

# Uh Oh! Tips for a Lost Cat

Losing a beloved pet is a terrifying and heartbreaking event. In this article, I will share some prevention tips in addition to some practical tips if your pet is lost. Let's start first with prevention.

## **Prevention/Assistance Tips**

There are several things you can do BEFORE a cat is lost to help either prevent the loss or at least mitigate it.

Microchip all your cats, even indoor-only ones. It only takes a couple of seconds for a cat to scoot out an open door or window. Microchipping your cat is quick and most cats never seem to notice when the chip is inserted. Your vet or county animal services department can microchip your pet for you. Be sure to ask if the fee charged includes registering the cat with the microchip company. If you adopted your cat from a shelter or rescue group, be sure to ask if they are microchipped (most are). When you adopt, usually the agency will give you the microchip information. However, and this is important, YOU will need to transfer the cat to your name, address, etc. for the microchipping to be helpful. Contact the chip maker and, for a small fee, you can have your contact info listed for the microchip. With that in mind, some rescues insist on keeping the chip in their names to prevent pets from being dropped off into shelters by an owner who may no longer want the pet. If this is their policy, be sure you update the adopting agency if you move or change phone numbers. Just like you would update your child's contact information, you need to keep your contact info up to date with the microchip company for their service to work for you and your pet.

Have good clear, up to date pictures (whole body and head shot) of your cat. Be sure to have pictures of any unique markings. Keep these pictures in a digital format so they can be quickly disseminated in the event of a loss. You will also want to keep a copy on your cell phone, if applicable, so you can quickly show a picture to neighbors or others when you begin your search.

Make sure your cat is up to date on shots and preventative care. You don't want your cat to become ill by exposure to disease that is preventable.

If your kitty escapes, it may take some time for them to get back to you. A well fed, well nourished cat will have greater resources to help sustain them in the interim.

Scope out the area around your doors and windows. Know where potential hiding places might be ahead of time. This will save you precious time later on.

Especially if you have a nervous cat who is prone to bolting, be sure everyone in your home practices "cat safe" entry and exit procedures. For example, my one "bolter" will hide behind a litter box in the laundry room that is close to the door. Every time we go in or out, we check before opening the door fully.

If you are hosting a party or will have workers in your home, it is important to isolate the cat in an area where no one will be entering. You may even want to put a sign on the door: "Please DO NOT Enter – Cat inside." Be sure you mention to workers that the room is off limits.

During loud, noisy events, such as July 4th, you may want to keep your cat isolated in a quiet room with the shades drawn and perhaps some soothing background music going. Some cats will prefer to be in their carrier in a quiet, dark place during times of loud noise. The bottom line, know your cat and be proactive to keep them safe.

If you have recently moved and have a cat you intend to let go outside, give them plenty of time to adjust to the new home and only gradually, with your supervision, allow them to explore their new outdoor home. If you have an enclosed playpen, let them get used to the new sights, sounds, and smells of their new home before giving them the freedom to roam.

## **When Your Cat is Lost**

There are indoor-only and indoor/outdoor lost cats. It's important to look at each separately. The reason behind the dual approach is that these two different kinds of cats get lost for different reasons and you need to search for them in slightly different ways.

### **Indoor Only Cats**

If your indoor-only cat gets out, time is of the essence in beginning your search. Cats, unlike dogs, are much more likely to “go to ground” and find a hiding place as quickly as they can. Unlike most dogs, cats will rarely go up to a strange human. Here are some helpful steps:

First, check the house thoroughly. Cats can hide indoors very successfully.

If he or she is not in the house, determine the escape point. Is there a door ajar, an open window or did you or someone else see the cat dart out?

Wear comfortable clothes and shoes that will allow you to bend and kneel down. Go outside and follow the edge of the house or apartment building from the escape point. A panicked cat will most likely follow the side of the building rather than risk the exposure of running out into the open. They usually either slink to the right or left of their escape place and find the first hiding area they can get into. This may be an opening under the building, a culvert, under a shed or deck, an open garage, etc. Search both the right and left sides of the building for these hiding places. Understand that even if your cat hears you calling their name, it is unlikely they will come out to you. At this point they are panicked and in full fear mode and, realizing their vulnerability, they will not risk exposing themselves in an environment they know nothing about. Many times, people walk right past their frightened cat hidden underneath their home. Use a good flashlight to see inside hiding places.

