

What's Up Transcript (Season 4, Ep. 19)

Hector Garcia: Another thing some people don't know is that our leash ordinance here in town also applies to cats.

Grace Hallowell: Yes.

Hector Garcia: So, a lot of people say they have indoor-outdoor cats. That is fine if the cat stays on your property, but as soon as it wanders off, it could violate a city ordinance. If they are off the property, they must be on a leash. A lot of people ask, "Is that even possible?" I've seen it maybe once or twice, but cats like to do their own thing. Some people try, and the cat just tangles up in the leash.

Grace Hallowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hallowell, and today I'm joined by animal control officer Hector Garcia. Hi Hector.

Hector Garcia: How are you doing?

Grace Hallowell: I am doing well. Welcome back to the show. We were just chatting about some of the little critters that get into our neighborhoods. I encountered a possum this morning on my way in, and it got stuck under my fence. But we are going to talk about bite prevention and why microchipping is so important for our pets. To kick things off, tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do.

Hector Garcia: I was born and raised here in Bryan-College Station. I've been doing animal control for the city for close to four years now, and I've been loving every bit of it. Not every day is the same; we deal with different types of animals every day. Sometimes we must take a step back and figure out how to handle a situation because it's our first time dealing with that specific type of animal. It's always a fun time to be an animal control officer here.

Grace Hallowell: I bet. What is the craziest animal story you've had during your time so far?

Hector Garcia: For myself, it was probably a hawk that flew into H-E-B. It took a little while, but we were finally able to get it out. Some of the other officers have had to deal with beavers, snakes, lizards, and even a couple of monkeys. Whenever those calls come in, we must figure out how to approach them, but in the end, it usually results in a neat story. There was another one where a fox was in the stadium at Olson Field during a game. The officer had a fun time keeping everybody back with the help of UPD, but she was able to get the fox into a trap and remove it safely. Nobody was bitten, so it was a great success, especially in that atmosphere.

Grace Hallowell: Yes, and I'm sure the fox was very confused as to what baseball was.

Hector Garcia: Very much so. We saw some pictures of it afterward inside the trap, and it just had a look like, "Where am I?"

Grace Hollowell: I recently took a trip to Disneyland, and it was duckling season. A duck had wandered onto the "It's a Small World" ride and had that same look of confusion. So, what is one thing you wish more people knew about animal control?

Hector Garcia: We are actually a very small unit. For the entire city of College Station and the Texas A&M campus, there are only four of us: one supervisor and three full-time animal control officers. Last year, we answered close to 7,000 calls, including dispatch calls, self-initiated calls, and patrol calls. We are constantly on the move, and a lot of the community doesn't realize there are only four of us for the entire area.

Grace Hollowell: Right, so you guys are all over the place.

Hector Garcia: Sometimes in the evenings, there are only one or two of us on shift. One might be on the south side of town, dealing with cattle that got out, while another must get through rush-hour traffic to the north side to meet someone who found a dog. We always try our best to respond to each call in a timely manner.

Grace Hollowell: Absolutely. And what is your favorite thing about your job?

Hector Garcia: I would say the different types of animals we deal with. Most are dogs and cats, but helping injured wildlife or returning lost pets to their homes is very rewarding. Whether it's getting an animal to a hospital or helping wildlife get back on their feet for release, that is probably my favorite aspect.

Grace Hollowell: Have you always been an animal person?

Hector Garcia: Growing up, we had one or two pets, but I didn't become truly passionate about animals until about 2019. When I moved back to town in 2022, I looked for a way to help the community through animal work. A position opened, I applied, and it's been awesome since then.

Grace Hollowell: How does what you do directly impact the College Station community?

Hector Garcia: Some people think we just go out and catch dogs, but we do a lot more than that. We help community members who are struggling to provide for their pets. We can provide food or leashes using our available resources, so they don't have to surrender their animals. We also focus on animal safety and education for first-time owners who may not know what to look for in signs of neglect or proper care.

Grace Hollowell: It's a two-for-one. Speaking of safety, why is animal bite safety such an important topic?

Hector Garcia: Whenever a bite happens, the main concern is rabies. By state law, we must follow up on those calls to ensure the animal is up to date on its vaccines. We want to rule out the possibility of a rabid animal being out there to ensure the community remains safe.

Grace Hallowell: What are some of the most common situations that lead to bites?

Hector Garcia: Last year, we had about 200 bite reports involving dogs, cats, and wildlife. Most pet bites occur while someone is playing with their pet; for example, a dog might accidentally catch a hand while going for a ball. It's less common to have a truly aggressive animal out trying to bite people. Sometimes bites happen when someone finds a scared or injured stray and tries to pet it before the animal feels safe.

Grace Hallowell: What should somebody do immediately after being bitten?

