

you can go HOME again

Many more lost pets could be reunited with their owners, say these pet detectives, given the right tools and support

by JULIE FALCONER

Whenever he sees a typical “lost pet” sign—a desperate plea on a plain sheet of paper plastered to a telephone pole—Rick Spears feels compelled to dial the phone number listed and offer advice to the frantic people on the other end of the line.

“They’re doing just what we did, and we got absolutely nowhere,” he says.

The urge to reach out is a lingering effect from a few harrowing days last summer, when Spears felt a level of fear that he’s never found the words to describe.

It started out as a typical Fourth of July holiday for Rick and his wife, Renee. They spent the evening at home, comforting their quivering dog while fireworks boomed in the distance. The next day, their suburb in the Los Angeles County foothills returned to quiet, and the Speares headed out for an evening movie. They didn’t know that neighborhood kids were just waiting for dark to set off some leftover firecrackers.

At 10 p.m. they returned to an open gate and an empty yard. Roxy, their 3-year-old Boston bulldog, had vanished.

In their quest to find her, the couple diligently followed all the conventional tactics. They knocked on doors, posted reward signs, visited local shelters, and contacted rescue groups and veterinary offices. For four days, they barely slept or ate. But it wasn’t enough.

“No one had even caught a glimpse of our precious girl, and we were beyond heartbroken and quickly losing hope,” Renee says.

It’s a scenario repeated countless times each year when pets wander, bolt, or dig their way to a world outside the safe confines of their homes. Sadly, many of them never return.

No one knows this better than pet detective Kat Al-

brecht, a former police officer, canine handler, and manager of missing person searches. While advances in veterinary medicine and companion animal care reflect the status of pets as cherished family members, Albrecht says, services for finding them when they’re lost remain woefully behind the times: “People are still told to look for their animals the same way they would advertise a yard sale.”

Of the 6 to 8 million dogs and cats who find their way into the nation’s shelters each year, less than 2 percent of cats and 15 to 30 percent of dogs are reunited with their owners. Many of the remaining animals, Albrecht believes, are lost pets whose owners either are looking in the wrong places or have given up the search.

“Lost pets are a major contributing factor to the homeless pet crisis,” she says. “They add to stray dog and feral cat populations, and they compete with truly homeless animals for a limited number of homes.”

In 2001, Albrecht founded the Missing Pet Partnership, a national nonprofit with an ambitious goal: to create a paradigm shift in how communities respond to missing pets.

MOTHER TERESA WITH A BLOODHOUND

Albrecht still remembers the calls from desperate pet owners when she worked as an emergency services dispatcher in the 1980s. Her response to the callers was always the same: The police department isn’t a missing pet service. But she gained a new perspective in May 1996, when her bloodhound A.J., a veteran of many human search-and-rescue operations, escaped from her yard.

With the help of another trained scent dog, Albrecht found A.J. a few miles away. Working as a police officer at the University of California at Santa Cruz at the time, she was

LOST



Answers to Spot. Last
Seen 4/23 Please call

208-1985

so affected by the experience that she started down a different career path. In her off-hours, she began using her dogs' tracking skills to help find missing pets.

"People were so grateful that someone took their pet's disappearance seriously and was willing to show up to help them. I felt like Mother Teresa with a bloodhound," she says.

In 1998, she left the police force to devote herself to full-time pet detection, joined by A.J. and two other talented assistants, her Weimaraner Rachel and bloodhound Chase. Adapting the tools she'd learned as a police investigator, she developed a comprehensive approach using behavior profiling to determine how far an animal is likely to travel, scene investigation, physical evidence collection and forensic analysis, surveillance equipment, search management based on probability theory, and the trailing skills of her dogs.

Five years later, she'd published a book on her experiences, appeared on Animal Planet, and gained notoriety as the police officer who became a pet detective. She was a novelty, and that was a problem.

"It was like being the only veterinarian in the nation and having people call you from every state, begging you to do the surgery that would save their pet's life," she says.

So Albrecht branched out. In 2005, the Missing Pet Partnership launched training



Rick and Renee Spears with Roxy

and certification courses for missing animal response technicians and search dogs. Two early graduates were Landa Coldiron and Annalisa Berns, animal lovers who ditched their office jobs to follow in Albrecht's footsteps.

"From the very beginning I realized this was not something to be viewed as a hobby," says Berns. "I view pets as family members, and I want professionals looking out for my pets."

