

Tip Sheet: LOST DOG BEHAVIOR

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Dogs travel different distances when they are lost. Understanding the following environmental and behavioral factors and taking appropriate action will increase the chances that you will recover your missing dog:

Factors That Influence Distances Traveled: There are six major factors that influence the distances that a lost dog will travel: Temperament, Circumstances, Weather, Terrain, Appearance, and Population Density.

Temperament of the Dog How a dog behaves towards strangers influences how far it will travel (when lost) before someone intervenes and rescues it. There are three primary behavioral categories of lost dogs: Gregarious Dogs, Aloof Dogs, and Xenophobic Dogs.

Gregarious Dogs: Wiggly-butt, friendly dogs are more inclined to go directly up to the first person who calls them. Depending on the terrain and population density where the dog was lost, these dogs will generally be found fairly close to home or will be picked up by someone close to the escape point. Gregarious dogs are often "adopted" by individuals (not shelter or rescue workers) who find them.

Aloof Dogs: Dogs with aloof temperaments are wary of strangers and will initially avoid human contact. They will be inclined to accept human contact only after they have overcome fear issues and become hungry enough. While these dogs can travel a great distance, aloof dogs eventually can be enticed with food and patience, typically by experienced rescuers who know how to approach and capture a wary dog. These dogs are often recovered by rescue group volunteers, and their wariness can be easily misinterpreted as "abused." In addition, these dogs are often not recovered for weeks or months after their escape, giving them the physical appearance (thinness, injuries, stickers, ticks, etc.) that they are homeless, abused, and unloved.

Xenophobic (Fearful) Dogs: Xenophobia means "fear or hatred of things strange or foreign." Dogs with xenophobic temperaments (due to genetics and/or puppyhood experiences) are more inclined to travel farther and are at a higher risk of being hit by cars. Due to their cowering, fearful behavior, people assume these dogs were "abused," and even if the dog has ID tags, they will refuse to contact the previous owner. Some of these panic-stricken dogs will even run from their owners! It may be necessary to use other dogs to get close enough to capture them or to use baited dog traps.

Circumstances Surrounding the Disappearance - A dog that digs out from a yard to explore a scent will tend to travel a short distance before it is found meandering and doubling back as it explores a scent. On the other hand, a dog that bolts in panic due to fireworks or thunder will take off at a blind run and can run for several miles.

Weather: A dog that escapes on a beautiful spring day may travel farther than one that escapes in a snowstorm. Extreme weather conditions (snow, hail, rain, sweltering heat) will decrease the distances that lost dogs travel.

Terrain: A dog that escapes in a residential area will not travel as far as a dog that escapes in a mountainous area. Fences that create barriers will influence a dog's travel since a dog will tend to take the "path of least resistance" when traveling. Cactus, heavy brush, and steep cliffs can be barriers that influence whether a dog continues on a path or changes directions.

Appearance of the Dog: What a dog looks like can influence how quickly it will be picked up by a rescuer. In general, most people are less inclined to pull over and attempt to grab a loose Pit Bull they perceive as being “aggressive” than they would a “friendly” Labrador Retriever. Also, size matters as people are more inclined to pick up small dogs because they look vulnerable and are easier to transport and house than large dogs. In addition, people are more likely to attempt to rescue a purebred dog that they perceive to have value than a mixed breed dog. When average motorists see a mixed breed dog trotting down the sidewalk, their impression is often that the dog belongs in the neighborhood or that it is a homeless stray. But when those same people see a Boston Terrier, they are inclined to believe that, because it is a “valuable purebred dog,” it must be a lost pet.

Population Density: A dog that escapes in Manhattan will travel a shorter distance than will a dog that escapes in the Rockies or in rural farmland. When dogs escape into areas with a high number of people, their chances of being found close to the escape point are increased. But in areas with an extremely low number of people, dogs tend to travel farther and their chances of being found close to the escape point are decreased. A dog that escapes in the middle of the night will travel farther before being seen than a dog that escapes during rush hour traffic.

