

Why Do Dogs Scratch the Ground After Defecating?

An Ethological Analysis of a Complex and Multifactorial Behavior

Author: Massimiliano Torfini

The behavior of “ground scratching” observed in dogs after defecation or urination is an ethological phenomenon widely documented in both domestic and wild canids. It is an innate motor sequence with a strong communicative component, regulated by neurobehavioral mechanisms linked to territoriality, olfactory marking, and social information exchange.

1. Evolutionary Origins of the Behavior

Ground scratching after elimination has been observed in wolves, coyotes, jackals, wild dogs, and feral domestic dogs. This indicates an ancient phylogenetic origin and a stable adaptive function over time. The behavior serves to increase the persistence and spread of chemical-olfactory signals in the environment.

2. Olfactory Marking and Signal Enhancement

The interdigital glands of dogs contain pheromonal compounds and volatile metabolites. When the dog scratches the ground, it releases these cutaneous secretions and deposits them on the soil, combining them with the odor of feces or urine. The result is a persistent, complex, and multilayered scent signal.

3. Informational Function

The pheromones produced convey information about individual identity, sex, reproductive status, dominance, emotional state, and social belonging. The marked area becomes a chemical-communication point for other canids.

4. Territorial Value

Contrary to the common misconception, the purpose is not to bury the feces but rather to enhance the visibility and communicative value of the marking. By scratching, the dog lifts soil and vegetation, creating a visual signal that amplifies the olfactory message.

5. Social Aspects

Observational studies show that the behavior is more frequent in males, dominant individuals, and confident dogs. This suggests a hierarchical component: scratching acts as a display of presence, confidence, and territorial control.

6. Sensory Stimulation

The behavior may also be part of a post-elimination motor discharge sequence, activating spinal motor pathways and proprioceptive feedback mechanisms.

7. Individual Variability

Some dogs perform the behavior consistently, others occasionally, and some not at all. This variability depends on temperament, social rank, sex, hormonal status, genetic background, and environmental context.

8. Ecological Function

Ground scratching conveys a multimodal message:

- Olfactory: the identity of the individual
- Pheromonal: reproductive and hierarchical information
- Visual: a clear territorial marker
- Social: a signal of presence and confidence

Conclusion

Ground scratching after defecation is deeply rooted in canine biology. It is not a random or playful gesture, but a complex multimodal communication strategy with territorial, social, and olfactory functions. Understanding this behavior allows for a more accurate interpretation of canine intraspecific communication.