

# How to Find and Recover a Lost Cat

By Kat Albrecht (1,665 words)

One of the biggest mistakes that animal shelters make is when they give out generic “lost pet recovery” information to pet owners in an attempt to help families find their lost dog or lost cat. They give tips that supposedly will work effectively to finding *both* lost dogs and lost cats without realizing they should share species-specific tips. One of the most important things to understand is that dogs and cats are like apples and oranges. They are two very different species that behave very different when they are lost. This means that the search and recovery methods that should be used for lost dogs are very different than what should be used for recovering lost cats. Before I explain specific recovery methods, I first need to explain lost cat behaviors.

## Missing Outdoor-Access Cats

When an outdoor-access cat vanishes, it means that *something has happened* to that cat to interrupt its behavior of coming home. Cats are territorial and they do not just run away from home (like dogs do). Thus the tactics and techniques used to search for a missing cat should be different than those used to search for a missing dog.

Lost cat posters will not always help find a lost cat, especially if it has crawled under your neighbor’s deck and is injured and silent. While I do advocate lost cat posters, they should be a supplement to a primary search which most often involves an aggressive, physical search of a cat’s territory. Yes, that means looking under and in every conceivable hiding place in your yard and in your neighbors’ yards!

When an outdoor-access cat vanishes, the investigative question and mystery to solve is: **WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CAT?** There are basically eight things that could have happened to a missing cat—we call these “Probability Categories.”

1. THE CAT IS TRAPPED
2. THE CAT IS DISPLACED INTO AN UNFAMILIAR AREA

3. THE CAT WAS UNINTENTIONALLY TRANSPORTED OUT OF THE AREA
4. THE CAT WAS INTENTIONALLY TRANSPORTED OUT OF THE AREA
5. THE CAT IS INJURED, SICK, OR IS DECEASED
6. THE CAT WAS RESCUED
7. THE CAT WAS STOLEN
8. THE CAT WAS KILLED BY A PREDATOR

Note that unless the missing cat was transported (intentionally or unintentionally) out of the area, a missing outdoor-access cat could very likely be somewhere within a 5-house radius of your home. The next farthest to travel would be displaced cats that might have been chased several houses or a few blocks from home. On rare occasions (but it does happen) some cats will travel up to a mile (or more) from their territory. The cats that end up the farthest (many miles) from home, and that are the most difficult to recover, are those that were transported (intentionally or unintentionally) out of their territory.

### **Displaced Cats**

A cat that is transplanted into an unfamiliar territory is a “displaced cat.” The majority of these cases involve indoor-only cats that accidentally escape outdoors. However, outdoor-access cats become displaced when they escape from their carrier while at the vet’s office, escape from an RV while traveling on vacation, or escape from a vehicle during a car accident. We’ve also discovered that many outdoor-access cats become displaced when they are chased from their territory, ending up hiding ten houses down in a neighbor’s yard, yet they too disoriented and afraid to come home. In these circumstances, even though the cat is technically an “outdoor-access cat,” it is displaced and it could very well be hiding in fear inside someone’s garage or yard.

When a cat is displaced into an unfamiliar area, it is likely hiding (usually near the escape point) in fear. That is because cats are territorial and your cat’s territory was inside of your home. Once a cat is transplanted into unfamiliar territory, it seeks shelter because it is afraid. Cats that are afraid (and cats that are injured) will seek areas of concealment such as under a deck, under a house, under a porch, or in heavy brush and **they will not meow!** Meowing would give up their location to a predator. Their behavior has nothing to do with whether the cat loves you, whether it recognizes your voice, or whether it can smell you—it has everything to do with the fact that a frightened cat will hide in silence! We call this behavior “The Silence Factor.”

## **The Silence Factor**

This is a term that Missing Pet Partnership coined to describe the consistent pattern of behavior that we've seen where a sick, injured, or panicked cat will hide in silence. It is a natural form of protection for a cat to find a place to hide under a house, a deck, a porch, bushes, or any place they can crawl. The Silence Factor *kills many cats* because while the cat is sick or injured and hiding under a neighbor's deck, cat owners are typically busy "looking" for their cat down at the local shelter or they are busy posting flyers on telephone poles. Instead, the proper search for most cats in most situations is to conduct an aggressive, physical search of the immediate area while understanding that the cat might be close by but hiding in silence. Cats that are truly at risk are outdoor-access cats that suddenly vanish due to illness or injury. This is why it is critical that cat owners obtain permission from their neighbor's to conduct a physical search of the neighbor's yard. Simply asking your neighbor to "look" for your cat is not sufficient because your neighbor *is not* going to crawl around on their belly to look under their deck or under their house for *your* missing cat, and yet these hiding places are the highest probable locations where a missing cat could be!

