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What You Don't Know About Lost Pets Can Hurt Them

By Kathy "Kat" Albrecht, Founder, Missing Pet Partnership, *May 2012*

Want to find lost pets? Whether you're a shelter worker trying to help a guardian find a missing pet or you've lost a pet yourself, the first step to successfully locating a lost pet is to understand how they behave.

Lost pets do not behave like pets in their own homes. They demonstrate distinct patterns of behavior common in lost dogs and cats, often so different from their usual behaviors that their guardians fail to find them even when nearby.

Missing Pet Partnership (MPP), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to reuniting people with their lost pets, has studied the issue of lost companion animals and discovered that understanding those patterns of behavior can dramatically increase the chances that a lost dog or cat will be recovered.

They've also put together a program based on those traits that can give shelter workers another tool to help pet owners find their lost pets, preventing those dogs and cats from ending up in shelters or being injured, stolen, or killed.

How Lost Pets Behave

Since 1997, Missing Pet Partnership volunteers have conducted thousands of physical searches and/or lost pet consultations, and identified these lost pet behaviors that can be used to more effectively search for lost pets.

Lost Outdoor-Access Cats

When a cat who is allowed access outside vanishes, it means that something has happened to interrupt the customary behavior of that cat coming back home.

Displaced Cats

Any cat that is transplanted into unfamiliar territory is a displaced cat. The majority of cases of displacement involve indoor-only cats that accidentally escape outdoors. However, outdoor-access cats can become displaced into unfamiliar territory as well.

Some outdoor-access cats can become displaced when chased from their territory (usually by another cat or a loose dog) and can end up just a few houses away, hiding in fear. While some of these cats may adapt after a few days and work up the confidence to return home, many become disoriented. One of the primary methods recommended to recover displaced cats is the use of digital wildlife cameras and baited humane traps.

Sick, Injured, and Panicked Cats Hide in Silence

The behavior of a sick, injured, or panicked cat is that they will *hide in silence*. Just because the cat owner does not see or hear their cat does not mean that s/he is *not* right there. The lost cat could be hiding in the neighbor's yard. If not found, the cat will likely end up in your shelter in a few months.

Cats who are afraid or injured will seek areas of concealment such as under a deck, under a house, under a porch, or in heavy brush.

Most critically, *these cats will not meow*. Meowing would give up their location to a predator. Their behavior has nothing to do with whether the cat loves you, recognizes your voice, or whether s/he can smell you. It has everything to do with the fact that a *panicked cat will hide in silence*. So just because you do not see or hear your cat does not mean that s/he is not very close to home.

The "Threshold Factor" in Cats

An interesting behavioral pattern that Missing Pet Partnership has observed with displaced cats is that many cats will simply not respond to food or break cover (from their hiding place) for several days.

Cats with confident temperaments initially hide in silence, but within hours (or sometimes days) break cover and meow, return to the front door, or finally enter a humane trap.

Cats with more skittish, fearful temperaments may take several days before they finally reach a threshold point (typically ten to twelve days) and before they will finally break cover. In one case, an extremely timid cat hiding inside the attic of a veterinarian's office did not enter a baited humane trap for twenty-two days, most likely due to barking dog noises that kept the cat in a constant state of fear. Cat owners should be encouraged to

continue with trapping efforts even if their cat does not immediately enter the baited trap.

Gregarious Dogs

Wiggly-butt, friendly dogs are more inclined to go directly up to the first person who calls them. These dogs are at risk of self adoption because they end up with well-meaning rescuers who don't want to turn them into an animal shelter for fear they'll lose their lives there. 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.

Aloof Dogs

Dogs with aloof temperaments are wary of strangers and will initially avoid human contact. Eventually, they will be inclined to accept human contact once they have overcome fear issues and become hungry enough. The wariness of these dogs can be easily misinterpreted as "abuse," since many will cower in fear. 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're stray and homeless rather than someone's lost pet.

Skittish Dogs

Dogs with timid, skittish 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," making them reluctant to search for an owner. It may be necessary to use "magnet" dogs with a snappy snare, baited humane dog traps, or "lost dog calming signals" (see below) to capture a skittish dog.

How Humans Looking For Lost Pets Behave

Dog and cat caregivers often behave in ways that actually reduce their chances of recovering their lost pet.

Some develop "tunnel vision" and fail to find their pet 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.

Cat caregivers are often discouraged by others who tell them "your cat was probably killed by a coyote," when in fact their cat is hiding under the neighbor's deck.

Alone and discouraged, both dog and cat caregivers experience "grief avoidance" and quickly give up search efforts because they really believe they will never see their pet again.

Sometimes rescuers who find lost dogs and cats behave in ways that reduce the chances that the animal will be reunited with their owners. Those who find skittish dogs assume that the cowering, fearful behavior means that the dog was "abused," when in fact the dog was simply born with a fearful temperament and has been shy and fearful since it was a puppy.

People who see a skittish cat darting under a deck automatically assume that the cat is "feral," when in fact the cat could be a tame housecat born with a fearful temperament and has been shy since it was a kitten. Some people who find a stray dog who does not have a collar automatically assume it is "homeless" and therefore immediately work to place the dog rather than attempt to find the dog's owner. In addition, the first place the caregiver 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, for fear the animal will be killed.

Lost Pet Coaching

With everything working against them, people who lose their beloved dogs and cats need all the help they can get in order to achieve a successful reunion. Your willingness to guide them to the proper recovery techniques could not only save their animal's life, it could free up cage space in your shelter and save the life of another animal as well.

Now that you know about the human and animal behaviors that inhibit lost pet recoveries, here are some tips and techniques you can pass along to caregivers to increase the chances they'll find their lost dog or cat.