Hector Garcia: If the animal is owned, try to exchange information with the owner, including their name and address. You should always seek medical help to get the wound cleaned to prevent infection. If it's a stray and you can safely secure it, do so; if not, stay away and call us. Try to get a picture so we know what the animal looks like when we search the area.

Grace Hallowell: And if it's wildlife?

Hector Garcia: If you can safely secure it—like putting a box over a bat—please do. If we can't find the animal to quarantine it for ten days, it is highly recommended that you see your primary care doctor to discuss the rabies vaccine, just to be on the safe side.

Grace Hallowell: How can parents teach their children to safely interact with animals?

Hector Garcia: Teach your kids to always ask first before petting someone's pet. Even if an animal looks friendly, it might be scared or in training. If they see a stray, they should stay away and find an adult to tell them. Most kids are actually pretty good at asking for permission.

Grace Hallowell: Switching gears to keep pets safe—why is a microchip so important?

Hector Garcia: A microchip is about the size of a grain of rice and is not battery-operated. When a scanner goes over it, it displays a 9 to 15-digit number. That number links to the owner's contact information in a database. It helps us tremendously. We can scan a dog, find the owner, and sometimes return the pet before the owner even realizes it's gone.

Grace Hallowell: How often should pet owners update that information?

Hector Garcia: I would say check it once a year. People often forget to update it when they move. We've picked up dogs whose addresses are still listed in North Texas or out of state. If you aren't sure of the number, give us a call; we can swing by, scan the chip, and give you the number so you can update your info with the company.

Grace Hallowell: What are some common misconceptions about microchips?

Hector Garcia: People worry their private information is being blasted out to the public, but it's actually very limited. If a regular citizen scans the chip, they often only see a way to message the owner through the company. As animal control, we have access to additional tools to facilitate reunions, but the data is handled by trusted departments.

Grace Hallowell: Have you seen any memorable reunions because of a chip?

Hector Garcia: We recently caught a dog that had been running loose for about two months. The owner had called when it first went missing, but the dog was too skittish to be caught. We finally got him in a trap, and sure enough, he had a chip. When I called the owner, they were so excited; they didn't know if he was injured or had passed away. Reuniting that dog with his family was a great feeling.

Grace Hallowell: What should residents do first if their pet goes missing?

Hector Garcia: Call us with a description and your contact info. We keep a lost pet log and check it against every animal we pick up. We also take found animals to the Aggieland Humane Society, so check their lost-and-found page daily. Facebook groups for lost pets in town are also great resources we monitor.

Grace Hallowell: If someone finds a pet, what should they do?

Hector Garcia: Give us a call so we can scan it for a chip. If it's late at night, you can try to keep the dog in your backyard or garage until the next morning, when we can respond.

Grace Hallowell: What are some tips for being a responsible pet owner?

Hector Garcia: Microchips and leashes are the big ones. People often think their dog has great recall until they see a squirrel. And remember, the leash ordinance applies to cats, too. If your cat leaves your property, it needs to be on a leash. Most cats don't like it, but it is the ordinance. Beyond that, a collar with an ID tag or embroidered phone number is incredibly helpful.

Grace Hallowell: In College Station, all dogs, cats, and ferrets also need to be licensed and vaccinated against rabies.

Hector Garcia: Yes, and they also need a county tag. The new county tags have QR codes that owners can program with their contact information. There is also a 24/7 hotline and a trauma fund for serious injuries to animals wearing those tags.

Grace Hallowell: Where can people go for more information on these ordinances?

Hector Garcia: You can look at the Animal Control section of the city website. If you need clarification, you can reach us through the police department's non-emergency line. We are happy to walk first-time pet owners through the requirements for rabies vaccines, microchips, and leashes.

Grace Hallowell: You guys are a wonderful resource. Are you ready for a quick lightning round?

Hector Garcia: Sure.

Grace Hallowell: Dog person or cat person?

Hector Garcia: Both, but maybe a little more dog.

Grace Hallowell: Biggest misconception about animal control?

Hector Garcia: That we're mean people who like to toss animals around. It's the complete opposite—we love and pet just about every one of them.

Grace Hallowell: Most unusual animal call?

Hector Garcia: The hawk in H-E-B. I was walking around with a giant pole and net in the rafters while everyone in the produce aisle recorded it on their phones.

Grace Hallowell: Funniest thing an animal has done on a call?

Hector Garcia: I responded to a call for a massive 120-pound dog. I was nervous because of his size and bark, but as soon as I put the leash on him, he rolled over for a belly rub. He was just a big old puppy.

Grace Hallowell: One word to describe working in animal control?

Hector Garcia: Interesting.

Grace Hallowell: Thank you so much for joining me today, Hector.

Hector Garcia: Thanks for having me again.

Grace Hallowell: And that's what's up!