## **The Threshold Factor**

This is an interesting behavioral pattern that Missing Pet Partnership has observed with displaced cats. Many of these cats initially hide in silence, but eventually break cover and meow, return to their home or the escape point (window or door), or finally enter a baited humane trap. While some cats take only hours or a few days to reach their threshold, many others take several days (typically ten to twelve days) before they break cover. We suspect the threshold is reached due to their thirst, although more research needs to be conducted into this behavior.

## **Wildlife Cameras and Humane Traps**

Sadly, cat owners are told to post flyers and to drive twenty miles to check the animal shelter cages but they are not instructed to set humane traps **in their yard or in their neighbor's yard where their indoor-only cat is likely hiding in fear**. Animal shelters are not providing this information because they are not trained in this new information! Missing Pet Partnership is working to provide training in lost pet behavior to animal shelter staff and volunteers so that more cat owners are given information that will help them know how and where to search for their missing cat.

### **House As Trap**

In cases where an indoor-only cat has escaped outside and is known to be hiding near the escape, a technique known as “House As Trap” might prove to help make a quick and easy recovery. This works well for cats that are either trap shy or have been seen near the door of the escape point and acts as if they want to come inside, yet bolts and runs as soon as the owner comes to the door. In cases like this, we instruct the owner to prop open their door and smear a trail of wet cat food from outside leading into the house. In addition, the owner would set up a driveway alarm six feet in front of the door so that it will beep and alert the owner that the cat is approaching the house. The owner hides behind the door and once the cat has entered the house (or entered the garage that has an electric garage door opener) the owner kicks the door (or pushes the garage door opener) and “catches” the cat inside of their house (or garage). This technique can be tricky, especially if there are many other cats (or worse, skunks!) in the area, but it has helped to recover many displaced cats that otherwise would've continued to hide outdoors.

### **Lost Cat Recovery Team / Cat Detection Dogs**

The use of lost cat recovery teams using cat detection dogs trained to search for missing cats happens to be my passion. Although Facebook pages have sprung up nationwide with volunteers willing to help with lost dog recoveries, very few groups have been formed to specifically search for missing cats. I firmly believe that existing TNR (trap-neuter-return)

groups could offer their trapping expertise and their love for cats to help reunite lost cats with their owners, not to mention prevent many cats from ending up in shelters and feral cat colonies.

The advantage of a lost cat recovery team is that they would respond and make certain that a proper, physical search of a missing cat's territory is conducted. A bonus would be if that team trained and used a "Cat Detection Dogs" which to help recover physical evidence and in many cases, actually locate the missing cat. Although this is a great service, it has been the slowest concept to catch on in communities. MPP is working to change that and plans to help shelters and lost cat recovery teams evaluate and train shelter dogs to find missing cats through their Missing Animal Response (MAR) training program. In addition, "target cats" are needed to train the cat detection dogs and MPP is working to help see cats rescued from shelters and given jobs "working" to help train dogs to find missing cats.

## **Missing Cat Study**

Recently, Missing Pet Partnership partnered with the University of Queensland (Australia) to conduct the first-ever Missing Cat Study. Through an on-line survey, this study interviews cat owner/guardians who've lost a cat and identify the typical distances that lost cats travel, how they behave when lost, and the most effective recovery methods. If you've ever lost a cat, please help us by participating in the survey which can be found at <http://www.missingpetpartnership.org/get-involved/missing-cat-study/>

## **Conclusion**

Lost cats that are not found by their families are a *major* contributing factor to worldwide feral, shelter, and homeless cat populations. In 2011 a preliminary, non-scientific study by Missing Pet Partnership determined that the majority (93%) of escaped indoor-only cats were found within a 3-house radius of their escape point, hiding in fear. There are many things that cat owners can do to increase the chances that their missing cat will be found, the most important is to be aware of lost cat behaviors. Missing Pet Partnership plans to continue our research into the behavioral patterns of missing cats as well as offer training courses to animal industry

professionals who're interested in helping to recover missing pets. MPP is also preparing to launch a membership program this Fall that will offer discounted training courses and free monthly webinars with various guest speakers who cover a range of lost pet recovery-related topics. For more information, visit [www.missingpetpartnership.org](http://www.missingpetpartnership.org).