

THE CASE OF THE MISSING CAT





HOW TO INCREASE THE ODDS OF FINDING YOUR LOST FELINE

BY LIZ FINCH

IT WAS NEARLY WINTER in Butte, Montana, and a 12-year-old tabby cat named Captain was traveling cross-country with his person. Though Captain was nestled in a roomy crate with a litter box, bedding and toys, his human decided to let him out for a short break. As soon as she did, however, Captain bolted from his carrier and disappeared into the trees.

Captain's person had adopted him from Harbor Hope Cat Rescue in Gig Harbor, Washington, and before embarking on that lengthy road trip with her cat, she had contacted Laura Carlson, the executive director, for advice on how to travel safely with him. When the cat took off, the distraught woman once again connected with Laura for advice. Only this time, the cat was lost in the woods 600 miles away — and Laura was desperately trying to recall everything she knew about how to find a missing pet.



WHERE AND HOW TO LOOK

While the number of pet cats who go missing is difficult to estimate, suffice it to say that Captain's is nowhere near an isolated case. And the number of cats who, tragically, are never found? Also unknown. Sometimes cats stay lost even though their families do everything they can think of to find them. But sometimes — many times — people don't have the slightest idea how to even begin looking.

Kat Albrecht, an investigative pet detective, is determined to change that. After all, finding a lost cat is about more than standing outside your front door and yelling, "Here, kitty, kitty."

Kat (a delightfully ironic name for a woman who's a missing cat sleuth) was a police officer in 1996 when her search-and-rescue bloodhound AJ dug out from the yard and disappeared. Kat reasoned that if search-and-rescue techniques could work for people, they could work for pets, too, and she enlisted a friend's search dog to trail AJ. "We found him several blocks away," she says. "He was sitting on a neighbor's porch, soaking wet from his adventures in a nearby stream."

That experience inspired Kat to change careers and use her extensive knowledge to help people find their missing pets. Today, she runs Missing Animal Response Network, which offers courses on pet recov-

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ery strategies, which are based on proper search techniques as well as knowing where to search for lost pets. The latter varies depending on the species. "The behavior of dogs and cats influences the distances they travel," Kat says. "Dogs run, sometimes great distances, while cats will hide. They not only hide, they do so in silence and typically stay close to home."

Sometimes, they are still inside the house. A near-tragic example of this is the case of Bess, a two-year-old cat who disappeared one night from her family's home. Bess remained missing until a few weeks later — when



the family suddenly heard a faint "meow" coming from, of all things, a hinged window seat in the living room. Bess was nursed back to health and recovered almost completely.

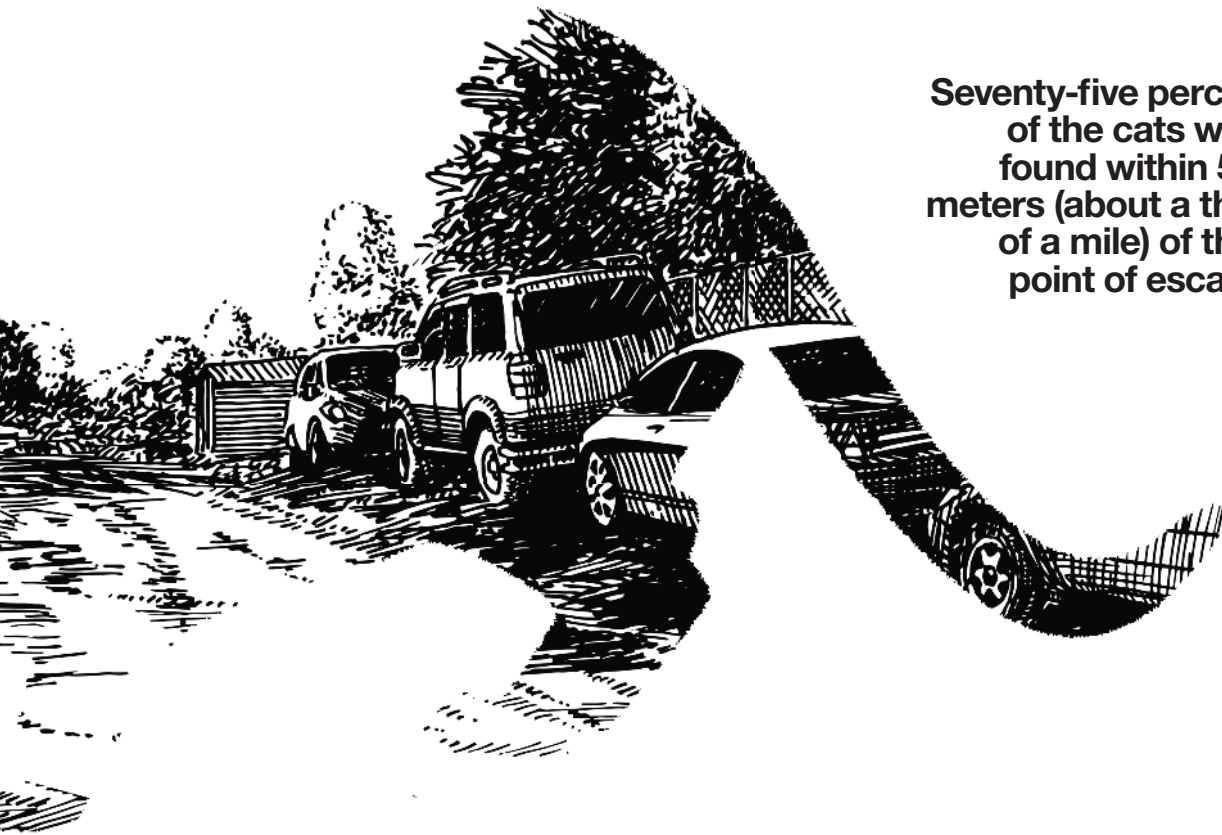
"Bess is a perfect example of why you should comb every inch of your house thoroughly," Kat says. "Check areas where you think the cat couldn't possibly be, like inside cupboards, under mattresses and behind dressers. Check, then check again, because cats may change their hiding spots over time."

