

Missing in Action

By Michelle Heald



It's a pet owner's nightmare to have a loved fur or feather child go missing. Often, in the panic and turmoil, many pet owners are confused about the steps to take for the fast, safe return of their pet.

What should you do when your prized parrot takes flight through an open window, your cat disappears or your dog bolts from an unlatched gate?

Like a Boy Scout, Be Prepared!

You may never experience the heartache of a lost pet, but at least be prepared and have a file where you can keep identification information. This is where a record of the microchip identification should be kept. A clear and distinguishable photo of your pet/s should be in this file and a brief and clear description. During the panic of a pet going missing, it's hard to keep a clear head, so a pre-prepared description is vital. This is also very important if you ever leave your pet in the care of a neighbour or friend, as they may be at a loss to describe the pet, even the breed or mix of breeds. You love your pet and know their nuances, breed and special markings, but is your pet's carer going to know your pet well enough to give an accurate description?

Leave an action plan if you are leaving town

Trips interstate or overseas for many of us involve a kind-hearted neighbour or friend looking after the care and feeding of our pets. But what if something goes wrong and your pet ends up missing?

Urban Animal's first parrot, Roger, has an interesting tale of flight and retrieval. "It's pretty funny, actually, although not at the time for the people involved," remembers Lisa Treen. "We had left Roger in the care of a trusted friend and experienced pet- and house-sitter. She came home from work, fed the dogs and went out into the backyard for a cold glass of wine, but had forgotten to fully close one of the back doors. In a flurry of yellow feathers, out flew Roger, landing high in the branches of the tree in our backyard. Panicked, she whistled to him, called his name and tried unsuccessfully to coax him down. She even tried to climb the tree!"

With daylight fading it was certain there was no way that Roger would be located, so the house-sitter had the worst night's sleep, worrying about the missing Ringneck. Parrots have lousy eyesight in the dark so they're likely to roost in a tree and remain there until early morning.

The next morning the staff arrived to find the distressed house-sitter who tearfully told them that Roger was still missing. All staff mobilised, realising that it was more important to miss phone calls and stall business than to have Roger, a very tame and trusting parrot, out and alone in an unfamiliar world. After combing the neighbouring streets and whistling his favourite wolf-whistle, Roger was located - he was in a neighbour's backyard and high in a tree.

"A quick-thinking staff member (and one of Roger's favourites) knocked on the neighbour's door to try to gain access," explains Lisa. "However, no-one was answering the door. So he grabbed the office ladder, scaled the fence and waited, all the while trying to coax Roger down.

"True dedication is something rarely found in people, but was clearly present in Paul. He used his mobile to phone the office and get them to bring some treats and his laptop. The treats were used to get Roger - now probably well and truly hungry for his breakfast - down out of the tree. The laptop was so that he could continue working while waiting. That's pretty dedicated in my books," laughs Lisa.

"All the more amusing was that the neighbour walked out into his backyard to find a stranger sitting on his patio with a laptop and an arsenal of treats, whistling and tweet-tweeting. It turns out that the poor chap was hard of hearing and was never alerted to Paul frantically knocking at the door. It's a great thing that Paul was well trained in public relations and was able to explain it all. I believe that Roger landed on Paul's shoulder not long after. I'm sure Paul stuffed little Roger under his shirt to ensure a safe and secure return to the office."

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In NSW it's law that dogs in public are to wear a collar and tag that identifies the owner. A simple tag can be a fast way to get your pet back.

Although this episode of flight and recovery does have a happy ending, it did reinforce the need to have a detailed description and action plan for all the pets should they go missing.

Microchips do help reunite people with pets

Those mandatory little implants, about the size of a grain of rice, inserted under the skin, can be the one thing that helps reunite you and your pet. However, the chip only contains an alphanumeric code that a scanner reads, not the full contact details of the owner. The information on the code can be checked against the register, which has information on the animal's ownership. But it's important to make sure that your contact details remain up-to-date. If you move frequently, have a relative as a secondary contact - preferably someone who is unlikely to change address as often.

A solution for a quick return

In NSW it's law that dogs in public are to wear a collar and tag that identifies the owner. A simple tag can be a fast way to get your pet back. A number of vets and pet stores offer quick-turnaround pet tags. Some have on-the-spot technology to send you on your way in less than 5 minutes with a custom tag for under \$15.00. It's not intended to be a substitute for a microchip but it's an instant point of contact.

A local dog trainer and friend of mine doesn't agree with having her dog's name on the tag. Instead, she opts for a phony name like Muppet. Her reasoning is that if someone gets close enough to read the name on the tag, then calls the dog, it's not going to come when called by a phony name. She's heard too many stories of dognapping, with the owners being contacted and a reward expected. That said, if a reward for the safe return of your pet has been offered, make sure you're in possession of the pet before any reward is given.