Owner Behaviors That Create Problems: Dog owners often behave in ways that actually inhibit their chances of recovering their lost dogs. Some develop a “wait and see” approach (believing their dog will return home like Lassie) and by the time they start actively looking, the vital first few hours to locate the dog (or witnesses who saw the dog) are gone. Others develop “tunnel vision” and fail to find their dog because they focus on wrong theories. They assume their dog was “stolen and sold to research” when in fact their dog might have been rescued and put up for adoption through a local adoption event. They experience “grief avoidance” and quickly give up their search effort because they really believe they will never see their dog again. They feel helpless and alone, often discouraged by others who rebuke them and tell them “it was just a dog” and “you’ll never find your dog.”

In addition, the level of human animal bond (HAB) will influence the recovery efforts. People with a strong HAB will go to extremes to find their lost dog. They will accomplish the “impossible” task of visiting all shelters, posting flyers, and contacting rescue groups while maintaining a full-time job and other family commitments. On the other hand, people with a weak HAB will quickly become discouraged, assume they will never see their dog again, and will stop searching.

Rescuer Behaviors That Create Problems: People who find stray dogs often misinterpret the dog's behavior; they assume that the cowering, fearful dog was “abused” when in fact the dog has a xenophobic temperament and has been shy and fearful since it was a puppy, due to genetics and puppyhood experiences. Dogs found in rural areas are often assumed to be “dumped” and homeless; many rescuers never think this could be a dog that was lost. Some people who find a stray dog that does not have a collar automatically assume it is “homeless” and therefore they immediately work to place the dog rather than attempt to find the dog's owner. In addition, the first place the owner of a lost dog will search for his or her dog - the local shelter - is typically the last place that someone who finds a loose dog will take it (due to the fear of euthanasia)!

For more information on lost pet behaviors, effective advice on lost pet posters, information about animal shelter seminars and programs that help increase lost pet recovery (while lowering euthanasia) rates, and a national network of professional and volunteer pet detectives, visit www.missingpetpartnership.org.

Tip Sheet: LOST CAT BEHAVIOR

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The disappearance of an outdoor-access cat means that something has happened to interrupt that cat's behavior of coming home whereas indoor-only cats that escape outdoors typically hide in silence near their escape point. Thus the methods that should be used to search for a missing outdoor-access cat are very different from the methods that should be used to recover an indoor-only cat that has escaped doors. Understanding the following behaviors and taking appropriate action will increase the chances that you will recover your cat:

Outdoor-Access Cats: Cats are territorial. When an outdoor-access cat suddenly vanishes, it means that SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED to that cat to interrupt its normal behavior of coming home. The disappearance could mean that the cat is injured, trapped, or deceased within its territory. Or perhaps the cat was transported out of the area—either intentionally (by an irate neighbor who trapped the cat) or unintentionally (by the cat climbing into an opened parked van). Possibly the cat was displaced into unfamiliar territory—something as simple as being chased by a dog several houses away but in an area that the cat is not familiar with, causing it to panic and hide in silence. **The investigative question when an outdoor-access cat disappears is: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CAT?**

Indoor-Only Cats: The territory for an indoor-only cat is the inside of the home where it lives. When an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors, it is "displaced" into unfamiliar territory. Usually they will look for the first place that will offer concealment and protection. Their instinctive response is to HIDE IN SILENCE because that is their primary protection from predators. How long they remain in that hiding place and what they do from there is dependant upon their temperament. **The investigative question when an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors is: WHERE IS THE CAT HIDING?**

Feline Temperaments That Influence Distances Traveled:

Temperament influences actions. How a cat behaves when in its normal territory will influence how it behaves when it becomes "lost" or displaced into unfamiliar territory. In addition to posting flyers and checking the cages of local shelters, encourage cat owners to develop a search strategy based on the specific behavior of their cat. Here are guidelines to use:

CURIOUS/CLOWN CAT – These are gregarious cats that get into trouble easily, run to the door to greet a stranger, and are not easily afraid of anything. When displaced, these cats might initially hide but then they will most likely TRAVEL. Strategy for recovery should be to place florescent posters within at least a five block radius. Also, interview neighbors in a door-to-door search, thoroughly searching possible hiding places in yards of houses and other areas within a close proximity to the escape point. Do not assume that the cat will come when you call!

