

# Emotional Support Animals:

pigs, peacocks, pythons  
...and even appaloosa ponies



Over the last two years, US air carriers have reported a significant increase in passengers bringing aboard emotional support animals (ESAs), resulting in a subsequent rise in incidents involving unruly animals during flights. **Alexandra James** examines the case for ESAs and asks whether more specific legislation and tighter airline policies are needed to tackle this emerging issue.



In November 2014, a woman was asked to leave a US Airways flight from Connecticut to Washington because her emotional support animal (ESA) – a very large, brown pig – began howling and defecating in the aisle just prior to take-off. In 2016 (the year of the monkey) a passenger was added to Frontier’s no-fly list for failing to announce to airline staff that he was travelling with his emotional support marmoset, Gizmo, which a member of cabin crew spotted peeking out of his owner’s pocket.

‘Hedgehogs, ferrets, insects, rodents, snakes, spiders, sugar gliders, reptiles, amphibians, goats, non-household birds (farm poultry, waterfowl, game bird, & birds of prey), animals improperly cleaned and/or with a foul odour, and animals with tusks, horns or hooves’.

## What is an ESA?

But what exactly is an ESA and how do they differ from service animals like guide dogs? As mental health becomes an increasingly prevalent issue in society, with one in five Americans suffering with some form of mental health problem, people are employing ever more inventive ways to deal with stress, anxiety and depression. Unlike service animals such as guide dogs, ESAs are not usually trained to assist their owner by carrying out specific tasks, but give support in other ways such as by providing companionship or a distraction from stressful situations. The 1986 Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) of the US Code, which deals specifically with how airlines make their services accessible to passengers with disabilities, requires airlines to allow passengers to fly with ESAs in the cabin, without a pet carrier and at no extra cost, providing they



“...a very large, brown pig began howling and defecating in the aisle just prior to take-off...”

Ducks, turkeys, spiders, penguins, kangaroos and even an appaloosa horse – the list of creatures that have taken to the skies as ESAs is becoming longer and more bizarre. United Airlines famously drew the line at a peacock named Dexter earlier this year, and both United and Delta have since updated their guidelines regarding travelling with animals. Delta now expressly prohibit from their flights:



Dexter the Peacock was denied boarding  
(Credit: Instagram DEXTERTHEPEACOCK)

can supply documentation from a licensed mental health professional that confirms the following:

- The passenger has a mental or emotional disability that is recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM);
- They need their emotional support or psychiatric support animal as an accommodation for air travel and/or for activity at their destination;
- The individual providing the assessment is a licensed mental health professional and the passenger is under his/her professional care; and
- The licensed health care professional's
  - Date and type of professional license; and
  - Jurisdiction or state in which their license was issued.

Over the last couple of years, there has been a significant increase in passengers flying with ESAs. In 2016, 43,000 animals flew with United Airlines as ESAs, and in 2017 the figure rose to 76,000. But does this increase represent a deterioration of the mental health of the US population, or is there something else going on?

### ESA 'Registration' Websites

Over the last few years, there has been a proliferation of websites offering ESA 'registration', official-looking dog vests, leashes and ID tags. Many of these websites mislead passengers into believing they need to register their animal as an ESA, and will charge around US \$70 to do so (there is no official ESA registration process). These websites also charge around \$150-\$200 for that all-important doctor's note – but of course, they don't need to meet you to make a diagnosis; patients simply spend a few minutes filling in an online questionnaire and a therapist's letter can be delivered within 24 hours.

Obtaining the necessary paperwork to fly with an ESA is therefore not only simple, it is a process that seems to have been designed to be abused (assisted, dare I say, by the largely private healthcare system in America, which makes obtaining doctor's notes very easy if you are willing to pay enough for them). Some states are starting to recognise that many individuals are falsely claiming that they have psychiatric disorders – or

"...obtaining the necessary paperwork to fly with an ESA is therefore not only simple, it is a process that seems to have been designed to be abused..."

exaggerating their symptoms of stress or anxiety – in order to fly with their pets, and these states are introducing penalties such as \$1000 fines and a few days in jail as a deterrent. But of course proving that an individual does not have a mental health issue can be significantly more tricky than diagnosing them with one in the first place. Additionally, airline staff are not permitted to ask a passenger about the condition that the ESA assists them with – although they can inquire how the animal assists them.

This is not to say, however, that there aren't passengers (and therapists) who genuinely believe animals can provide valuable psychological support while travelling. The difference between these passengers and others who abuse the system is that they are more likely to have invested the time and energy to ensure that their animals are properly trained to behave in public spaces and around other animals. Sadly, not all passengers travelling with an ESA have taken these measures, which often results in an increase in stress, not only for themselves, their fellow passengers and cabin crew, but for the animal, too.

### Unruly Animals

"...in January, a Delta passenger was mauled by a 22kg emotional support dog..."

Let's be honest: many humans find an aircraft cabin to be a challenging environment at the best of times – but they endure the discomfort because they believe the end justifies the means. Being in an enclosed space and surrounded by unfamiliar people, smells, noises and air pressure, not to mention turbulence, is enough to make any reasonable person uncomfortable, let alone a creature with a sense of smell 40 times more sensitive than ours, and ears more than 1000 times better at hearing than ours.

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vegasclace I'm going to make her an emotional support animal and carry her on planes ✈️ with me 🐍 #comfortanimal #reptilesaresoothing #snakemassage #ballpython #petsonplanes #snake #reptilelover #thrive #fitness #model #relaxing #snakemom #silksmooth #snakesonaplane #someonewillfreakout be.strong.minded 🤔🤔🤔

Some people may view a snake as an ESA, but the majority of passengers are likely to be freaked out by snakes on a plane



## Megan Peabody regularly travels with her emotional support pig, Hamlet. She explains how he helps her and why ESAs play an important role in many people's journeys across the states.



