

Finding Your Lost Cat

by Kathy “Kat” Albrecht

Outdoor-Access Cats

Cats are territorial. When an outdoor-access cat suddenly vanishes, it means that something has happened to that cat to interrupt his normal behavior of coming home. The disappearance could mean that the cat is injured, trapped, or deceased within his 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 open, 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 the cat 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 she lives. When an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors, she is “displaced” into unfamiliar territory. Usually indoor-only cats will look for the first place that offers 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 depends on their temperament. The investigative question when an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors is: *Where is the cat hiding?*

How Feline Temperaments Influence Distances Traveled

Temperament influences actions. How a cat behaves when she’s in her normal territory will influence how she behaves when she becomes “lost” or displaced into unfamiliar territory. In addition to posting flyers and checking the cages of local shelters, you’ll want to develop a search strategy based on the specific behavior of your cat. Here are some 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. The strategy for recovery should be to place fluorescent 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 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 most likely hide initially, but eventually they will break cover and come back to the door, meow, or possibly travel. Your 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 hide immediately out of fear. If not pushed (scared off) from their hiding place, they will typically return to the place where they escaped from or they will meow when their person comes looking 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. Your strategy should be to conduct a tightly focused search in neighbors' yards and to set baited humane traps.

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 these cats are found by someone other than their own people, they are typically mistaken for untamed or feral cats. The primary strategy to recover these cats is to set baited humane traps. Xenophobic cats who become "lost" are routinely absorbed into the feral cat population.

Owner Behaviors That Create Problems

People 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 the wrong theories. They experience "grief avoidance" and quickly give up the 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 people typically focus their efforts on posting lost-cat flyers and 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. Your neighbors are not going to crawl around on their bellies under their decks or houses to search for your 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 who 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!

I have talked to people whose lost xenophobic cats had to be humanely trapped in order to be recovered; they 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 trap/neuter/return workers should scan all “feral” cats for microchips and conduct research (check the classified ads, lost cat reports, etc.) to determine if the new “feral” is actually someone’s xenophobic pet cat who escaped outdoors, perhaps several weeks or months before he/she was found.

For more information on the behavioral patterns of lost pets, visit www.lostapet.org. For a list of training resources that can help you search for your lost pet (including search dogs trained to track lost pets), visit www.pethunters.com.

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In 2004, Albrecht founded Pet Hunters International (www.pethunters.com), a pet detective academy that trains Missing Animal Response (MAR) technicians in how to analyze both human and animal behaviors when investigating a lost-pet incident.

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