

TERRORISTS ON FOUR LEGS

NEVER attempt to stare down a rottweiler. When the animal, the black and tan terrorist of the dog world, is about to attack, he does so in silence, completely still, without growling or raising his hackles. The first warning may be an intimidating glare.

To stare back is to issue a challenge the dog is unlikely to ignore. Attack is the best and possibly only form of defence, according to Gavin Grant, a dog expert with the RSPCA.

Shout and try to dominate the dog by 'exuding power', he advises. Above all, don't run — unless you have somewhere to run to — and try not to show you are afraid because the dog will sense it.

If this doesn't work you have a serious problem and Mr Grant can't help you, especially if there are two or more animals: then the pack instinct takes over.

The recent attacks by rottweilers, which can grow to 15 stone and have powerful heads and jaws, have led to renewed calls for strict controls on owners as well as their animals.

Joseph Flynn, the Birmingham market trader whose three rottweilers savaged a five-year-old boy last week, did neither any favours last week. By driving off after the attack, apparently unconcerned and without checking how the child was, he gave credence to the dog lobby's argument that the danger is caused by problem owners rather than problem dogs.

Last week's newspapers were full of horror stories of dogs attacking people and other animals, from another rottweiler that put an old age pensioner in hospital and killed her pet terrier, to an American pit bull that savaged and seriously injured a pony in Leeds. In April, 11-year-old Kelly Lynch was killed by two rottweilers as she walked them along a beach in Dunoon, Strathclyde, the most hor-

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SIMON de BRUXELLES
investigates the mounting concern over danger dogs and their owners.

rific of recent attacks.

It is estimated that at least one million people are bitten by dogs in Britain each year. Only a tiny proportion ever get reported to the police, but despite this the number of recorded incidents rose by 18 per cent last year to 7,057.

Stray dogs alone cost the taxpayer at least £70 million a year, according to a report commissioned by the RSPCA from the London School of Economics in support of its campaign for a self-financing dog registration scheme. The registration fee, the organisation claims, would also pay for a nationwide network of dog wardens.

The total includes £50 million for road accidents caused by dogs, £7 million on hospital treatment for bites, £2.2 million for boarding strays and £1 million for death or injury to farm animals.

Provision for a dog registration scheme was incorporated in the Local Government Act 1988 which abolished the 37p dog licence. It was inserted into the Act by the House of Lords against the wishes of the Government.

But although the machinery is there, neither the Home Office nor the Department of the Environment have any intention of putting it into motion.

Canine opinion is divided. The Kennel Club and many dog experts think that the answer is to penalise irresponsible owners through the courts rather than making it more costly and complicated to keep a dog. The RSPCA has coined a name for the dangerous new breed of dog-owner: FIDO — Feckless and Irre-

sponsible Dog Owners.

The RSPCA, supported by 284 MPs who have so far signed an Early Day Motion calling for the introduction of a registration scheme, claims it would weed out those buying a dog on a whim and make it more difficult for people to deny responsibility for their animals' activities.

Two suggestions are to either tattoo the dog with the owner's name and address, or inject it with a miniature coded microchip, which could be read electronically.

Last Friday, Battersea Dogs' Home decided to electrically 'tag' all the 12,000 animals that leave the home annually in an attempt to stop them straying again and, if they do, track down the owner.

But they will not include either rottweilers or the even more notorious pit bull terriers as the Home refuses to find those dogs new owners because they are too dangerous to be treated as pets.

Both the Kennel Club and the RSPCA agree there should be stricter controls on dog breeders who operate virtually unregulated. The only reaction by the Home Office to increasing public and political concern is to look at the possibility of increasing the penalties on owners who fail to keep their dogs under control.

In 1980, around 2,000 new rottweilers were registered with the Kennel Club; probably as many again were not. Dog fashions change and the popularity of powerful 'macho' breeds has led to a dramatic increase in the number of pet rottweilers.

Last year alone, there were just under 10,000 new

registrations — a five-fold increase in just eight years. There are now 90,000 registered with the Kennel Club, and probably the same again unregistered.

Although most breeders select animals for their docility and gentle natures, some specialise in pairing aggressive, short-tempered rottweilers for use as guard dogs. Others, mainly unlicensed back street breeders just try to produce as many pups as possible for the maximum profit.

Dog owners who find their animals too much to handle turn to Dr Roger Mugford, an animal psychologist, whose clients have included one of the Queen's corgis and the polar bears in Bristol Zoo. His clinics are conducted from a Portakabin at the picture-postcard Hardwick Court Farm in Chertsey, Surrey.

On the couch last Friday was Flint, a three-year-old weimeraner, a German gun dog, from Romsey, Hampshire. Flint's owners, Joe and Rosemary Wilson, realised they had a serious problem when the dog bit a neighbour's knee as she tried to pat it.

Earlier, he had sprung at the neighbour's seven-year-old daughter and attacked other dogs. Training classes and other attempts to keep him under control had all failed.

Dr Mugford established that Flint was not only highly strung and snappy, but also a cowardly dog who ran away after every attack. Armed with an aerosol whistle similar to an anti-mugging device, he took Flint out into a field.

Dr Roger Mugford

The first lesson I introduce him to on the farm, is under control with a nylon halter. he went for S Mugford's red dog was pushed to the ground when he high-pitched whined off. The reaction was instantaneous.

The same thing, with the second introduction, to the bitch. But by the Flint had learned.

Dr Mugford is taking him to the gymnasium to humiliate him, far more potent than

