

Lost Dogs Found More Often Than Lost Cats, Study Suggests

ScienceDaily (Jan. 15, 2007) — A lost dog is more likely to be reunited with its owner than a lost cat, according to two new studies.

In one city in southwestern Ohio , researchers found that 71 percent of lost dogs were found, compared to just 53 percent of lost cats.

More than a third of the recovered dogs were found by a call or visit to an animal shelter. More than one in four dogs were found because the animal wore a dog license or identification tag at the time of its disappearance.

“The animal control system is a key component in the recovery of lost dogs, but owners have to be vigilant about calling and visiting these agencies,” said Linda Lord, the lead author of both studies and an assistant professor of veterinary preventive medicine. “Some form of visual identification is also critical to the recovery of a pet, and can result in a faster recovery.”

Although Ohio law requires that dogs be licensed, just 41 percent of the lost dogs in the study wore a license at the time of their disappearance. Less than half (48 percent) of dogs had an identification tag or microchip when they went missing. Microchips, which are implanted under the skin, provide permanent identification about where a pet belongs. Cat owners aren't required to identify their pet, and 19 percent of lost cats had a tag or microchip at the time they were lost.

More than half of the cats returned on their own, but less than one in 10 dogs did.

The results of the two studies appear in the January 15 issue of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Lord and her colleagues restricted their four-month study to Dayton , Ohio , and the surrounding county. They collected information on lost cats and dogs by scanning classified advertisements in the local newspaper and by contacting the county dog warden and two area humane societies. Each agency kept a log of the phone number and date of contact for any owner who called or visited the agency regarding a lost cat or dog.

Researchers interviewed by phone owners of lost pets who agreed to participate in the study. Collectively, these owners reported the disappearance of 138 cats and 187 dogs. Owners answered a series of questions related to the recovery of their pet, including what kind of methods they used to search for the missing animal.

The researchers also asked the owners if the animal was wearing an identification tag; a rabies tag; a dog license tag (applies only to dogs); or had a microchip at the time it disappeared. Each shelter scanned animals for microchips.

Two out of three (66 percent) of the lost cats came home on their own. Only 8 percent of lost dogs returned home on their own.

“Many people think that a missing cat just comes home on its own,” Lord said. “Most of the lost cats that were recovered in our study did return home on their own, but nearly half of the cats reported missing were never found.”

More than one out of three owners (35 percent) found their lost dogs at a shelter. Just 7 percent of cat owners who recovered their pet found it at a shelter.

“Cat owners tend to wait longer to call and visit a shelter,” said Lord, adding that cat owners waited about three days before contacting a local animal shelter, while dog owners waited about a day to do so.

“The cats that stayed missing during the study may have been in a shelter, and could have been euthanized because their owner didn't call or visit the shelter,” Lord said.

One of the best ways to locate a pet may be to post a sign in the neighborhood, the study showed.

Posted signs resulted in the return of 15 percent of recovered dogs and 11 percent of found cats. Six dogs (4.5 percent) and two cats (3 percent) made it home because of an advertisement in the newspaper.

“Less than half of the pet owners in this study hung signs around their neighborhood,” Lord said. “But this could be a very effective way to find a pet. If someone loses a pet, they should get something visible out there to let people know about the missing animal.”

Lord says that many pet owners may not know how to go about finding their lost cat or dog.

“For many of the owners in this study, it was the first time their pet had disappeared,” Lord said. “Pet owners should think about having a plan in place in case their pet is lost. Both animal shelters and veterinarians can educate their clients and the public about the best course of action to take when a pet is missing.”

Lord said that websites dedicated to helping people find missing pets are a lesser-known alternative to finding lost pets.

“Most important, though, is adequate identification of a pet,” she said.

Lord conducted the studies with Thomas Wittum and Päivi Rajala-Schultz, both in the department of veterinary preventive medicine at Ohio State; Amy Ferketich, division of epidemiology, School of Public Health at Ohio State; and Julie Funk, with National Food Safety and Toxicology Center in East Lansing, Mich.

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