

# ANALYSIS OF LOST CAT BEHAVIOR

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background (Science of Finding Lost People)

## II. LOST PET EPIDEMIC

### A. Statistics (none)

### B. Macro-View of Lost Cat Problem (**the majority of lost cats that are not found at the shelter are absorbed into the feral cat populations**)

### C. Barriers to Recovering a Lost Cat

- (1) Shelter Logistics
- (2) Lack of Central Clearinghouse
- (3) Physical Limitations
- (4) LOSS OF HOPE!
- (5) System Works AGAINST, not WITH the cat owner

## III. LOST PET TRIAD

### A. Definitions

1. Triad
2. Homicidal Triad
3. Lost Cat Triad
  - (a) Behavior of the Cat
  - (b) Behavior of the Owner/Guardian
  - (c) Behavior of the Rescuer

## IV. BEHAVIOR OF THE CAT

### A. Displaced (i.e. Indoor-Only) Cat Behavior

- (1) Xenophobia = “fear and hatred of what is strange or foreign”
- (2) Territorial Influence
- (3) Concealment
- (4) Silence Factor
- (5) Threshold (B.S.) Factor
- (6) **Investigative Question: WHERE IS THIS CAT HIDING?**

## B. Outdoor-Access Cat Behavior

- (1) Territorial Influence
- (2) Injured Cat (Silence Factor) Behavior
- (3) Displaced Outdoor-Access Cat Behavior
- (4) Eight Probability Categories
  - a. They Become Trapped
  - b. They Become Sick, Injured, and Killed
  - c. They Are Killed by Wildlife
  - d. They are Unintentionally Transported
  - e. They are Intentionally Transported
  - f. They are Rescued/Self Adopted
  - g. They are Stolen (rarely)
  - h. They Become Displaced (From Territory)
- (5) Investigative Question: **WHAT HAPPENED TO THIS CAT?**

## V. BEHAVIOR OF THE OWNER

### A. Tunnel Vision

- (1) Stolen
- (2) Went off to Die
- (3) Neighbor's Revenge
- (4) Clairvoyant
- (5) Needle In a Haystack - Hopelessness

### B. Lack of Education

### C. Grief Avoidance

- (1) When someone wants closure to their grief to the point they will deny the truth or attempt to move away from what is causing the pain (i.e. searching for their lost cat, visiting the animal shelter, etc.).

### D. Improper Strategies/Techniques

- (1) Scatter Kitty Litter
- (2) Walk Barefoot In Area (disperse human scent)
- (3) Hire Helicopter to Search for Lost Cat
- (4) Fail to Search Shelter in **Target Time Frames**
  - (a) Outdoor Cat Vanishes – SHELTER SEARCH WITHIN HOURS OF DISAPPEARANCE
  - (b) Displaced Cat Escapes – SHELTER SEARCH 10 DAYS TO 3 MONTHS AFTER DISAPPEARANCE

- E. Strong H/A Bond vs. Weak H/A Bond (the level of the Human/Animal Bond influences the chances of recovery!)

## VI. BEHAVIOR OF THE RESCUER

- A. Semantics (“Stray” or “Feral”, seldom “Lost”)
- B. Xenophobic (fearful) Behavior = “Feral and Untamed”
  - (1) Temperament Mistaken as **lack of TAMENESS** (skittish cat assumed to be feral)
  - (2) Automatic Assumption (that cat is not owned)
  - (3) Immediate candidate for euthanasia (or TNR)
- C. Finders Keepers
  - (1) Valuable Find
  - (2) Emotional Bond
- D. Guilt by Location
  - (1) College campus = abandoned
  - (2) Cat Colony = stray/feral
- E. Shelter Avoidance
  - (1) Self adopt
  - (2) TOT Rescue Group
  - (3) Family, Friend, etc.
- F. Assumptions About The Owner
  - (1) “Neglectful” (for allowing cat outdoors)
  - (2) “Irresponsible” (no collar/tag)
  - (3) “Not Searching” (not in shelter)
- G. Rescue Groups
  - (1) Focus is fostering and adoptions, not on searching for owners of found dogs and cats

## VII. SOLUTIONS

- A. Change What We Think – Paradigm Shift
  - (1) From “WHO DUMPED THIS CAT?” to “WHO LOST THIS CAT?”
  - (2) From “OH GREAT, ANOTHER FERAL” to “COULD THIS BE A DISPLACED, SKITTISH PET CAT?”
  - (3) “THINK LOST, NOT STRAY!”

