Reuniting Lost Cats with their Families: Training Guide

Nationwide, only 3% of impounded cats are reclaimed by their owners. Less than 1% of cats in the United States are microchipped. Plus, the overwhelming populace, shelter workers included, do not understand the very different ways lost cats behave compared to dogs. Each contributes to our collective low return rate for cats.

However, each cat that we can reunite with her family is one less cat we must shelter, provide medical care for, and rehome, which preserves our limited resources for other cats. Reuniting missing cats also shows our dedication to the human-animal bond and returning a beloved pet to her overjoyed family is among the most rewarding experiences we have as animal welfare professionals.

This guide was amassed from best practices of shelters with feline Return to Owner (RTO) rates upwards of 40% and professional feline recovery specialists. Implementing a robust RTO program is not only fiscally sound, but community-focused. Robust RTO programs build community engagement, empower volunteers, and drive donations by your demonstrated commitment and empathy. After all, you would want the same if your pet went missing.

Contents:
1. Lost Cat Prevention: Microchips
2. Internal Procedures: Getting That Cat Back Home
3. Public Communication: How To Find A Lost Cat

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Lost Cat Prevention: Microchips

Statistically, microchips are the most successful method of reuniting lost cats with their owners. However, only 1% of cats are microchipped in the United States. We must increase this number.

Cat owners do not microchip their cats for well-understood reasons: The cat is indoor-only and the owner believes she will never get out. Owned cats visit a veterinarian less than half as frequently as owned dogs, as cats are masters of hiding illness, do not enjoy travel, and many veterinary clinics are not feline-friendly which makes the experience stressful for both feline and owner. Shelter-driven microchip clinics are also typically canine-focused and equally stressful for the cats who do attend.

To increase the number of cats microchipped in your community, consider the following strategies:
- Grant funding is popular for microchipping costs, as data shows us they are our most effective tool in reuniting lost pets. Do not hesitate to seek out funds for these initiatives.
- Implement a policy that every cat passing through your shelter doors will leave microchipped. This includes community cats, cats presenting for wellness services, and, of course, all adopted cats.
    - The goal of microchips is to get a pet back home. Community cats also have homes, outdoor homes, and their microchips enable us to return those impounded cats to their rightful address.
- Hold feline-focused microchip clinics free of dogs and stressors that prevent many cat owners from taking the plunge. The most successful feline microchip clinic I have worked was a drive-thru style in which people pulled up, I got into their car, microchipped the cat inside, and registered it on the spot with a tablet. Exponentially more cat owners took advantage of this clinic citing they did so because it was feline-friendly, the cat did not have to get out of the car, it was quick, many cats arrived loose in the cars as the owners did not have a carrier thus they were never able to attend traditional clinics, and they simply appreciated that this clinic accommodated the unique needs of their cat.
- Ensure all animal control trucks have microchips stocked at all times and empower ACO's to implant, and register, microchips in the field.
- Create targeted door-to-door microchip services for neighborhoods identified as the highest intake, communities with transport challenges (owners who cannot visit the shelter facility), for seniors, and other populations or areas where there are often barriers to an owner getting a cat microchipped. Canvassing a neighborhood offering free microchipping on the spot is a great opportunity for meaningful volunteer engagement and community relationship building.

- At the time of adoption, register the microchip with the new adopter before they leave with the cat if this is not done automatically through your shelter software.
- Apply for funding to place microchips scanners throughout your community, such as with firehouses and police stations. Data shows us people are much more likely to have a found pet scanned if the location is nearby and convenient to visit, unlike having to find a veterinary clinic where many assume a fee may apply.
- Collars and ID tags are the quickest route home for many lost pets, enabling good samaritans to reunite pets easily themselves. Consider offering free or low-cost cat collars and ID tags to the community, or included with each adoption.

