

LOST CAT



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MISSING

Your Lost Cat Action Plan: here's what to do if your cat goes missing (hint: time is of the essence)

By Jen Reeder

California resident Angela Price panics when her cat Holiday goes missing—despite Price's vigilance, the indoor cat somehow still manages to dart outdoors whenever opportunity presents itself.

"We scour the house and the neighborhood and get hysterical that she's gone, only to find her several hours later standing in the hallway looking at us like we're crazy," Price says.

Many cat parents can relate to the fear of realizing their beloved pet is missing. And unfortunately, not all lost cats are found as quickly as Holiday. Knowing what to do if your cat is lost—and taking steps to prevent the situation—are key to finding a missing cat.

"Searching for a lost cat is quite different from searching for a lost dog," notes Nancy Peterson, cat programs manager at the Humane Society of the United States.

While people searching for lost dogs are typically told to search shelters and post missing pet flyers, cats, in contrast, are often hiding in or near their home or where they escaped from their carrier. Immediately and aggressively searching their territory is key—starting in your home.

"Look in the closets, look in cabinets—cats can open cabinets—look under blankets, under pillows," Peterson says. "Know where your cat typically will go when he or she is frightened."

If the missing cat typically lives indoors and possibly escaped when a service person or guest opened the door (or if a screen is loose or open), the cat is usually hiding within a five-house radius of his home. Bring a flashlight and search under decks, porches, and bushes. Let your neighbours—children as well as adults—know your cat is missing and ask permission to search their yards.

"Don't ask your neighbour to look; you go look. Nobody is going to look as well as you're going to look," Peterson says.

If the cat is still missing, set a humane trap with delicious food in a place your cat would feel safe, like near a bush or a deck, not out in the open. Traps can often be borrowed from a local shelter. Then keep an eye on it, either from a perch in your yard or, if the cat escaped its carrier near the veterinarian's office, ask the staff for permission to set up camp there to observe the trap, if possible. ▶



An indoor cat is usually hiding within a five-house radius of his home.

"It's more likely that your cat will come out in the dark, at night, when it's really quiet and they might feel a little safer," she says.

Safety concerns are a major reason why missing cats might not meow in response to calls from their owner.

"The fact that your cat may not respond to you doesn't mean your cat doesn't love you, it just means your cat is probably scared at the moment. If a cat is scared, announcing their presence wouldn't be a very smart thing for survival—there could be a predator, or the big bad electrician has come in," she says.

If you haven't recovered your cat after the first evening, it's time to call local animal shelters and veterinarians, place "lost pet" classified ads in the newspaper and online, and hang flyers. Flyers should be brief, with a photo of your cat, his or her name, where he or she was last seen, your phone number, and if there is a reward. They should be in waterproof sheets and posted at a level where someone walking or driving by would see them. Then when people call, keep a log record with their names, phone numbers, and where they think they saw your cat so you can figure out if you need to search a new area—a possibility if your cat was chased out of its territory by a dog.

Searching for outdoor cats is "trickier," according to Peterson, because their territory might be larger than five houses away. The main key to finding an outdoor cat is acting quickly; if they don't come home when expected, such as dinnertime, they might be locked in a shed, or have been hit by a car and injured. So as soon as the cat doesn't come home when she usually does, it's time to start looking because time is of the essence, particularly if she is injured.

"You have to assume something is wrong," Peterson says. "Don't just say, 'I'll wait until tomorrow' ... Cats are creatures of habit. So when something out of the ordinary happens, you have to assume that something has prevented your cat from coming home as he normally does."

When you and your cat are reunited, it's important to let everyone know—shelters, veterinarians, neighbors, mail carriers—and thank them for their efforts. Then learn from the experience and take steps to ensure it doesn't happen again.

"Prevention is the best medicine," Peterson says.

The most important step is to make sure your cat always wears a collar with visible identification, either engraved on a tag or embroidered into the collar. This is important for indoor as well as outdoor cats because indoor cats can and do get out of the house.

"You just never know what could happen," she says.

Peterson says it's also important to always take your pets with you if you have to evacuate, and to that end, train them to feel safe in their carrier (this also makes trips to the veterinarian more pleasant).

"I would have the carrier out, maybe in a quiet place with a blanket, sometimes feed the cat in there, sometimes have treats appear in the carrier, put toys in the carrier," Peterson says.

Carriers should be part of a lost cat recovery kit, since frightened cats might try to scratch or jump out of their owner's arms when they are first found. Other items to keep in a recovery kit include a flashlight, pens, paper, and recent photos of your cat.

Peterson said the Humane Society strongly recommends that people make their cats indoor cats and provide stimulation indoors, such as play times to satisfy their hunting instincts. They should also be spayed or neutered to prevent wandering and other unwanted behaviour.

As a back up, Peterson recommends microchipping your cat and keeping the contact information updated with the registry. A microchip implant is about the size of a grain of rice and when scanned by a shelter employee or veterinarian, identifies the pet, its owner and the owner's home address and telephone numbers (it does not have GPS tracking capabilities).

Kimberly May, DVM, MS, and assistant director in the communications division of the American Veterinary Medical Association,

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says almost 75 percent of pets with microchips are reunited with their owners—and reiterated that it's crucial to keep contact information updated. While some pet owners have concerns that microchips might cause cancer in their animals, she says tumor growth associated with microchips is rare and considered to be low-risk.

"A microchip dramatically increases the chances that you'll get your beloved feline family member back in the event that he or she is lost, escapes outside, or is picked up by your local animal control as a stray, May says. "For many cat owners, the risk of cancer is far outweighed by the chances of a happy reunion due to a microchip."

Traci Moriarty started microchipping her pets after a happy reunion that occurred months after her orange Tabby, Star, disappeared. Moriarty and her husband had recently moved from a big city in California to a small town in Colorado when their indoor/outdoor cat didn't return for dinner. They searched the neighbourhood, put up flyers, alerted local shelters, and talked to neighbours—to no avail. When there were thunderstorms and howling coyotes, they feared the worst.

Luckily, Star had a current ID tag on her collar. After being lost for two months, a neighbour saw the little kitty, lured her closer with a can of tuna, picked her up and called Moriarty, who burst into tears and rushed to pick up Star—who lived another five years into old age.

"She was a total city cat—she had no idea what all these wild-life things were," Moriarty says. "But she did it. She came back. And she never got lost again." ■

Lost Cat Resources

- * thecenterforlostpets.com
- * humanesociety.org/animals/cats/tips/collars
- * americanhumane.org
- * catalystcouncil.org
- * missingpetpartnership.org



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