

## Shell Island goes to the dogs // Check out Photo Gallery



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Dogs and dog lovers alike enjoy the "Picnic with Your Pooch" event at Shell Island on Saturday.

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[By SCARLET SIMS / News Herald Writer](#)

SHELL ISLAND — Collar tags jingled, leashes tangled and tails wagged as the ferry left Bay Point Marina at 9 a.m. Saturday, sailing for Shell Island on the first-ever nonprofit-sponsored dog-friendly excursion.

"Everybody ready to go?" said Hal Lacey, St. Andrew Bay Ferry Company owner.

"Yeah."

"I didn't hear any 'woofs,'" Lacey said.

About 10 dog-owners and 14 dogs signed up to participate in "Picnic with Your Pooch." More are coming Sunday, said Stephanie Somerset, Bay Families with Dogs executive director and a founding member of Friends of Shell Island.

The fundraiser benefits both Bay Families with Dogs and Friends of Shell Island, a newly-formed nonprofit for anyone interested in preserving the island and keeping it open to boaters and families.

Friends of Shell Island has more than 100 members, including four businesses, since forming a few months ago. Bay Families with Dogs has 800 members, Somerset said.

Lacey is donating his time and ferry because he supports access to the island and is a dog lover. Dogs, he said, are part of the family.

"Everyone should have the right to visit Shell Island as long as they are responsible — whether they have dogs or not," Lacey said.

Bay Families with Dogs started after the state park began ticketing people who brought dogs to the island or drank the wrong beverage in 2006, Somerset said. Penalties were stiff. People ticketed had to appear in court, write letters apologizing for bringing a dog, pay fines or do community service.

The legislature decriminalized the offenses in 2007. Somerset said dog lovers take their dogs to property that is considered a county subdivision where park officials say they won't ticket dog owners who clean up after their dogs and don't allow them to chase wildlife.

Families should be able to come to Shell Island, and dogs are part of the family, Somerset said.

"Shell Island represents our freedom and a chance to get away from bureaucracy, from regulation," Somerset said. "We just want to make sure that we have a voice to tell the powers that be that we like (Shell Island) the way it is."

Somerset hoped to raise about \$1,000 over the weekend. The money will help maintain dog-sanitation stations and buy educational brochures to promote the nonprofit organizations.

On the island Saturday, dogs played chase, swam, played fetch and guarded the tent where Catherine Zehner, a founding Families with Dogs member, cooked up hotdogs for the picnic.

Josie Strange of Panama City brought her two dogs, Willow and Roscoe, to play.

"I love my dogs," Strange said. "I love to see them happy. I think when you see a dog this happy, it makes you happy."