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Tales of happy reunions boost interest in pet microchipping

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By Barbara Goldberg

NEW YORK (Reuters) - In the weeks since the highly publicized return of long lost Willow the microchipped cat to her Colorado owners from New York City, microchipping of pets has jumped 185 percent, according to industry statistics.

News this week of the return of Petey the microchipped dog to his Tennessee home from Michigan is likely to spike those figures again.

Across the United States, 26 percent of dogs had implanted microchips in 2010 compared to 17 percent in 2009, according to an annual survey of pet owners by American Pet Products Association. Some 12 percent of cats had microchips in 2010.

Then there are bursts such as the 185 percent jump in microchip sales in the weeks after Willow's discovery, reported by Banfield Pet Hospital, a nationwide animal hospital group headquartered in Oregon.

"Clyde and Monty are our family -- we don't have children, said Charlie Dammand, explaining why she chose to implant microchips in her Exotic Shorthair Persian kitten Clyde and Golden Retriever Monty.

"I want every assurance that if they got out, I'd get them back," said Dammand, 44, an airline customer service worker from Kent, Washington.

Most shelters and humane societies implant microchips in animals before allowing them to be adopted, experts say.

While most pet owners get their animals from friends or family, 21 percent of dog and cat owners adopted them from shelters or humane societies, according to the APPA survey.

A microchip is an electronic chip about the size of a grain of rice, implanted under the skin between an animal's shoulder blades with a hypodermic needle.

MAGIC WAND

It contains an identification number that can be registered in a data base with owner contact information. A hand-held scanner waved like a magic wand over a lost animal detects the chip's electronic frequency. and the reunion process begins.

But the microchip is not a global positioning system to locate lost animals like Jack, a microchipped cat found at a New York airport this week after being lost there for two months. It was subsequently identified through its microchip.

The trend toward electronic tracking of pets appears to be growing after a long stall attributed to what some call the "Microchip Wars."

While Europe uses microchips with a single frequency that can be read by all scanners, U.S. competition for market share initially resulted in sales of microchips with three different frequencies, each of which could be read only by its own type of scanner.

Some owners who microchipped their pets for safe return were horrified to learn that their lost animal had indeed been found and brought to a shelter but, since the shelter's scanner read a different frequency, the animal remained unidentified and eventually was put to death.

Outrage among animal advocates led to oversight of an industry effort to supply shelters nationwide with universal scanners that recognize all chip frequencies, said Aimee Gilbreath, executive director of Found Animals Foundation, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization.

UNIVERSAL READERS

"The different corporate entities have come to a sort of detente where we now have universal readers in most shelters," said Stephen Zawistowski, science advisor for the ASPCA.



He cautioned, however, that smaller, less sophisticated community shelters may still have the older scanners.

"As the result of the shenanigans of a few years ago, I think many pet owners are still a little reluctant to get microchips," said Gilbreath.

Helping to turn around that reluctance are microchip mystery tales like the recovery last month of Willow the cat after a five-year disappearance and the finding of Cooper the dog in Florida, nearly two years after he went missing from his California home nearly 3,000 miles away.

Essential to a happy ending is data kept current by the pet owner. Failure to update a change in an email address or phone number could cost a lost pet its life.

Ultimately, the best bet for pet identification is a good old-fashioned collar tag with owner contact information as well as a microchip with data kept updated online.

"Microchips should be your last line of defense, not your first," said Gilbreath. "You need to get your pet a primitive metal collar tag. That's a much faster way to get Fido or Fluffy home."

(Editing by [Ellen Wulfhorst](#) and [Jerry Norton](#))

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