather than making a straight beeline for the park. Once inside, he seemed to stay very close to Linda rather than exploring around by himself. This is however not necessarily a concerning observation, as he may just be quite people-focused. Once back in his camp he was initially in a neutral state until the next major environmental trigger.

Recommended actions for Jakkals

If Rusty can be moved from that corner camp and a better coping dog moves into it (or even better if it can stay empty altogether for a while), Jakkals will likely benefit by having a less “noisy” neighbour. Jakkals and Pablo are also very close to one of the exits with only a few camps to pass on the way to a walking area. This may present an opportunity for Jakkals and Pablo to be walked more frequently but for short durations due to it taking less time to get them to and from a quieter area. For example, one might walk them twice per day in the open area near the quarantine instead of a single longer outing in “Central Park”. More regular (even if short) outings for Jakkals will enable him to cope better while or until Rusty can be moved and longer-term.

Observations and recommendations about the general area where Rusty and Jakkals are:

While observing Rusty and Jakkals, it also occurred to me that dogs are not always taken along the shortest route to an exit from the camps area when going for an outing. Put differently, dogs are sometimes walked past an unnecessary number of camps on the way to a neutral area where dogs can relax. Jakkals’ and Rusty’s area has three exits that lead to quieter areas, being “Central Park”, the parking area (quiet on weekdays) and the area next to the quarantine. It would be great if shelter staff and volunteers could always seek out the closest exit from the camp to reduce the number of dogs agitated along the way out. In terms of dog-walking, I noticed that the areas divided by colour on a map are not covered off systematically. For example, a group of dogs from the yellow area might be walked, then dogs from the blue area and then the red area. This creates a randomised pattern of dog-walking-induced environmental triggers. As an alternative, it may be worth trying out a system where areas (by colour) are covered off entirely before moving onto the next area. For example, if all the dogs in the blue area (or as many as possible) are walked between 8am and 10am, then the yellow and red areas will be quiet during this time as there will be much less activity. Then, for example, when the dogs in the yellow area are walked between 10am and 12pm, it will be quiet in the blue and red areas. The randomisation across areas is one of the reasons why Rusty and Jakkals have very few (if any) quiet pockets of time during the day.

N.B. The above assessment was performed over a 2.5-hour session and may hence not be a complete reflection of Rusty’s and Jakkals’ behaviour profiles due to the limited window of time. If desired, a follow-up assessment can be scheduled in a month to observe and track a trend as well as evaluate the benefits of changes made.

Kind regards



Daniel Schonlau