Internal Procedures: Getting That Cat Back Home

The first step in increasing your feline RTO rate is to ensure the culture of your organization prioritizes getting lost cats home. Staff must start with the belief that every stray cat who presents has a family missing her. Abandon the concept of what a "responsible" person would do to find a missing cat, cease judgment, and accept that it is our job as experts and service providers to know how to return missing pets. Remember the barriers people may have to finding a lost pet including language barriers, technology and transportation barriers, and remember that *you* would want the same dedication should your pet be found stray.

There are several collaborative methods that have been shown to increase feline RTO. Most can be volunteer-driven! Consider implementing them all as you develop your robust feline RTO program:
- Collaborate with all area animal welfare organizations on lost/found pets.
  - Commit that each day, you will each send an email update with the day's lost animal reports and found stray animals. Often, an owner is unaware of which shelter to call or does not call all of the possible shelters. Remember that lost pets can travel, or be transported, great distances. When you receive a stray cat, check for a match against the above data set.
  - When you receive a microchipped stray cat, report the information to all of your area shelters so they can check their databases and lost/found reports.
- Create a dedicated shelter Lost/Found animal Facebook page or group. Collaborate with other shelters in your area. Every day you will each post the stray animals who have arrived. Allow the public to post stray pets they have found. It is incredibly common for residents to recognize a pet and have the information needed to get her back home. This project can easily be led and moderated by volunteers.
- Ensure you have a resources page on your website with quality information on what to do when you have lost or found a pet. It should have information in the most common languages spoken in your community. A great example resource website you may

borrow from is the [MSPCA Lost/Found Pet Information page](). In addition to information on what to do when you've lost or found a cat, consider including on your resource page:

- A webform to easily submit information on a lost or found cat that automatically fills to a spreadsheet.
- Video to show what to immediately do when you've lost a cat. (See [this free video from Frontline Animal Shelter]().)
- A link to the more comprehensive search guides at LostCatFinder.com, a professional, respected service dedicated to educating owners on tested, scientific methods to recover missing cats.

● Partner with local delivery restaurants and ask them to attach found pet flyers you provide to pizza boxes and with their orders. This has shown to be more successful in Austin, TX than any other reunification method!

● Ask volunteers or Field Services to flyer a neighborhood a found pet is suspected of being from, and/or knock on doors.

● Maintain a lost/found report book or spreadsheet at your shelter and make sure you reference it often. Keep it up to date. Follow up on old reports of missing cats and ask if the cat has been found yet so your report is accurate.

● Post all strays to NextDoor in suspected neighborhoods of origin if known.

● If using Chameleon, set up PawBoost to automatically post all incoming stray pets with no additional work for your staff.

Next, develop an intake protocol for every stray cat that focuses on RTO, describes the steps to scan for microchips and what to do when one is found. Below is a sample:

Scan for a microchip

1. If a chip is found, search for the chip first in our own shelter software, then at http://www.petmicrochiplookup.org. Call the first suggested company and get as much of the following information as possible: Owner contact info including address, email, phone numbers, alternative contacts; implant facility, contact info, implant date; animal's name, age, and spay/neuter status.

2. Create a note under the animal's file in our shelter software to record the above information.

3. Once you have owner information, call, leave a voicemail, text, and email at all the available contact info with the following script: "Hello, this message is for (x). This is the (x) Adoption Center getting in touch because a cat with a microchip that is registered to you has been brought to our adoption center after being found as a stray. The cat was found on (date) in (town) and is a (sex and description and name on chip if applicable.) Please respond within 24 hours of this message to make arrangements to reclaim your cat. If you have since rehomed this cat or are unable to take the cat back, it is still

important to respond so we can get information about their current owner or move forward with an alternative plan for the cat. If we do not hear from you or the cat is unable to be reclaimed, possible outcomes are adoption, transfer to a different organization, or humane euthanasia if warranted. Please contact us at (x) by (24 hours from when the message was sent.) We would also appreciate a response if this message has been received in error. Thank you."