CARE-LESS CAT – These aloof cats don't seem to care much about people. When a stranger comes in, they stand back and watch. When displaced they will likely initially hide, but eventually they will break cover and come back to the door, meow, or possibly travel. Strategy should be to search hiding places nearby, interview neighbors door-to-door and search their yards. If these efforts do not produce results, consider setting a baited humane trap.

CAUTIOUS CAT – These cats are generally stable but they show occasional shyness. They like people but when a stranger comes to the door, they dart and hide. Some of these cats peek around the corner and eventually come out to investigate. When displaced, they will likely immediately hide in fear. If not pushed (scared off) from their hiding place, they will typically return to the point where they escaped from or they will meow when the owner comes to look for them. This behavior typically is observed either within the first two days (after the cat has built up confidence) or not until seven to ten days later when their hunger or thirst has reached a point where they will respond. Strategy would be to conduct a tightly focused search in neighbors' yards and to set baited humane traps.

CATATONIC/XENOPHOBIC CAT – Xenophobia means "fear or hatred of things strange or foreign." Xenophobic cats are afraid of EVERYTHING that is new or unfamiliar. Their fearful behavior is hardwired into their character; it is caused by genetics and/or kittenhood experiences (nature or nurture). These cats will hide when a stranger comes into their home, and they typically will not come out until well after the company has left. They do not do well with human contact (being held, petted, etc.) and they are easily disturbed by any change in their environment. When displaced, they bolt and then HIDE IN SILENCE. They tend to remain in the same hiding place and become almost catatonic, immobilized with fear. If they are found by someone other than their owners, they are typically mistaken as being untamed or "feral." The primary strategy to recover these cats would be to set baited humane traps. Xenophobic cats that become "lost" are routinely absorbed into the feral cat population.

Owner Behaviors That Create Problems: Cat owners often behave in ways that actually inhibit their chances of finding their lost cat. They develop "tunnel vision" and fail to find their cat because they focus on wrong theories. They experience "grief avoidance" and quickly give up their search effort. They feel helpless and alone, often discouraged by others who rebuke them and tell them "it was just a cat" and "you'll never find your cat." But one of the biggest problems is that cat owners typically focus their search efforts by posting lost cat flyers and by searching the cages at the local shelter. Although these techniques are important and should not be overlooked, the primary technique to recover a missing cat should be to obtain permission from all neighbors to enter their yards and conduct an aggressive, physical search for the missing cat (and to set baited humane traps there when necessary). Simply asking a neighbor to "look" for the lost cat is not sufficient! Neighbors are not going to crawl around on their bellies under their decks or houses to search for someone else's lost cat!

Rescuer Behaviors That Create Problems: One of the most tragic misinterpretations of feline behavior occurs when rescuers observe a cat with a xenophobic temperament and assume, based on the fearful behavior, that the cat is an untamed "feral." While it is true that feral, untamed cats that are unaccustomed to human contact will hiss, spit, twirl, lunge, and urinate when humanely trapped, **this "wild animal" behavior is also common in cats who have xenophobic temperaments!** We know this because we have talked to owners of lost xenophobic cats that had to be humanely trapped in order to be recovered; the owners verified that their cats exhibited wild behavior while in the humane trap. These behaviors are a reflection of **a fearful TEMPERAMENT, not a lack of TAMENESS.** Shelter and TNR workers should scan all "feral" cats for microchips and conduct research (check Classifieds, lost cat reports, etc.) to determine if the new "feral" is actually someone's xenophobic pet cat that escaped outdoors, perhaps several weeks or months before it was found.

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