

How To Find Lost Pets: A Primer for the Public

BY KAT ALBRECHT



In this 101, **Kat Albrecht**, founder of the **Missing Pet Partnership**, gives advice on finding lost pets. If pet owners come into your shelter searching for lost animals but come up empty-handed, you can still help by **handing them a copy of these tips**. (To read more about Kat Albrecht, see page 24.)

The main text on a lost pet poster should be clear to someone driving by at 55 miles per hour. KAT ALBRECHT

1. Understand the dynamics of lost pets.

As every devoted pet owner knows, animals are individuals. The behavior of a lost animal depends on more than just species and breed. Her circumstances and personality—and the way our own species responds to her—can affect both where she goes and how you search for her. Here are some general tips about the behaviors of particular kinds of cats and dogs. You may recognize your own pet in these descriptions.

DOGS

It is difficult to predict how far lost dogs will go if they get loose; there are too many variables. The distance a lost dog travels depends on his individual temperament, the environment (terrain and weather), and the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. Another complicating factor is that people who pick up stray dogs often transport them out of the immediate search area. But generally speaking, your target search area will be within a mile radius of your home.

Friendly dogs and purebreds

In general, wiggly-friendly dogs who seek attention from strangers, along with dogs recognizable as purebreds or rare breeds, will be picked up more quickly than mixed breed dogs, who often go unnoticed. The average, non-rescue-oriented person who sees a mixed-breed dog trotting down the sidewalk may not think much about it, but when the same person sees a dog of “value,” they’re more likely to realize something is not right and pull over. (They may want to keep the dog, but hopefully

Although it is possible that someone has transported your animal a long distance from your home, you must act on the assumption that your pet is nearby and that you will recover him. If you lose hope or become discouraged by others who are trying to tell you to “give up” your search efforts, you will reduce your chances of recovering your pet.

they'll try to help find the owner, especially if you have placed ads and posted signs around the neighborhood.)

Panicked dogs and skittish/shy dogs

Panicked dogs—for example, those who've been scared by fireworks or involved in a car accident—and dogs with skittish, shy temperaments will be more difficult to capture and are at risk of traveling further. These dogs often run blindly and can travel for miles before intervention. When they eventually slow down, they often seek secluded places (such as wooded areas, cemeteries, and creeks) where they can avoid all human contact. People who find these frightened dogs often mistakenly believe they have been abused. If all other methods fail to help you get close to your panicked dog, you may need to resort to setting a large humane dog trap. But this can be tricky; you need to know where your dog is hanging out and set the trap in the vicinity. (To learn how, see www.AnimalSheltering.org/humanetrapp.)

CATS

We do not know enough yet about lost cat behavior to predict which cats will remain hidden and which cats will travel. To be on the safe side, follow the tips below, and combine aggressive distribution of fliers with the use of baited humane traps; these traps are your best and primary tool for recovering a displaced, skittish cat. For instructions on how to recover a cat with a humane trap, go to www.catsinthebag.org.

Because cats are often nervous, they may hide for an extended period before emerging into the open. Even if some time has passed since your cat disappeared, you should continue searching local shelters—your cat might not come out for weeks and might not end up in the shelter until months after his initial disappearance.

Indoor cats with outdoor access/indoor-only cats

Injured or frightened cats usually hide within their own territory and remain silent. Indoor-only cats who escape into the outdoors are displaced from their territory. Because these cats are traumatized by displacement, they also tend to remain concealed and silent. Their silence is designed to protect them from predators. Just because you do not see or hear your cat does not mean he is not right there, hiding in the bushes or behind your hose box.

Gregarious indoor cats

Displaced gregarious cats may initially hide in silence, but eventually they will likely meow and break cover. Some of them will even show up at your door and run back inside, but others may travel.

To learn more about the behavior of lost pets and the environmental and temperament issues that may influence how far an escaped pet will travel, visit the Missing Pet Partnership's website at www.lostapet.org.

2. Start your search close to home.

Search your own property and surrounding neighbors' properties first, checking areas where your animal could be trapped or injured. Dogs can become trapped inside sheds and trailers, get entangled in wires under homes, even fall into wells or neighboring swimming pools.

Get permission from your neighbors to search their property, especially if you're looking for a cat—that way you can search in and under sheds, basements, garages, houses, decks, and heavy brush. Do not simply ask your neighbor to look for your cat; they probably won't be as motivated to crawl around on their tummies to look in the places your cat is most likely to hide.

Your property and the houses within a three-house radius of your home are the high-probability search areas for an outdoor-access cat who has vanished. Use a flashlight and be both patient and hopeful, calling your kitty in your normal “cat calls.”

You can even try appealing to his appetite using recorded sounds of a can opener or clinking a cat food can with a spoon. Just remember that even if the cat doesn't appear, he may still be nearby—and possibly injured, stuck, or too frightened to respond.

3. Distribute posters and fliers in your target search area.

When developing lost animal posters, use bright, fluorescent poster board—available at drug stores or office supply stores—as the backing for 8 1/2 x 11" fliers (see photo on p. 41). In giant black letters at the top, write the word “reward,” and at the very bottom write the words “lost dog/cat.” On your 8 1/2 x 11" white flier, use an uppercase, 90-point font to describe your animal, such as “white” at the top and “poodle” at the bottom; in a smaller font, list important information about your animal, along with your contact information. Put a recent color photo in the center of the flier; then laminate it. If you can't laminate it, make it waterproof by covering it with clear tape when you affix it to the poster. The size and fluorescent color of the poster will immediately attract the eye; everyone driving by will know there's a lost white poodle in the area. Place these posters initially at all major intersections within a mile radius of the place your animal went missing, and expand outward within a week if he has not been found. If you get calls from people who think they've seen your animal, add posters in the areas they called from as well.

4. Check all known havens.

Be sure to visit all of the animal shelters in your area regularly. (There may be more than one.) Talk with the staff and provide pictures of your animal. Check back regularly, and contact all area rescue groups, too. Animal shelters and rescue groups are a high-probability search area for a lost animal. Many strays are ultimately posted on www.petfinder.com and other websites, so keep checking those sites in case your animal has been found and listed.

If you're searching for a cat, you should also notify any local "trap-neuter-return" groups who may eventually trap your cat. When you visit local shelters, be sure to notify shelter employees that your cat is skittish and might behave like a feral cat.

5. Be prepared to respond to several sightings.

Be sure someone is available at all times to answer incoming calls from potential sighters. If you have an answering machine, change your message to include a mention of the animal (so people will know they've called the right number) and instructions on how someone can reach you on your cell phone. If you don't have a cell phone, borrow or buy one.

If someone responds to your plea for help, ask the caller if she is calling from a cell phone. If the answer is yes, ask her to remain on the phone with you to keep you updated on the animal's location. This tactic—cell phone to cell phone communication between a witness and the owner—has proven to be the most effective method of recovering lost pets.

6. Do not give up.

Sometimes it takes weeks, even months, to find a missing animal. There have even been cases where pets have been located years after they disappeared. Your pet did not vanish from the earth. Although it is possible that someone has transported your animal a long distance from your home, you must act on the assumption that your pet is nearby and that you will recover him. If you lose hope or become discouraged by others who are trying to tell you to "give up" your search efforts, you will reduce your chances of recovering your pet. AS



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