The Los Angeles women eventually formed Lost Pet Detection, a fee-based business. Each brought a team of skilled scent dogs to the partnership: Coldiron's bloodhounds and Jack Russell terrier and Berns' three mixed breeds. Last year, their team approach resulted in an 82-percent success rate.

One of their cases was a Boston bulldog named Roxy.

LOST BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Like most people, the Speares had never heard of professional pet detectives. But after several sleepless nights without his dog, Rick had a new idea. "This may sound crazy," he told a local police deputy. "But I lost my dog and I want to hire a detective, and I don't care what it takes or what it costs."

Fortunately, the officer knew a friend of a friend who had used a pet detective. The next morning, Coldiron, Berns, and

their dogs pulled up to the couple's home.

It was like a military operation, Rick says. When he and his wife saw how seriously the team took the job, they started to hope again. While bloodhound Ellie Mae sniffed out Roxy's escape route, the Speares rushed to a copy store to create new reward signs. Next, they persuaded a radio station to air their story. "We thought we'd been so thorough and done everything possible," Renee says. "Boy, were we wrong."

The search party traced Roxy's escape route from the backyard, through the neighborhood, across a busy intersection, and eventually to a wooded area several miles away. There were no sightings of Roxy that day, but the dogs had led the team to an area the Speares never would have thought to search. Using aerial maps, Coldiron and Berns created a strategy for posting new signs on large fluorescent poster board.

During the four days of their dog's disappearance, the Speares had received no responses to their original signs. The morning after they posted 100 flashier ones in the targeted area, they got the only call they wanted to hear: Someone had spotted Roxy.

By 8 a.m., Rick was driving home with his beloved pooch in the backseat—she was dirty, skinny, and scraped up, but she was headed home.

The Missing Pet Partnership has certified more than 100 missing animal response technicians to date, enabling hundreds of happy reunions each year. But it's still not enough for Albrecht, who envisions a world where every family has the best chance of finding a loved pet.

Through the years, she has learned that understanding human tendencies is just as important as predicting pet behaviors. Owners often check shelters too early or too late, Albrecht says. And many lack the emotional stamina or flexible work schedules to visit shelters or conduct searches for weeks on end. Others develop tunnel vision and are unable to think critically about the situation. They may believe, for example, that their pet was eaten by a coyote or stolen without any evidence to back up the theory. Or they may pursue one scenario to the

15-30
percent of dogs in
shelters are
reclaimed by owners



Regular training keeps search dogs at the top of their game. Some dogs specialize in finding cats, while others have a talent for locating a scent trail or following the trail wherever it leads.

Lost and Found: Tips for Recovering a Lost Pet

If your pet disappears, stay calm, form a plan of action, and recruit as many people as you can to help with the search. Dogs will wander farther than cats, so if you're searching for a dog, immediately organize a team to comb the neighborhood and drive the surrounding area, posting signs and asking people along the way if they've seen a pooch on the run. Your recruits also should call all animal control agencies, shelters, and rescue groups within a 60-mile radius.

If you're looking for a cat, focus your initial search on a five- to seven-house radius, where indoor cats who bolt are likely to remain, says pet detective Kat Albrecht. Ask neighbors if you can check their yards, the spaces under their homes, and outbuildings. Inspect nooks and crannies where a disoriented cat could hole up, and bring a tasty treat as an enticement.

If your cat is too scared to come out, set baited humane traps with voice-activated baby monitors (to alert you when an animal is caught) in the areas you suspect she's hiding. In some cases, an amplified listening device or "plumber's camera" can help locate cats trapped or hiding under buildings. Remember that it can take a few days for cats to build up enough courage—or become hungry enough—to come out of hiding.

If you've followed these initial steps and are still coming up empty, it's time to take your search to the next level:

► **SPREAD THE WORD:** Make lost pet signs that are big, bright, and brief. On fluorescent poster board, write "Reward" in huge letters at the top and "Lost Dog" (or cat) at the bottom. In the middle, tape a flier with a photo of your pet between two or three words of description. Post the signs in highly trafficked areas, and take the flier to every animal shelter and veterinary clinic in the area.

Place ads in newspapers and announcements on radio stations. Check online at sites such as Fido Finder (fidofinder.com), Craig's List (craigslist.org), and Dog Detective (dogdetective.com). Consider using a lost pet alert service like findtoto.org to contact homes in your area.