If you do not find your cat with this initial search, it is important to immediately let your closest neighbors know your cat is missing. Show them a picture of your cat (hopefully on your cell phone) and let them know how to contact you if they see the cat.

Many cats will stay hidden until night. You can put out humane traps with smelly food ( tuna fish works well) to try and capture your cat. Be aware, you may end up capturing neighborhood cats or wildlife. These can safely be released. If you do not have a humane trap, you can contact your vet or local rescue groups. They may be able to loan you a trap to use. They can also show you how to use it if you are unsure.

Go out in the evening and quietly call your cat, perhaps shaking a bowl of their dry food or carrying a can of open wet food. Sit quietly close to where they escaped and continue to softly call them. You may need to do this for several evenings.

Leave cat food and water out near where the cat escaped.

If you have a baby monitor, you may want to leave it close to the cat food to pick up any meows they may make. Often cats will try to “come home” in the early hours of the morning when we are asleep, slinking back into hiding by daybreak.

Inform your microchip company that your cat is lost. If the cat is picked up by any animal control officer, they will scan the cat for a microchip, contact the microchip company and work to get the cat reunited with their owner.

Post “Lost Cat” signs around the neighborhood with a picture and your contact info. Remember, most cats stay within a block or two of where they got out. Use brightly colored paper, enclose it in a plastic protector in case of rain, and provide tear off contact strips. For your safety, use only your phone number and email as contact info.

Contact and visit animal control, the local humane society or other organizations that take in found pets. Check every couple of days to see if they have found your cat.

If you have recently moved, check your old neighborhood. Cats that have been inside/outside cats, have been known to travel some distance to get back to their old homes. Be sure to let your prior neighbors know to look out for your cat.

Persevere. Cats have been known to return home weeks or months later. Perhaps my personal story will help. I have several indoor-only cats. One is a semi-feral girl who had the vestibular disease as a young cat. She has difficulty orienting herself, is easily scared, and does not let anyone handle her. When my son was home for Christmas and was leaving to catch an early AM flight, he accidentally opened a door in the dark. Cissy must have been near it, got scared in the dark, and ran out. He did not even know she had gotten out (gray cat, early morning hours, lights off so as not to wake Mom). I looked everywhere in the house for her and finally realized she must have gotten out. I saw her that next evening slinking off to the side of the house, but could not catch her. I tried humane traps ( I repeatedly caught the neighborhood cat who waited patiently for the yummy tuna and, when caught, would pull the throw around the cage inside and curl up on it until I released him each morning). I left out food, kept the door open, etc. Nothing. Of course, we had cold weather, New Year’s Eve fireworks, etc. I knew she had to be terrified and I was heartbroken. What I did not do was give my neighbor a picture of her. Well, 5 weeks went by with no sign. One day, I heard my neighbor’s visiting sister talking to something saying “Go Home”. Long story short, she said she saw a gray cat going under their shed for a couple of weeks since she had been visiting, but could not get the cat to come to them. I said it might be mine and sure enough, the next day I saw her walking along the wooden fence dividing our properties. I called her and Cissy turned and looked at me. It was like she seemed to say “There you are”. The next day she was at the front door and came in with some coaxing and food. Fortunately she was pretty tubby when she got lost as she seemed to have lost half her weight while she was missing. She was almost skeletal when she returned. It took a few months, but she is now back to her tubby self.

## Outdoor Cats

Although many of the hints above also pertain to outdoor cats, the dynamic is different. It can be assumed that outdoor cats know their environment. They already know all their hiding places and are more confident in their outside home. When an outdoor cat goes missing, the question is not where did they go, but what happened to him or her? What got in the way of them returning home like they always do? They could be

- trapped
- sick/injured
- taken by predators (coyotes are a growing problem in this regard)
- transported out of the area
- intentionally taken/removed by a neighbor who does not like cats

For outside cats, you would check all their regular hiding places, including up trees in the area. Drive the neighborhood looking for him/her. Continue to put out food and water. Sometimes, cats just decide they want to live somewhere else. Some outdoor cats have a circuit where they go to 2 or more houses where they are fed and cared for, each one thinking of the cat as “their” cat. You will want to check with your neighbors to see if they have “your” cat and have just decided to keep him or her inside.