- B. Change What We Think – Spay/Neuter and TNR are not the ONLY answers to the stray/feral cat problem!
- C. Study Lost Pet Behavior (Missing Pet Partnership)
- D. Community-Based Lost Pet Services
  - (1) Lost Pet First Responders
  - (2) Professional Pet Detectives
  - (3) TNR Groups Could Offer TAR (trap-and-reunite) Services

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Our indoor cat Scoonie slipped out the door and was lost to us for 32 days. For part of that time, we followed the conventional wisdom: posted flyers, went door to door, visited animal shelters, put an ad in the local paper. Then a few weeks later, we caught sight of him on our front porch two nights in a row, but he ran off when we opened the door. **We could not understand why he wouldn't come home.** Then I found your web-site and the description of displaced indoor cats fit our situation to a "T". **I purchased a large humane trap, put it on our front porch, and 5 days later we caught Scoonie!** He is pretty bony but otherwise in good health and even more affectionate than before; in fact he won't let us out of his sight. With gratitude,

-- Pat and Mike Green and family

To read more lost pet recovery testimonials, visit [www.missingpetpartnership.org](http://www.missingpetpartnership.org)

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## Think Lost Not Stray!

The phrase "THINK LOST, NOT STRAY" was developed by **Missing Pet Partnership** as a means to send out a new message designed to reunite more lost dogs and cats with the families who love them. Our message to the animal welfare industry and citizen rescuers is this: Many of the "stray dogs" and "feral cats" that come into your care are actually lost pets with families who would do anything to get their companion animal back home! Before you work to give a found dog or found cat a new home, THINK LOST, NOT STRAY!

**HOW MESSAGES INFLUENCE OUR BEHAVIOR:** The messages that we hear through marketing, advertising, and other sources influence our thought processes and, ultimately, how we behave. According to Malcolm Gladwell, author of *BLINK: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, a good portion of our decision making comes from an unconscious level. Gladwell says that we make unconscious "implicit associations" that influence our decision making process and, ultimately, our behavior. These implicit associations, which typically lead to snap judgments, are the opinions we've developed based on the things we've previously seen or heard.

According to Gladwell's research, people "make connections much more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already related in our minds than we do between pairs of ideas that are unfamiliar to us." He went on to write that, "The giant computer that is our unconscious silently crunches all the data it can from the experiences we've had, the people we've met, the lessons we've learned, the books we've read, the movies we've seen, and so on, and it forms an opinion." THE "HOMELESS" MESSAGE: Some of the primary messages the animal welfare industry have sent out in the past years have promoted the words "homeless," "abandoned," "dumped," and "feral." People (usually private citizens) who have heard messages that millions of "homeless" animals

are "abandoned" and "dumped" every year tend to leap to the conclusion that the dog they find wandering along a road was "dumped" and is "homeless" rather than considering that it could be a beloved lost pet.

Someone who believes that a dog was dumped is more likely to self-adopt that dog rather than attempt to find its' owner. Are some dogs dumped? Yes! Are most of the loose dogs running around in our neighborhoods there because they were dumped? *NO!* In order for most of the loose (found) dogs to be unwanted (dumped or abandoned), we'd need to have hoards of people lining up every day just to dump all of these dogs! How likely is that? In reality, we have many people showing up at our animal shelters every day to report that their dog escaped and is lost. The number of loose (found) dogs that end up in shelters, rescue groups, or that are self-adopted is comparably less, compared with the number of people who "dump" or "abandon" dogs and more comparable to the number of lost dogs that are never found by their families.

