

DO NOT CHASE

The dog was chased by the person who lost her, a young boy eager to earn the reward money, and a nice lady trying to help. Oh, don't forget the concerned parent who yelled and then ran her out of his yard. Each chase reinforces a growing perception that ALL humans should be avoided. Today, a territorial dog was loose and she had to take a different, difficult, and much longer route to a reliable source of water. Now wary of *everyone* and *everything*, the lost dog runs away from the slightest attention.

THINK LIKE A DOG

Dogs wander primarily in residential areas where water, food, and places to shelter are easier to find. They can settle in one area for weeks, months, or *years* as long as basic needs to survive are met. Attracted to the scent of farm animals, dogs might find access to water, food, bedding areas, or hay barns. They sometimes play with friendly dogs that are chained up, fenced in, or loose and running around. The yards most visited provide shelter or food, are animal/nature friendly, or remind them of home.

Water can be found at streams, lakes, ponds, puddles, water gardens, Koi (fish) ponds, and kid's pools. Things they *might* eat: food litter, rodents, birds, snakes, birdseed, acorns, manure, insects, and road kill. With a little luck, dogs can find bowls of water and kibbles left outside for the pets of local residents. Alone or in a "colony," feral cats are often fed by individuals *every* day in the *same* aromatic spot. It's a "no-no," but people still leave food out on a regular basis for foxes, raccoons, and other wildlife. Certain birds (seagulls, crows, and bluejays) can be exceptionally vocal when they see bits of food. Dogs roam through streets that are ready for "rubbish night" to get at promising odors in garbage bags. Drive around before and after pickup to look for ripped bags and excessive trash strewn on curbsides.

Dogs need protective shelters appropriate for current weather conditions. Finding shade on a hot day or a dry spot in a downpour is easier than bunkering in for a snowstorm. A small dog can fit almost anywhere, but a bigger dog has limited choices. A "busy" yard provides a variety of shelters for most any size dog: doghouses, decks, spare/junk autos, evergreens, trailers, piles of debris, carports, sheds, and open barns. Seasonal, vacation, for sale, or unfinished - vacant houses are great places to hide as no one's ever home. Powdery snow gets so cold in sub-zero temperatures that some dogs find it too painful to walk on, and must immediately search for ground that doesn't hurt their paws or a shelter so they can get off their feet.

OK...what's the fastest way to get to everything and not be noticed by the residents *or* their dogs?

Shortcuts are fast, convenient, and used frequently, especially power line access roads. Shortcuts:

Golf courses, parking lots, gravel pits, bridal trails, pastures, recreational fields, parks, and cemeteries.

Dogs favor homes adjacent to woodlands on dead end streets, cul de sacs, and at the rear of subdivisions.

One backyard leads to the yard of a home on a different street - a wealth of travel *and* escape routes.

Many take *temporary* refuge in the woods behind a yard favored for shelter, food, or dog companionship.

They don't normally go that deep into the forest unless chasing after a deer, rabbit, or some other animal.

They can follow man-made trails or the barely visible, narrow paths used by wild inhabitants in the area.

Dogs often travel along "lines" created by roads, fences, railroad tracks, shrubs, and stone walls.

BUDDY DOGS

Take the dog's best buddy for a walk and get him to bark - HAPPY! A social butterfly might be enticed to come play or go for a walk. He might not respond to unfamiliar dogs unless he *loves* to play with *anyone*. Lost dogs *are* attracted to others, but socializing is now done solely at their own discretion, or not at all.

Note – Some residents will think you've found the dog if walking one that looks *somewhat* similar.

BEDS, TRAPS, BAIT, AND TOYS

For *all* beds (trap, kennel, or cardboard box) use a color blanket that will show hairs the dog most sheds. Carefully check dark blankets for white/light hairs and light blankets for dark hairs AND paw prints. Some dogs are not comfortable being forced to crouch going into a trap. It is *not* the same as crawling under a deck at home in your own yard. If the trap has a rear door that can be removed, you can make a new entrance that's easier and less intimidating for big or tall dogs. If you plan to set the trap to catch the dog after he's been using the "shelter," it's better to get him used to going in the main entrance, but tie the door to stay up, even if the dog nudges it. You can set the trap once the dog learns to clear the overhang. To encourage a dog to be less wary, train him to *walk through* the trap. First tie up the front door and remove the rear one, then lay a trail of food bits leading inside and back out the other side. If the dog is comfortable enough to "take the bait" and pass through the trap, then put the rear door on and set to catch. The dog should accept the one-way entry since its recent experience was safe, and the reward so tasty. You should always provide the dog with a wide open path to approach, get near, and go inside the trap. Don't expect a dog to struggle, dig, or crawl through deep snow or other ground that proves troublesome.