Action plan

Figure out where the pet was last seen and comb the neighbouring streets looking for it. Stop people and ask if they've seen the pet, but realise that time is ticking and your pet may already have been picked up by someone.

Pick up the phone and call your council and the vets in your local area

Veterinary clinics are the most common place that found pets are taken. Most vet clinics are happy to scan a found pet for microchip identification. If they can't locate the owner or the contact information is out of date they will turn the pet over to the local pound. Even if your lost pet hasn't been brought in, leave your contact details and a description in case your pet is brought in later.

If you have no luck contacting the veterinary clinics in your area, call your local pound and give a full description and contact details. If you suspect that your details may be out of date on the register, now is the time to insist they take the current information over the phone. Council will update your pet's record on the register to show it's missing.

Plaster the streets near where your pet was last seen

Make a poster - A4 size is fine - and tape it on poles around the greater area in which your pet was last seen. Remember the old-fashioned 'wanted' posters seen in western movies? Base your poster on those. Use a big photo with the word 'MISSING' above it and a description and contact details below. Pole posters around local dog parks also work a treat and 'pet people' are more inclined to read the 'missing' posters in the area.

A photo speaks a thousand words but keep your description brief

Use a recent and clear photo and make sure it looks like your pet even if photocopied. It's a mistake people often make in not having a prepared photo that represents your pet's likeness. Forget the cute Easter shot with 'Pookie' wearing bunny ears, you need this photo to be an exact likeness.

A succinct description is vital and you should keep this simple. For example, if your Maltese goes missing, by all means give the breed or breed likeness but also list it as being a small, fluffy, white dog.

Give a contact number and ask people to call with any information on sightings. We would caution on giving further personal details such as a contact name as there are some pranksters and plain creepy people out there.

24 hours is a long time

Act quickly and use friends and family to help you with the multitude of calls and tasks needed to get the word out. This is the time to lean on people who are likely to have a clearer head and aren't so emotionally involved in the situation.

Recent case #1: The Missing Maltese

A number of months ago a distraught woman knocked on Urban Animal's door wanting help in locating her missing Maltese cross. Quite by accident, the young dog bolted from her parked car and headed off towards a busy main thoroughfare. She spent ages combing the streets but was unable to locate her young dog. She found our office and tearfully asked for help. Immediately we advised her to 'paper' the street in which the dog was last seen and spread posters in a radius from there.

Her biggest fear (and one so many pet people can relate to) was that the dog was young and appealing and someone might keep it. And we suspect that this was exactly what happened. However, the story does have a happy twist.

After seven days the pet owner was contacted by a woman who had had the dog in her possession the whole time. She claimed she had been too busy at work and at home to look for the owner. The finder hadn't bothered to call any of the local vets, pounds or councils. Yet she had taken the time to feed the dog and keep it inside away from harm. Finally, she took action, 'found' the locally placed 'missing' posters and contacted the owner. The cynics reading this might well suggest that on finding the dog she flirted with the possibility of keeping it. After a number of days the cuteness of the pup may have worn thin and it was at that point she reconsidered. The main thing is that there were posters everywhere in her area and she was able to make contact with the owner.

Recent case #2: How can you miss a Dane?

Another recent incident involves a much-loved Great Dane who managed to get out of his house and fenced yard. The landlord had arrived to conduct repairs and left the gate open as he entered the house. The Dane bolted and then the landlord pursued the dog through the inner city suburban streets before contacting the dog's owner. The dog wasn't wearing a collar and so carried no immediate contact information or even an easy means to grab this wayward hound on the lam.

Immediately, the dog's owner left work and rang some locally based friends and acquaintances to seek their help. Within a short time, a network of people put the word out that her dog was missing. Various tasks were allocated to those who could help - from ringing the local vets to calling on council to send out rangers in the vicinity.

A message throughout the greater dog community was posted on a social networking Internet site and people were quickly able to mobilise and help out. The dog was not located that evening despite several sightings and so the owner had a troubled and fitful night, hoping for the best but expecting the worst.

The next morning, friends, casual acquaintances and people she hadn't even met arrived to collect 'missing' posters. They were each allocated a zone to canvass in the areas the dog was last seen. This collective and cohesive approach resulted in the dog being located, vet-checked and taken home by midday. A happy ending to something very scary when you have the combination of a scared dog and busy main roads. And if you think that it's unlikely that your dog will travel far, the Dane was located three kilometres away from his home.

Losing a pet can be devastating and the period of not knowing of its whereabouts or safety is gut-wrenching. But with some forward planning - like the file suggested above and a plan of action - means that a well thought-out action plan will make the job of recovery more organised and thorough.



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