

## Finding Your Lost Pet

*(Adapted from "Finding Your Lost Greyhound" by Michael McCann)*

Okay, you've lost him. He slipped his collar or ran out of the open gate. He was spooked by lightning and jumped the back fence. You dropped the leash or you let him run off lead; he saw a squirrel and suddenly he was gone. It all doesn't really matter now. What matters are the steps you have to take to get him back. He's out there and he's depending on you to find him. He's lost and can't find his way home. It's been a couple of hours now. You've scoured the neighborhood, and you are hoping to see him in every yard and around every corner. But you are beginning to realize that you can't find him. Here's what you have to do:

**Change your mindset:** This is most important and the most difficult step. You have to stop checking every street and backyard yourself and start recruiting an army to do it for you. Most pets are found within a mile or two of where they were lost, but a two-mile radius is nearly 13 square miles – an impossible area to search adequately alone. You have to stop looking for your dog and start looking for people. Everything that follows depends on it. With every hour that goes by your chances of finding your dog, on your own, diminish. You now have to find someone who has seen your dog. You need a sighting and – in order to get a sighting – you need help! Ask everyone you know – including your friends, co-workers, adoption groups, and son's cub scout pack – to help you. Don't wait until tomorrow; do it now.

**Get the word out:** Whether you have help or not, you've got to get the word out about your lost dog. Of course, you and your volunteers are going to search, but while you're searching, you're going to post flyers on every available telephone pole, in every supermarket, drug store, school, church, police station, vet's office, or any other public place surrounding the area. Ninety percent of lost dogs who are found **are** found because someone saw a flyer. The flyers don't have to be fancy, but get them printed on the loudest, gaudiest colored paper available. "LOST DOG [or type of dog]" in big letters. "If sighted please call (555)555-5555" A silhouette of a dog works great as an attention grabber. Produce 500 as a good start, but you may need more. The area should be so saturated with flyers that you can't turn around without seeing one. Don't expand your search area until you've totally covered the area where he was last seen.

- Knock on doors and talk to everyone you see – the mail person, UPS driver, local landscaper. Any of these people may see your dog; if they do, now they won't just think it's some dog on his way home, they'll know he's lost. Give everyone you talk to a flyer.
- Schools are a great resource for search help. Ask the principal to make announcements about the lost dog and leave flyers to pass out and post on bulletin boards. Kids see everything in the neighborhood but will ignore dogs running around unless asked to look. If you hand one kid a flyer, five more will have seen it by the end of the day. Don't ignore the little kids either. They tell their parents everything.
- Call every veterinarian's office, animal control officer and police department within two or three miles from where he was last seen. In rural areas, expand your calling to every nearby town. Follow up with a flyer or several. Faxing them will save you some time but it is important that they see you rather than just a piece of paper. If you show people how concerned you are, they'll want to help you. Don't just call them once; call them every few days and – in the case of the police – during every shift, to make sure everyone knows about your dog.
- Run newspaper ads in the local papers, and while you're at it talk to a reporter and see if she'll run a local interest story on the lost pet. Local cable access stations often will run your lost dog ad for free and local radio stations and TV stations will often run the story on a slow news night.
- Check your local animal shelters every few days in person. It is amazing how many folks who work in these places don't know dog breeds. Your pet could be hanging out at a local shelter and up for adoption because they think he's a Whippet instead of a greyhound or a Doberman instead of a lab mix.
- Get in touch with your local Department of Public Works, or Highway Department. Sadly, they often will pick up an animal's body from the road, and if there is no identification the owner will never know. Collars often fall off when a dog is loose or struck by a car.

**Tools you'll need:** Print some maps of your area to give to the volunteers. Make notations of areas that have been well posted. Set up grids and utilize them to cover all the locations in your search area. Send people to each grid area. Get heavy duty staple guns and use those for putting up your posters on telephone poles. If available, try to keep in touch with your teams with cell phones so that when you get a sighting, you can have them go immediately to the sight.

Make sure that there is always someone available at the phone number you posted. You don't want people to call with a sighting then hang up because they got a message service.

***Don't assume anything:*** Don't assume your dog has been picked up – it's the trap that everyone seems to fall into: "No sighting, someone must have picked up my dog!" Some animals go for months or even years without being found because people assume they have been picked up or are dead.

Don't assume that the call you got about a dog five miles away is yours. Follow it up, yes, but when you start getting calls about dogs, ask questions: "What color was the dog you saw? How big? Which way was it heading? Have you ever seen him before?" You don't want to be running out of your search area just to find that someone called you about a beagle they saw running through the yard. These false leads are actually a positive sign – they mean your efforts are working; people are looking out for your dog.

***Don't lose hope:*** A few days or a week of searching can be discouraging. A lack of sightings or no word at all can be tough on a positive attitude. Just remember that your pet is still out there, and someone has seen him. All you have to do is to find that person. It's only natural to start thinking the worst. But as non-street savvy as some pets can be, most are survivors. Keep looking. Don't give up. Your pet is counting on you.

***Edited to Add:***

A NOTE ABOUT REWARDS: Lost pets, especially shy ones, can be very difficult to catch. Your goal should be to encourage people who see the pet to call you with the sighting. Once the sightings have established where the pet is hanging out, then set up feeding stations. Then you can set up a humane trap for the capture if you cannot catch your pet.

In our experience, rewards often work against getting sightings. What happens is that you will increase the number of people looking for the dog, but the new people tend to be bounty hunters, teenagers or "cowboys" who just think of the money, not the safety of the animal. Often, the first thing they do when they see the dog is give chase, and sometimes they chase the dog right out the safety of the territory the dog has felt comfortable in. These people rarely call in sightings because they want to cash in.

We suggest that the wording of your flyer never even mention a reward. We feel that if someone does catch the dog and asks for a reward, we can still pay it, but we don't ask for trouble by offering money in advance.

Would you rather have a hundred sympathetic animal lovers helping you look for your dog or a couple hundred clueless bounty hunters trying to cash in? We'll go with the animal lovers every time.

**The following is a good idea from Paula McVann:**

In these searches for pets, where people are driving around in cars, what about making up a sign for the car door saying "Looking for a lost pet" or some such. It could even have the phone number of the contact person on it. This might save some people from being thought "suspicious" for cruising around slowly, and someone who saw the dog might see the number. Any port in a storm, I figure.