Bait stored in leak-proof bags is easier to carry, and heat or defrost. Hotdogs are the best all-around bait. Meatballs cooked in red sauce are messy, but *excellent*. Cooked liver gets mushy but is also very good. Swiss cheese and luncheon meats are okay until you try tossing bits to a dog that's about 40' away. It's easy to forget to bring bait. Store kitty treats, beef jerky treats, and cans of dog food in your car. Remember to bring anything normally used for positive training purposes, like clickers or dog whistles. Keep extra toys in the car: squeaky toys, tennis balls, small stuffed animals, fetch sticks, or Frisbees. A lost dog might steal another dog's toys out of curiosity – even though *you* never gave him any before. Life-sized stuffed animals in shapes of small dogs, cats, or rabbits can attract a pet to a specific spot or directly into a cage trap. These toys can work quite well if your dog loves to chase cats or rabbits. Leave a brightly colored toy (no scent) as a "test" where your dog (hopefully not another) will see it. Use a toy easily carried, even in a small dog's mouth. Wildlife *shouldn't* be interested. If picked up but dropped nearby, you've still got a direction of travel. If it disappears, look in the immediate area, and then ask residents if you can spot check their yards, especially known or suspect shelter or food yards.

You left food at a site, but now it's gone and you're not sure if your dog or another animal found it. Food left after dark and gone by morning can be taken by wild *or* domestic animals, *including the dog*. Monitor food closely. Anything that disappears *during the day* is likely eaten by local pets *or your dog*. Dust the ground with powdered chalk or fine ashes to help identify the food bandit by paw prints. Watch the site to see what shows up from a vehicle parked at a discreet distance, from behind a window in a home, or in a camouflaged tent. Dogs learn there's a "catch" to free food - and it's usually human. Lost dogs don't often come out until you've given up and gone home. If you're very quiet, the dog might come around because she *thinks* you've left. Using equipment like night vision goggles and a hunter's "scouting cam" help determine if she's still in the area. They are very useful when monitoring sites and traps when it's pitch dark. Of course, they don't guarantee you'll be smart enough to catch your dog.

Traps can be set to trip using a stick to hold up the door. Tie a sturdy line near the bottom of the stick and run it out to a well-hidden spot. Keep it taut on the ground or suspended in the air. Lines work well only for a set distance, so test to make sure you've got it just right. Wait until the animal goes inside and then pull the line hard and fast to yank the stick out of place. The door comes down, the dog is trapped - and you can breathe again. It worked! The basic idea of using line to close a "trap" can be adapted for use on a variety of doors and gates to enclosed structures or outside areas.

BEHAVIORS

Certain breeds go “feral” (return to instinctive wild animal behavior) and adapt more readily than others. Lacking familiar territory, family, or personal things to “defend,” lost dogs don’t bark as much, *if at all*. Many will not respond as they would under *normal* circumstances in *familiar* surroundings. The most beloved and pampered pet can be frightened and run away from members of her human family. This dog later decides to go up to a stranger who offers food or a kind word at the *right* place and time. The dog might shun adult family members but go up to children she knows and loves to play with. Children on a search must be old enough to remain calm and not yell or scream if they see their dog. Dogs are *generally* more responsive to women who instinctively treat them as they would a small child.

All dogs need a name they recognize as their own so they know when you’re talking to or calling them. If recently given a new name, the dog might respond better to his old one since he’s had it for *so long*.

People wonder if the dog has been mistreated - she won’t come out of hiding for her “favorite” human. They assume a dog is not “intelligent” because it won’t come out and go up to someone to be “saved.” Residents are quick to assume that a missing dog has most likely been victimized by local predators. Predators, such as coyotes, *are* a threat, but one should worry more about the dog getting hit by a car. Dogs that can catch scent of predators often sense “trouble” and head off in the opposite direction. Residents are *quick* to assume a dog can’t possibly survive on its own in bad weather - and some can’t. BUT dogs (even small ones) *have* survived heavy downpours, cold temperatures, and blizzard conditions. Most *try* to find good shelters that will protect them during heavy rains, chilling winds, and heavy snow.