4. Contact the implant facility and ask if they have up-to-date or alternative owner information on the microchip.

5. Call Animal Control from the town where the chip is registered and ask if they can make a visit to the address to speak with the residents, determine if they no longer live there, or if they have alternate contact info for that name/address/phone number. If reasonable, send your staff, or a volunteer, to the address to make contact or leave a letter.

6. Google the name of the owner to try to find alternate contact info or any other information that may be helpful (a work email or phone number, an obituary that lists next of kin.) Search the person on Facebook and other social media platforms. If you find someone that seems like a match, send them a message with the same info as the script above.

7. Post photos. Take a clear photo of the cat in landscape orientation and upload it to our shelter software. Post the photo to the Lost/Found Pets Facebook page/group including the animal information, found location, and reclaim instructions.

8. Add the found cat to the Lost/Found pet report book or database, ensuring you send that daily email update to area partners.

9. Call other area shelters and ask them to check their Lost/Found report for a match. If necessary, look up the address where the cat was found, search for nearby shelters, and call them, too.

10. If you've made a match or a possible owner is coming to ID, congratulate yourself, you're awesome! Update the software comment section or add a note with information about the owner and any particulars you've discussed about the reclaim process that other staff might need to know (i.e. needs a rabies vax, update microchip info, etc.)

Public Communication: How To Find a Lost Cat

Cats have very different lost behaviors than dogs: Lost dogs run and roam; cats hunker down. Lost dogs are frequently immediately visible whereas cats, depending on their psychology, take time to venture out to be noticed. Compounding the challenge, the internet is filled with incorrect advice on locating missing cats, like the old myth about putting dirty cat litter outside.

Below is a sample guide so you can provide accurate information owners may use to find their missing cat:

LOST A CAT?

Here are a few big-picture basics from the search guides:

- Instead of the vague REWARD LOST CAT, offer a specific amount. "Reward for confirmed photo" gets proof of sighting so you're not wasting time on the wrong cat. The photo should be the largest element on the flyer, ideally a side view in silhouette to remove all distracting background. Here's a [free template](#) for lost cat flyers.
- Make mini versions of your flyer, 4 to a page. Distribute them to landscapers who often flush a cat out of hiding, local pet stores, vets, mailmen, and FedEx/UPS drivers.
- Get permission from the nearest school to place a poster at the entrance of the student drop-off area.
- Use large, bright posters: one in your yard and one at each intersection within a 500-foot radius of your home or the point last seen.
- Put a Lost Cat sign in your front yard and the first five intersections near your house.
- Place a flyer on every car and each door in the neighborhood as many neighbors may not be out walking or take the time to read a sign.
- Ask neighbors who may have outdoor cameras to review the footage. The cat's movement may trigger their camera, especially at night.
- Do not put out kitty litter or food that will draw unwanted wildlife and bully cats. Instead, open a few windows to use the scent of home as a beacon.
- Physically search for your cat, but do not call your cat unless you are within 100 feet of home or you see them. Search in the daytime, lure at night.
- Use a flashlight as you look, the cat's eyes will reflect the light even if you can't see the shape of the cat itself.
- Contact your local humane society or community cat organization to rent/borrow a cat trap. Your cat may be too shy to come out to you but may enter the trap for food. Precautions include not leaving the trap open overnight or when you can not check on it every hour. Trapped wildlife may harm themselves trying to escape.
- Call your vet and microchip company. Report your cat lost and confirm your contact info.
- Check lostcatfinder.com for recommended search gear, a personal strategy or to download the complete lost cat search guide.
- Post online: NextDoor; Craigslist in both Lost & Found Pets and in Pets; helpinglostpets.com; petharbor.com; lost.petcolove.org; local lost and found Facebook groups; any neighborhood message boards. Renew posts every 3 days. Include a request for neighbors to check around their homes/garages. Cats may have entered an open garage/shed and not been able to escape.
- Unless you have found a body, do not give up hope. Many cats take days to come out of hiding. Giving up hope is a coping mechanism to relieve the grief, but cats can be recovered after weeks or months.