**THE "ABUSED" MESSAGE:** A secondary message that the animal welfare industry has sent out in the past years is that many dogs and cats are "abused." Are dogs and cats routinely neglected and physically abused by a sick segment of our population? While the answer, unfortunately, happens to be yes, these sick people are actually a rather small segment of the entire pet owning population. More importantly, the physical appearance and the behavior of a found dog or cat is *not* the best indicator of whether or not an animal was abused! A dog that is thin, has cuts, burs, fleas, ticks, and is limping may appear this way because it has been running loose for two weeks. A cat that is thin, emaciated, and full of fleas might appear this way because they have been hiding in fear for six weeks under a neighbor's deck after escaping from their owner's home.

Many dogs and cats are at risk of permanent separation from their families simply because their appearance and their behaviors are misinterpreted as "abuse." The two groups of companion animals that are at the highest risk of permanent displacement are dogs and cats with xenophobic (fearful, skittish) temperaments.

**THE XENOPHOBIC DOG:** Xenophobia means "fear or hatred of things strange or foreign". Dogs with xenophobic temperaments (due to genetics and/or puppy hood 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", and even if the dog has ID tags, they will refuse to contact the previous owner. Some of these panic-stricken dogs will even run from their owners! People who find xenophobic dogs often misinterpret the dog's behavior: they assume that the cowering, fearful dog was "abused" when in fact the dog has a fearful temperament and has been shy and fearful since it was a puppy.

Dogs found in rural areas are often assumed to be "dumped" and/or homeless; many rescuers never think this could be a dog that was lost. Some people who find a stray dog that does not have a collar automatically assume it is "homeless" and therefore they immediately work to place the dog rather than attempt to find the dog's owner.

**THE XENOPHOBIC CAT:** 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." 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 kitten hood 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 they are found by someone other than their owners, they are typically mistaken as being untamed or "feral cat." 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! We know this because we've talked

to owners of lost, xenophobic cats that had to be humanely trapped in order to be recovered; the owners verified that their cats exhibited wild behavior while in the humane trap. These "wild" and "aggressive" behaviors are a reflection of a cat with a fearful TEMPERAMENT, not a lack of TAMENESS.

**WHY WE SEND THIS MESSAGE:** Every year, millions of dogs and cats escape from their homes and are never reunited with their rightful owners. The entire burden of finding and recovering a displaced dog or cat rests solely on the shoulders of the owner, who, in most cases, is not trained in how or where to search. They are not equipped with or trained in how to use animal capturing tools like catchpoles, snappy snares, and humane traps. We offer every imaginable service under the sun for our companion animals but when they become separated from the families who love them, we leave it up to grieving people who are discouraged, overwhelmed, and usually working alone.

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. Lost dogs and cats that are not returned to their families take up valuable space in our animal shelters, no-kill shelters, rescue groups, and feral cat colonies. So, the next time that you find a loose dog or an unattended cat, assume that someone loves and is looking for that particular companion animal. Ideally, you should post a FOUND poster in the area where the animal was found, place a FOUND Ad in the paper, have the animal scanned for a microchip, and report the animal as found to your local shelter (or transport it to the shelter where the owner can find it, but place a hold on it so you can adopt it if the animal is not claimed). With your support, Missing Pet Partnership can put out the message that STRAY DOG MAY MEAN **LOST** DOG and STRAY CAT MAY MEAN **LOST** CAT. By doing this, we know that rescuer behaviors will change and more found dogs and found cats will be reunited with the families who love and are searching them!

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Missing Pet Partnership is a national, nonprofit organization dedicated to reuniting lost companion animals with their owners/guardians. We offer behavior-based lost pet recovery tips, referrals to lost pet services, and Missing Animal Response (MAR) seminars that train professional and volunteer pet detectives (many with search dogs trained to locate lost pets) to conduct CSI-like investigative searches that bring lost companion animals back home. For more info, visit our website at [www.missingpetpartnership.org](http://www.missingpetpartnership.org).

For more info on Kat Albrecht's speaking services and her books, *THE LOST PET CHRONICLES: Adventures of a K-9 Cop Turned Pet Detective*, and *DOG DETECTIVES: Train Your Dog to Find Lost Pets*, visit [www.katalbrecht.com](http://www.katalbrecht.com).