

Ohio Study Says, “Tag—You’re Home”

ID tags and current licenses lead to the most reunions

BY DEBRA J. WHITE

Nothing says “I love you” like a cheap metal tag. That’s the conclusion of a recent pair of studies in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* (Vol. 230, No. 2) that shows lost dogs and cats wearing identification tags are recovered more often by their owners than those who are naked.

The findings of the study, conducted from June to September 2005, seem to support a “back to basics” approach to recovering lost pets. Led by Linda K. Lord, D.V.M., Ph.D., of the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, researchers studying several animal shelters in Montgomery County, Ohio, found that dog owners who contacted shelters in search of their animals had the greatest success rates. Successful owners also called or visited an animal services agency sooner and more often than those who did not get their dogs back. The median recovery time for dogs was two days; the likelihood increased if the dogs wore current licenses and ID tags. Neighborhood signs posted by owners proved effective, helping 15 percent of recovered dogs go home. Most dogs were found within a mile of home, although at least 7 percent wandered more than five miles away.

Interestingly, high-tech methods of search and recovery proved less useful. Websites played little or no role, and the study also found that the increasingly popular identification microchip had a negligible effect on dog recovery. (Despite estimates that 69 percent of Americans have recently used the Web, many owners may not yet be aware of the lost-pet sites available to the public, the authors suggested.)

Ten percent of owners believed their dogs had been stolen; people in this group were less likely to recover their animals. While the researchers originally hypothesized that these pet owners

were less likely to look for their animals as intensively, they found this to be untrue; owners searched anyway. Yet reunions with pets were notably lower. The researchers drew no conclusion as to whether this lower success rate indicated owners were correct in their belief that their dogs had been stolen.

This study validates the widely held belief that dogs with ID—such as name tags and current licenses—have a much greater chance of being returned to their owners than dogs without ID. Microchips may be helpful in dog recovery, but they should not replace standard ID. Though Ohio requires dogs to be licensed, only 41 percent of dogs in this study were wearing a license tag.

In the companion study, the authors surveyed owners of missing cats in the same county. Ohio has no state laws regarding stray cats, although individual municipalities have the power to impose such rules. Significantly fewer lost cats were recovered than dogs (53 percent compared to 71 percent). The search method with the highest success rate was posting signs in the neighborhood.

Most of the lost cats were outdoor cats or lived both inside and out. The majority were neutered, and neutered cats were significantly more likely than intact cats to be recovered. Only 14 percent of cats wore an ID or rabies tag, a lower rate than dogs. (While the survey did not officially investigate this issue, some owners expressed fear that cats could injure themselves wearing a collar or noted that their cats wouldn’t put up with a collar.) A paltry 7 percent of recovered cats were found in animal shelters, compared to almost 35 percent of their canine counterparts—but, the authors note, owners of cats waited a longer time to contact an animal agency, and more “frequent and earlier contact with animal agencies ... could increase the recovery rate.”



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Cats also showed their well-known independent streak: 66 percent of recovered cats came home on their own compared to only about 8 percent of recovered dogs. In a few instances, owners located missing cats by driving or walking around the neighborhood.

Debate rages about cat licensing. Even in cities like San Mateo, Calif., and Honolulu, Hawaii, where comprehensive cat ordinances exist, cat return rates are still low—only 5.2 percent in Honolulu and lower in San Mateo. Both rates remain well below those for the dogs studied in Ohio.

The authors conclude that owners need to be educated about the importance of ensuring their cats wear identification, suggesting that their study “points to the need to continue to encourage owners to keep their cats indoors.” While the researchers cite veterinarians as a key source of such education, shelters too can continue to encourage the responsible owner behaviors that will keep more owned cats from entering their facilities. AS