Tailor the Search to the Situation

One of the biggest mistakes related to advising pet caregivers how to search for a lost pet is to provide "one type fits all" lost pet recovery advice.

Lost dog incidents require different sets of advice from lost cat incidents because dogs behave very differently than cats do when lost. In general, dogs run and cats hide.

In addition, how people perceive loose dogs is very different from how people perceive loose cats. People pull over and rescue dogs, but most people ignore cats. Thus the search for a lost cat truly involves searching for the cat.

The search for a lost dog, on the other hand, usually involves searching for *the person* who has self-adopted/rescued the "homeless stray" (lost) dog that they found. In addition, the most effective methods that should be used to search for a missing outdoor-access cat are very different than those that should be used to search for an indoor-only cat who escaped outside.

Search Means Physically Look

It is critical to encourage cat caregivers to obtain permission from their neighbors to enter their yards and conduct an aggressive, physical search of their property, looking under and in every conceivable hiding space for their lost cat.

Just handing a flyer to a neighbor and asking them to "look" for a missing cat will not do. Most neighbors simply will not go out into their yards, get on their belly, and look around under their house or deck for someone else's cat. And yet many times neighbor's yards are the areas where a sick, injured, or displaced cat is likely to be found.

Neon Posters

Based on knowledge of the effects of "inattentional blindness" and the poor visibility of most lost pet signs, Missing Pet Partnership has discovered a creative and highly effective tool for recovering lost pets.

When it comes to marketing a lost dog to people driving in cars who typically don't pay attention to signs, you have only five seconds using five words to get a message across to drivers who are traveling at 55 miles per hour. Most pet owners make the mistake of posting flyers (8 1/2" x 11" white pieces of paper) instead of posters. Flyers are too small and very few people passing by notice them. People notice neon posters.

Humane Traps and Wildlife Cameras

If the owner/guardian says that their dog is skittish and is running loose and they can't catch him, or if the owner/guardian of a missing cat says she is an indoor-only cat that escaped outside, suggest that they utilize feeding stations with baited humane traps and wildlife cameras to help recover their pet.

Missing Pet Partnership offers detailed information on this topic on their website, along with lost pet consultations to instruct dog and cat owners in how to use humane traps and/or wildlife cameras to help recover panicked dogs and displaced cats.

Window Tagging

"Tagging" a car is when owners use neon window markers to write their lost pet information (most often used for lost dog cases) on the back window of their car. This is a fantastic way of "marketing" a lost pet while the family drives through their neighborhood and community.

Intersection Alerts

An intersection alert is where the owner/guardian uses four giant, florescent "REWARD LOST DOG" posters to "market" their lost dog by standing on a street corner, holding the sign just like sign twirlers.

In the past, MPP instructed 43 families to do this and *14 of them got their lost dogs back by using this technique.*

While the most effective method for finding cats is searching neighbor's properties, making a scene and "protesting" a lost dog is a highly effective method for recovering lost dogs.

House as Trap

This is a unique lost pet recovery technique that Missing Pet Partnership advises some pet owners to use to capture skittish dogs and cats. The concept is that when someone has a skittish pet who bolts outside and then returns to the home *but won't allow anyone to approach and keeps darting away in fear* whenever the owner/guardian opens or approaches the door, they can effect a capture by hiding behind the door, enticing the animal into the house, and slamming the door closed.

Lost Dog Calming Signals

Dogs with skittish temperaments that become lost are difficult to recover, primarily because they run from rescuers and often from their own guardians. By the time a guardian sees their skittish lost dog, it is probable that several would-be-rescuers already tried to capture him, sending the dog into a blind panic.

It is also important to understand that the olfactory portion of a dog's brain closes down during the "fight or flight" process and that a panicked dog likely won't recognize their guardian's scent. Guardians should be prepared that their timid lost dog may run from them.

Guardians should be instructed that if they should see their dog, they should not call or chase or even look at their dog. Instead, they should remain calm and do the following:

Carry a bag that can make noise when squeezed and is filled with soft treats, such as a crinkly potato chip bag filled with moist pieces of hotdog.

Resist all urges to look directly at the dog.

Resist all urges to move toward the dog in any way.

Kneel down and pretend to accidentally drop food on the ground while looking away from the dog or looking at the ground, watching the dog out of the corner of the eye.

Make lip smacking noises along with "nummy, nummy" sounds while crinkling the bag of treats. This non-threatening gesture will typically entice a dog to believe the person doesn't even notice them but instead is eating food.

If kneeling and dropping food on the ground doesn't work, try lying flat on the ground while making whining sounds. This is yet another way to lessen the threat to a panicked dog and encourage it to come to a human.

Remain calm, patient, and allow the dog to come up to you. Only take hold of the collar slowly once the dog shows recognition or is calm.

Encouragement

The biggest enemy that dog and cat owner/guardians will have is their desire to give up too soon. This behavior is called "grief avoidance" and is natural. In times of grief, people want closure and an end to their emotional pain.

However, people who give up too soon typically don't find their lost pets. The most critical and effective tool that you can give to someone who's lost a dog or cat is encouragement. Refer families to Missing Pet Partnership's website and advise and encourage them to not give up hope.

For more information on lost pet behaviors, shelter-based lost pet recovery programs, and community-based lost pet search-and-rescue teams, a 5-day Missing Animal Response course as well as in-house workshops for shelters, visit the [Missing Pet Partnership website](#).

About the author: Kathy "Kat" Albrecht is a former police officer, field training officer, police detective, and K9 (police bloodhounds and cadaver dogs) trainer turned pet detective. During her ten-year career as a search dog handler, Kat and her dogs located physical evidence, missing people, and criminals. In 2001 Kat founded Missing Pet Partnership, a national nonprofit organization that is working to pioneer the concept of community-based lost pet services through the first-ever pet detective academy.