

LOST CAT BEHAVIOR

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Pet Hunters International (PHI) trains Missing Animal Response Technicians in how to analyze both human and animal behaviors when investigating a lost pet incident. Here is a brief sample of just one topic that we will cover in our MAR TECH I course:

Outdoor-Access Cats: Cats are territorial. When an outdoor-access cat suddenly vanishes, it means that SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED to that cat to interrupt its normal behavior of coming home. The disappearance could mean that the cat is injured, trapped, or deceased within its 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 opened 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 it 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 it lives. When an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors, it is “displaced” into unfamiliar territory. Usually they will look for the first place that will offer 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 is dependant upon their temperament. **The investigative question when an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors is: WHERE IS THE CAT HIDING?**

Feline Temperaments That Influence Distances Traveled:

Temperament influences actions. How a cat behaves when in its normal territory will influence how it behaves when it becomes “lost” or displaced into unfamiliar territory. In addition to posting flyers and checking the cages of local shelters, encourage cat owners to develop a search strategy based on the specific behavior of their cat. Here are 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. Strategy for recovery should be to place florescent 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 a 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 likely initially hide, but eventually they will break cover and come back to the door, meow, or possibly travel. 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 immediately hide in fear. If not pushed (scared off) from their hiding place, they will typically return to the point where they escaped from or they will meow when the owner comes to look 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. Strategy would be to conduct a tightly focused search in neighbors' yards and to set baited humane traps.

CATATONIC/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 they are found by someone other than their owners, they are typically mistaken as being untamed or “feral.” The primary strategy to recover these cats would be to set baited humane traps. Xenophobic cats that become “lost” are routinely absorbed into the feral cat population.

Owner Behaviors That Create Problems: Cat owners 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 wrong theories. They experience “grief avoidance” and quickly give up their 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 cat owners typically focus their search efforts by posting lost cat flyers and by 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! Neighbors are not going to crawl around on their bellies under their decks or houses to search for someone else’s 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 that 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 have 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 behaviors are a reflection of **a fearful TEMPERAMENT, not a lack of TAMENESS.** Shelter and TNR workers should scan all “feral” cats for microchips and conduct research (check Classifieds, lost cat reports, etc.) to determine if the new “feral” is actually someone’s xenophobic pet cat that escaped outdoors, perhaps several weeks or months before it was found.

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