► **HIRE SOME HELP:** If you can afford to hire a pet detective, start looking for one quickly, since scent trails weaken over time. When hiring a detective, ask for references and steer clear of anyone who guarantees success. Also beware of pet-recovery scam artists, such as someone who claims to have found your pet and asks for money before returning the animal.

► **BE PERSISTENT:** Visit animal shelters daily if possible; don't rely on staff to notify you if your pet is brought in. Keep in mind that many shelters have limited space and may adopt out or euthanize animals after a holding period—usually anywhere from three to seven days. Be sure to also ask shelter staff if your pet could have been placed in a foster home or transferred to a rescue group or if there are other shelters you should be checking.

Most of all, don't lose hope—many reunions occur after months of separation.

► **FOR MORE DETAILS** on pet recovery strategies, visit missingpetpartnership.org.

exclusion of all others.

False assumptions by good Samaritans picking up strays can also complicate recovery efforts. They may purposefully avoid calling the number on the tag of an animal who acts fearful or is in rough shape, believing he must have been neglected or abused. Assuming the worst, finders of lost animals sometimes decide to keep them or transport them to distant shelters.

And the pets' personalities, the twists their journeys can take, the hectic pace of understaffed shelters, and the often complex networks of rescue groups can work against



even the most diligent owners' search efforts.

With so many variables, happy outcomes like Roxy's are far from assured. If it hadn't been for the chance call that led them to Lost Pet Detection, the Speares could have ended up like too many grieving pet owners—haunted by the memory of the dog who never came home.

THE PATH AHEAD

From the beginning, Missing Pet Partnership's goal has been for every community to have a lost pets service comprised of a full-

time, fee-based professional pet detective, search dogs, and trained volunteers.

Albrecht once thought it would be easy to integrate such programs into existing sheltering services. She soon learned that most shelters were overwhelmed with the care and adoption of animals; they had neither the staff nor the financial resources to operate lost pet programs. “We’ve made great strides in spay/neuter and adoption,” she says. “But there’s still this gap in services that allows missing pets to take up valuable space in shelters and foster homes.”

To address the problem, Missing Pet Partnership plans to help launch a pilot Shelter Missing Animal Response program—which will engage both staff and volunteers in proactive reunion efforts—at the Washington Humane Society in Washington, D.C., this summer. It’s a chance for Albrecht to prove that aggressive lost pet services can drastically reduce impoundment and euthanasia.

Other concepts include one that Missing Pet Partnership is testing in Seattle, where owners can rent pet recovery kits for a modest fee. The kits include guidance on search strategies as well as tools that many pet owners can’t afford to buy, such as humane traps with voice-activated baby monitors to alert the owner when an animal is caught, high-powered flashlights for looking under buildings, and motion-activated cameras.

The cop-turned-pet-detective behind these creative ideas was once told that her vision of community-based pet recovery



Kat Albrecht demonstrates proper use of a humane trap for capturing skittish cats on the lam. Other tools of the pet detective trade include motion-activated cameras, amplified listening devices, night vision goggles, “plumber’s cameras” for searching under buildings, chemicals to detect blood, and evidence collection kits.

services across the nation was a pipe dream. And she admits that the struggle to keep her nonprofit afloat has been difficult.

For a few months in 1999, she felt so discouraged that she temporarily abandoned pet detection and her vision. But one day she drove past a picture of a dalmatian on a piece of paper with “Lost Dog” scribbled above. It was tacked to a telephone pole just down the street from her house. She pulled over, stood underneath the sign, and wept.

“I don’t know how I would be able

to look at another lost pet poster and be able to live with myself if I didn’t keep going,” she says. ■

Safe, not Sorry

Cats and dogs can easily slip through open doors, bolt in a panic, claw through window screens, and go over and under fences. That’s why it’s critical that you take these steps to safeguard your companions:

- ▶ Always have a collar and ID tag on your pet with your current phone number and address. Pet detective Landa Coldiron recommends that if your animal is shy or skittish, include on the tag, “I’m shy, not abused.” Her dogs’ collars also feature the word “Reward” in English and Spanish. “I don’t want there to be any doubt that my dogs have a loving owner who wants them back,” Coldiron says.
- ▶ Have your pet microchipped, and make sure you register the chip and keep your contact information up to date. (But never rely on the chip as a sole form of ID; your pet may not be lucky enough to end up at a facility with a scanner that can read it.)
- ▶ Keep recent photos and a detailed description of your pet on hand.



Scared or injured cats typically hide in silence within a five- to seven-house radius of their home territories.