SEARCH GROUPS

Search groups should arrange to meet in a parking lot. Don’t congregate noisily at any sighting location. Get organized and have a game plan so everyone knows “who to call and what to do” *if* the dog is seen. A savvy dog knows it’s the object of a “hunt” and will outrun, outsmart, and outmaneuver the group. Even if you do see the dog, she could prove hard to catch, even for the professionals with experience. Time is critical and a quick response is best – use all resources to go door to door with fliers ASAP. Every searcher’s vehicle should have a “lost dog” sign AND a flier taped to the rear window (top left). A sign helps identify you as a person looking for a dog - not a thief who’s casing their neighborhood. It’s a good idea to give the police a courtesy call to inform them of your group’s purpose and location.

While delivering fliers, **discreetly** glance at each yard to look for features a dog might find attractive. This family has a deck to hide under, that one feeds a cat outside, and a *very* friendly Beagle lives there. *Discreetly* point out possibilities you see to the homeowner *and* also mention the neighbor’s open barn. Give everyone a good reason to look out their window, be more observant, and hopefully spot your dog. Mention that local pets *can* get agitated if they see a dog wandering around their yard *or* the neighbor’s. Dogs can bark incessantly, and cats often sit on a windowsill to watch some animal that’s within view. Residents might ask if they should leave food outside. Some will do it without asking *or* telling you. This can attract wildlife, including predators, to their yards and it’s hard to catch a dog that’s finding something to eat at a number of houses, rather than finding food at *specific locations* you know about. Try to remain in control as much as possible by knowing exactly where food is left for the lost dog.

It’s understandable for searchers (owners and others) to get frustrated and lose their patience at times. Catching an elusive dog *can* take days, weeks, or months - even when you’re doing everything right. Don’t dwell on negative issues, concentrate on tactics that will outsmart and catch your dog quickly.

AUTO ACCIDENTS

When dogs are lost during an auto accident, some will search for the family vehicle because it carries recognizable scents (in varying intensity), including their own and that of their favorite human/s. Find a safe place to start a trail of food and scent markers leading away from the scene of the accident to a spot where you've left food, water, and familiar items such as a crate, and also set up a shelter or a trap.

OUTSIDE AWARENESS

Dress to stay warm in cold weather with layered clothes and a hat. Keep a change of clothes in the car, including spare socks, boots, and gloves, so if you get wet or catch a chill you won't have to head home. If cell phone coverage is spotty, use two way radios. Use a whistle or small boat horn for *emergencies*. If you don't already know, find out what wildlife is common to the area – better prepared, than surprised. Wear “hunter orange” during hunting seasons. A dog should have an orange neck gaiter, scarf, or coat. Large game animals can be aggressive and present a possible danger when the rut is on (mating season). Some animals will *actively* defend their young against perceived danger (female bears and cow moose). If you're in bear or moose habitat, talk loudly and wear a bell to help them avoid running into you. Copperheads are more apt to strike out at anything while in the process of shedding their skins. It's safer to travel in pairs for many reasons. If alone, you *must* be able to communicate with others in case you have an accident or get lost. Carry a walking stick – one misplaced step and you're stuck in a marshy, swampy, or muddy area, or you can fall through ice hidden under snow. There's a number of “accidents” waiting to happen. Most animals use caution when on unfamiliar ground, you should too.

If the dog was just seen and you're following her through snow, walk *beside* prints, not on top of them. She can double back and you'll miss the turn-around. Don't take a dog on searches without good reason. They walk over existing prints and disturb “clean” areas that can show new prints for future tracking. When tracking, walk slowly, listen, and observe. Prints can lead you on favored trails or to hiding spots, but it's easy to mistake prints of other animals for your dog's. Wild canines track more consistently in a straight line, whereas dogs investigate things, meander more often, and leave a lot of “sloppy” prints. Do prints go under a low branch or in tight spaces your dog wouldn't go under or through? Be objective. Try guiding the dog in a particular direction with markers that you drop along a safe, easy to travel route. Alternate dropped bits of bait and small cotton balls scented with urine, dog hair, and dust/dander. Never touch the remains of an animal with bare hands. If you need assistance with identification, ask a local animal control officer or game warden to help you. Wash your hands after working in the woods.

PHONE CALLS

Leave your cell phone on. Program frequently dialed numbers. Can you hear it ring or feel it vibrate? If working out of town or state, carry a list of numbers for local police, ACOs, and emergency vets. Set to vibrate if the dog is nearby. If someone found your dog ask them to be careful so your dog doesn't bolt from them through an open door or from their car. Always have someone with you when meeting a stranger. You can also meet at a public place such as a local veterinarian's office or animal shelter.

STRESS

Searches are stressful and some end prematurely due to family or job responsibilities, emotional distress, geographical or physical limitations, or a searcher doesn't know what else to do. Lost dogs do turn up. Continue to send updated fliers to shelters, vets, and rescues until you need full closure, no matter what.