Having Hamlet with me when travelling really takes the anxiety out of flying for me. It might be because most people focus on him, which helps to distract me, or it could just be the repetitive movement of petting him that makes me feel calm. Petting an animal is known to lower blood pressure and is a naturally soothing action for anyone with anxiety. Regardless of the reason, he's a very special pig, and shows no fear when we get on a plane. We spent six months in a dog-training programme, so he is very well behaved and listens to my commands. He is quieter than most children, too! Many people think it's ridiculous when they hear that the pig flies with me. But for me, it makes the trip a lot easier from the beginning. He doesn't bother anyone – after take off you don't even know he's there.

The significant increase in animals on board combined with other factors such as tighter seating arrangements and fuller flights have led to a more stressful environment. In September, a video went viral of a woman being dragged off a Southwest flight after she allegedly complained to airline staff about the presence of two dogs in the cabin and told them that she was severely allergic (although she later claimed this was not the case). In March last year, a woman was removed from a United flight after requesting to be moved away from a cat travelling with a passenger a few rows away. And in February 2016, a 7-year-old boy and his family were removed from an Allegiant Air flight because the boy broke out in hives from sitting near a service dog. The family were allegedly told by cabin crew, "There are dogs on every flight".

Airlines have so far managed the situation by reseating allergy sufferers or placing them on the next available flight, but with increasing numbers of animals travelling in the cabin and with no restrictions in place regarding how many service or emotional support animals can travel on one flight, we may soon get to the point where allergy sufferers or those with severe animal phobias will be at a serious disadvantage.

### What Can the Industry Do?

We are starting to see airlines adjusting their policies regarding ESAs. Even though the changes appear only to exonerate the airline from any responsibility in the event of an animal misbehaving during the flight, the change may be enough to make some passengers think twice about bringing their animal on board unless it is absolutely necessary.

### Allergies and Phobias

In January, a Delta passenger was mauled by a 22kg emotional support dog, which was sitting on its owner's lap in the seat next to him. The passenger, who was in a window seat and therefore could not escape, received severe wounds to the face and required 28 stitches. On 22 February, another emotional support dog bit a six-year-old girl on the forehead while boarding a Southwest Airlines flight from Phoenix to Portland, Oregon. The child suffered only a minor injury and the man travelling with the canine elected to take a later flight. These incidents served to fuel the already heated debate surrounding dogs travelling unrestrained in the cabin.

Following these events, Delta and United Airlines updated their policies regarding ESAs. As of 1 March, in addition to supplying therapists' notes, passengers wishing to travel with an ESA must supply written confirmation that the animal 'has been trained to behave in a public setting and takes [their] direction upon command' (Delta), and that the passenger 'assume[s] full responsibility for the safety, well-being and conduct of [the] animal, including the interaction of the animal with crew and other passengers or passenger property that may come in contact with the animal while on board the aircraft...' (United).

The ACAA specifies that: 'You must not deny transportation to a service animal on the basis that its carriage may offend or annoy carrier personnel or persons traveling on the aircraft'. However, if the aviation industry must acknowledge that animals can help alleviate physical and psychological issues, should it also acknowledge that they can be the cause of them too? A phobia of dogs (or 'cynophobia') affects around 36% of the world's population, and around three people in ten are allergic to cat or dog dander (skin cells) or saliva.

Megan Peabody with Hamlet



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But the onus is also on the regulatory bodies to issue legislation that deals with the issue at the root in a sensitive yet sensible manner. The phrasing of the ACAA has proved over the years to be problematic in its ambiguity, even after it was updated in 2009 to address issues concerning the species of animals accepted as ESAs. Perhaps a further update is required regarding the nature of the relationship between the passenger and their mental health professional to help deal with the near instant issuance of online diagnoses of mental health conditions.

Legislation aside, many psychologists have criticised the use of emotional support animals, asserting there is little – if any – scientific evidence to support the claim that animals can provide psychological benefits. In some cases, particularly where the animal is not sufficiently trained or accustomed to being in public spaces, travelling with an ESA can be more stressful, both for the passenger and the animal, than travelling without them. One passenger, Brittney Bies, who travelled with United from the US to the UK with her husband and his emotional support dog claimed that, "Actually, the stress of having the dog on our flight made flying much worse. I would never make an animal go through that willingly as it is not natural for an animal and I actually think it is quite selfish."

There is also the question of what happens when an animal is rejected as an ESA by an airline. In the case of genuine ESAs, we would hope the bond between the passenger and their animal is strong enough to warrant the passenger going to certain lengths to make alternative arrangements to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the animal. In Baltimore last November, however, a college student attempted to travel to South Florida with her emotional support hamster but decided to flush the animal down a toilet after being told the animal was not permitted to fly in the cabin.

## Conclusion

Some may not consider passengers' use of emotional support animals to be a security issue in the strictest sense. However, any situation that results in a crew's diminished control over the cabin will invariably have an impact on levels of safety and security.

While airlines are obliged to allow compliant passengers to travel with their ESAs, they do have a responsibility to ensure the safe passage of their other passengers and their crew. By developing their own policies regarding ESAs (in compliance with the ACAA and perhaps in co-operation with

mental health organisations), they can ensure that those who truly need an ESA are accommodated while protecting themselves, their employees, customers, and even some animals from irresponsible owners looking for a convenient way to transport their pets. ■



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