



Leo on the beach enjoying a full and happy life. Photo: Animals Fiji

# Caring for Pets with Special Needs



## Opinion



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Mary-Anne is a volunteer on assignment with Animals Fiji as part of the Australian Volunteers Program, an Australian Government Initiative.

Many people think that pets with severe injuries or disabilities are not as happy as other 'able-bodied' pets. But pets with special needs are just as loving as any pet and can give you hours of pleasure and company and be happy in themselves.

Pets can develop special needs through a disease, accident, or old age. Because your animal cannot hear or see well, or if they have lost a limb through an accident, it does not mean they are not happy.

Animals are very resilient, and while caring for those pets may require extra attention, patience and sometimes extra resources to look after them, your pet will respond and return that love and attention to you.

### LOSS OF A LIMB

Animals can usually adapt to the loss of a leg much better than humans, as they don't think about the emotional or mental side of things, and three legs are more stable than

having just one leg.

The animal gets on with life and quickly gets used to only having three legs. The animal may have difficulty adjusting for the first month or two, and usually it is easier for a dog with three legs to run rather than walk.

Once dogs or cats learn to get around without one of their legs, they are often just as mobile and energetic as before losing the leg.

### LEO'S STORY

Some of you may remember from an earlier article the story of Leo, a dog who was found abandoned and had his leg severed.

It was amputated at the Animals Fiji Savusavu Clinic shortly after he was found. Leo defied the odds; despite losing a lot of blood and having his leg amputated, he is doing very well.

Tui, who adopted him soon after his injury, said: "He is just a beautiful and loving dog, and even though he was not our dog at the time of the injury, he is now very protective of me and my family."

Leo is a living, local demonstration that animals can lead fulfilling lives even with physical challenges, such as only having three legs.

"He gets around easily on his remaining legs," Tui says, "...and he acts like any other normal dog, playing with other dogs, and he seems incredibly happy."

### LIFE WITH A DEAF OR BLIND DOG OR CAT

There is no reason your blind or deaf cat or dog shouldn't have a happy, fun-filled life.

Just like humans, some pets can be born blind or deaf, some become blind or deaf due to injury or illness and others will slowly lose their sight or hearing just because they are getting older.

For a blind or deaf animal, other senses become more pronounced and help them orient themselves.

For example, a new smell, your footsteps vibrating on the floor or new air currents from an open door can tell them you have arrived home.

Although your pet may not hear or see you pour dog or cat biscuits into their bowl, their sense of smell will



Goldie is able to remain mobile, thanks to her new wheelchair. Photo: Animals Fiji



Buster in the garden of his Savusavu home. Photo: Animals Fiji

alert them that their food is available.

It is important for dogs and cats that cannot see or hear you to not pat them without warning them that you are there, as they may be startled and bite or scratch if touched.

Stamp your foot to let them know you are there. It is a good way to alert them but be sure to treat them when you are teaching them this so that they know that your stamping or other action used to alert them is a good thing.

It is important to keep a deaf or blind pet inside when unsupervised or on a leash when you take them outside.

This prevents them from getting into danger, as they will not see or hear cars, other animals, or other dangerous objects and may get hurt.

Hand signals are a good way to show hearing-impaired animals what you want them to do. Voice commands are a good way to communicate with sight-only impaired animals.

When teaching your animal, always give them a small treat when they respond correctly to your commands, as this reinforces their good behaviour.

### BUSTER'S STORY

Buster is a loveable bulldog that his owner, David, brought back with him to live in Fiji.

Buster was born healthy and happy, but according to his records, he developed an infection in both eyes. Because the owner didn't recognise the problem early enough, Buster went blind.

He was left at an USA Animal Shelter, and when David came to adopt a dog, Buster immediately at-

tached himself to David. They have been inseparable ever since.

"We have set up a routine that we try to stick to so that Buster doesn't get disoriented," David explained.

"He certainly knows when we are in the kitchen - his sense of smell and hearing appear heightened because he cannot see," David continued.

Buster's hearing is excellent, and he responds to commands when he feels like it.

"You just have to make sure the screen door is open when you want him to come inside. Otherwise, he will go straight through it," David explains.

"Of course, if you move a chair or furniture, he will bump into it, but he just stands still for a moment and works out how to go around it."

Buster is extremely tuned in to what's going on around him.

He responds to very gentle pressure on his lead when there is a step or it is time to go back after a walk.

Buster is a regular at the Animals Fiji Savusavu Veterinary Clinic, mainly because he hates to have his nails clipped.

This normally very calm dog gets anxious because he cannot see what is happening. Sometimes, he has to be sedated so that it can be done.

"Buster does require extra care and attention, but I wouldn't trade him for anything - he is a loveable, delightful dog and gives us many happy moments."

David says he has just worked out how to deal with the fact that he cannot see, and Buster knows he is safe in his house.

### BUNDY'S STORY

Bundy was a small, furry, four-year-old black dog that Stephen picked out at the dog shelter.

Bundy was initially scared of men, but when he realised his new home provided regular feeding, attention, and a comfortable place to sleep, he decided it was a good place to live out his life.

When Bundy was 12 years old, he started to lose his hearing.

Keeping a closer eye on where he was at any time, ensuring he was watching when giving commands, improving security to stop him from wandering into danger and maintaining the routine he had all his life were enough to solve any problems.

Bundy always hated loud noises and thunder and a benefit of his loss of hearing was that he no longer whined, ran and hid when there was thunder.

### A SPECIAL DOG WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Goldie came to Animals Fiji first to get desexed in March 2023 as a community dog from Wailoaloa, Nadi.

Unfortunately, she was found on the side of the road a short time later, paralysed and unable to use her back two legs, possibly caused by being hit by a car.

The Animals Fiji team has worked tirelessly to return her to her previous happy self.

She has been donated a custom-built wheelchair and numerous other donations, including one year's worth of food.

She remains in the Animals Fiji Shelter in Nadi, waiting for loving pet parents to care for her.

If you know someone who might be able to offer her the love and care she needs and have a place where she can easily get around in her wheelchair. It would make Goldie a very happy dog!

As a non-profit charity, Animals Fiji depends on the kindness of donations to continue its work of supporting animals across Fiji.

To learn more about Animals Fiji and how you can help, contact their Savusavu Clinic at (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic at (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at [www.animals-fiji.org](http://www.animals-fiji.org).