

LOST DOG 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:

Factors That Influence Distances Traveled: There are six major factors that influence the distances that lost dogs travel: Temperament, Circumstances, Weather, Terrain, Appearance, and Population Density.

TEMPERAMENT OF THE DOG – How a dog behaves towards strangers influences how far it will travel (when lost) before someone intervenes and rescues it. There are three primary behavioral categories that lost dogs are classified into: Gregarious Dogs, Aloof Dogs, and Xenophobic Dogs.

Gregarious Dogs: Wiggly-butt, friendly dogs are more inclined to go directly up to the first person who calls them. Depending on the terrain and population density where the dog was lost, these dogs will generally be found fairly close to home or will be picked up by someone close to the escape point. Gregarious dogs are often “adopted” by individuals (not shelter or rescue workers) who find them.

Aloof Dogs: Dogs with aloof temperaments are wary of strangers and will initially avoid human contact. Eventually, they will be inclined to accept human contact once they have overcome fear issues and become hungry enough. While these dogs can travel a great distance, aloof dogs eventually can be enticed with food and patience, typically by experienced rescuers who know how to approach and capture a wary dog. These dogs are often recovered by rescue group volunteers, and their wariness can be easily misinterpreted as “abused.” In addition, these dogs are often not recovered for weeks or months after their escape, giving them the physical appearance (thinness, injuries, stickers, ticks, etc.) that they are homeless, abused, and unloved.

Xenophobic (Fearful) Dogs: Xenophobia means “fear or hatred of things strange or foreign”. Dogs with xenophobic temperaments (due to genetics and/or puppyhood 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! It may be necessary to use other dogs to get close enough to capture them or to use baited dog traps.

CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE DISAPPEARANCE – A dog that digs out from a yard to explore a scent will tend to travel a short distance before it is found—meandering and doubling back as it explores a scent. On the other hand, a dog that bolts in panic due to fireworks or thunder will take off at a blind run and can run for several miles.

WEATHER – A dog that escapes on a beautiful spring day may travel farther than one that escapes in a snow storm. Extreme weather conditions (snow, hail, rain, sweltering heat) will decrease the distances that lost dogs travel.

TERRAIN – A dog that escapes in a residential area will not travel as far as a dog that escapes in a mountainous area. Fences that create barriers will influence a dog’s travel since a dog will tend

to take the “path of least resistance” when traveling. Cactus, heavy brush, and steep cliffs can be barriers that influence whether or dog continues on a path or changes directions.

APPEARANCE OF THE DOG – What a dog looks like can influence how quickly it will be picked up by a rescuer. In general, most people are less inclined to pull over and attempt to grab a loose Pit bull they perceive as being “aggressive” than they would a “friendly” wiggly Labrador Retriever. Also, size matters: people are more inclined to pick up small dogs - they look vulnerable and are easier to transport and house than large dogs. In addition, people are more likely to attempt to rescue a purebred dog that they perceive to have value than a mixed breed dog. When average motorists see a mixed breed dog trotting down the sidewalk, their impression is often that the dog belongs in the neighborhood or that it is a homeless stray. But when those same people see a Boston Terrier, they are inclined to believe that, because it is a “valuable purebred dog”, it must be a lost pet.

POPULATION DENSITY – A dog that escapes in Manhattan will travel a shorter distance than will a dog that escapes in the Rocky Mountains or in rural farmland. When dogs escape into areas with a high number of people, their chances of being found close to the escape point are increased. But in areas with an extremely low number of people, they tend to travel further and their chances of being found close to the escape point are decreased. A dog that escapes in the middle of the night will travel farther before being seen than a dog that escapes during rush hour traffic.

Owner Behaviors That Create Problems: Dog owners often behave in ways that actually inhibit their chances of recovering their lost dogs. Some develop a “wait and see” approach (believing their dog will return home like Lassie) and by the time they start actively looking, the vital first few hours to locate the dog (or witnesses who saw the dog) are gone. Others develop “tunnel vision” and fail to find their dog because they focus on wrong theories. They assume their dog was “stolen and sold to research” when in fact their dog might have been rescued and put up for adoption through a local adoption event. They experience “grief avoidance” and quickly give up their search effort because they really believe they will never see their dog again. They feel helpless and alone, often discouraged by others who rebuke them and tell them “it was just a dog” and “you’ll never find your dog.” In addition, the level of human animal bond (HAB) will influence the recovery efforts of a lost dog. People with a strong HAB will go to extremes to find their lost dog. They will accomplish the “impossible” task of visiting all shelters, posting flyers, and contacting rescue groups while maintaining a full-time job and other family commitments. On the other hand, people with a weak HAB will quickly become discouraged, assume they will never see their dog again, and will stop searching.

Rescuer Behaviors That Create Problems: People who find stray dogs often misinterpret the dog’s behavior: they assume that the cowering, fearful dog was “abused” when in fact the dog has a xenophobic temperament and has been shy and fearful since it was a puppy, due to genetics and puppyhood experiences. Dogs found in rural areas are often assumed to be “dumped” and 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. In addition, the first place where the owner of a lost dog will search for their dog – the local shelter – is typically the last place that someone who finds a loose dog will take it (due to the fear of euthanasia)!

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