Even cats lost outside are consistently found under the porch on their own property or hidden somewhere close by, within just three to five houses of their escape point, Kat says. She even found one kitty hiding under an old bathtub in the backyard. And her claim about cats not straying far isn't just anecdotal; a recent scientific study supports it.

THE MISSING CAT STUDY

After hearing about Kat's experiences, a University of Queensland emeritus professor named Jacquie Rand proposed that they collaborate on a missing cat study. Using an online questionnaire, they gathered information about 1,210 lost cats to determine what search methods were successful and where cats were most often found.

True to Kat's experiences, the cats were typically hiding under porches, cars or other objects near their



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homes. Seventy-five percent of the cats were found within 500 meters (about a third of a mile) of their point of escape. Eighteen percent were hiding directly outside an entrance to their home. There was some difference in behavior between cats who live indoors and cats with regular access to the outdoors. Perhaps because they are more at ease outside, 75 percent of the latter traveled up to almost a mile from home.

A major finding of the study was the importance of an active physical search: 59 percent of cats were found alive because their people pounded the pavement and crawled under bushes looking for them. That's critical, because Kat often meets people who rely solely on passive methods such as posting signs or asking their neighbors to keep an eye out, hoping someone will see their cat and call.

"One of the most common suggestions," Kat says, "is to put personal items or a dirty litter box outside, under the premise that the smell will draw the cat back home." She doesn't give that strategy much credence, saying that if the cat does come back on his own, it's more likely that he overcame the fear of being displaced and returned home. What's more, Kat says, the pheromones from a litter box can backfire by attracting territorial cats, who then keep the missing cat from returning home.

Kat has also seen the impact that assumptions can have on someone who has lost a pet. Too often, people

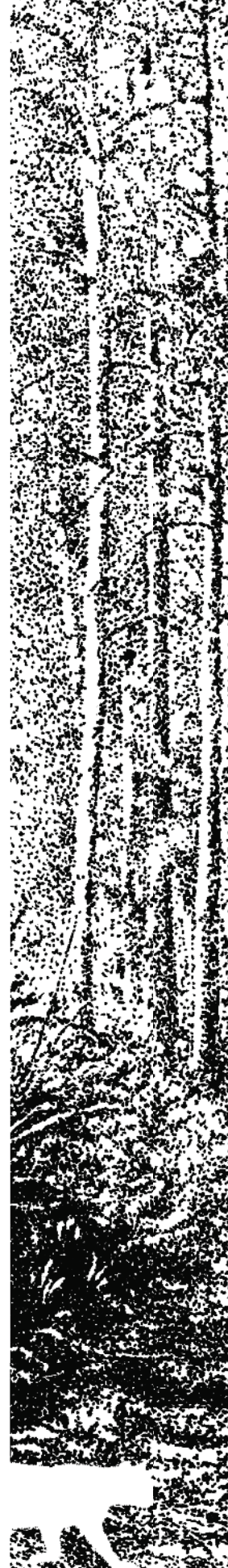
call off the search prematurely, or don't look at all, because they believe that their cat has already encountered a coyote or other wild animal. "I've had cases where the cat was trapped in a neighbor's basement and nearly died of starvation because the people were afraid of finding their pet's remains and just stopped looking," Kat says.

NEVER GIVE UP

In the missing cat study (a report on which was published in the journal *Animals*), about 56 percent of the lost cats were found within two months, but there are plenty of anecdotal and documented cases of people being reunited with their felines months or years after they went astray. Louise Kelly, a resident of Greeley, Colorado, is one of those people.

Louise's beloved indoor cat, Lolly, disappeared around Thanksgiving in 2010. Though she and her husband posted flyers, checked the shelters and walked the neighborhood nonstop for six weeks, they had no luck. When Louise's husband became terminally ill in January 2011, they were forced to stop looking.

The next few years brought some brutal winters to Greeley, and Louise was convinced that she'd never see her cat again. But one day in October 2013, after her husband passed away, Louise spotted something — or rather, someone — amazing. It was Lolly, sitting nonchalantly in the sunshine. Turns out she had been





fed and looked after by people in the neighborhood the whole time. She was found less than a mile from her home.

Today, the 14-year-old kitty is content to sit on the coziest pillow in the house and avoid the door entirely. Louise says Lolly seems to thank her before every meal, as if she's happy to be back home. And the timing of her return was uncanny. "It was almost three years to the day she went missing, and right after my husband died," says Louise. "It was when I needed her the most. She seemed to know that."

USE EVERY TOOL IN THE TOOLBOX

So, what became of Captain? Well, his person had to resume her trip without him, but Laura was determined to continue the search, even though he was lost far away from home and well-meaning friends told her that Captain was probably picked up by someone nice. She hired a tracker and his two dogs to drive out from Washington to look for Captain, and she posted his story on Facebook and PetAmberAlert.com. She

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found a local cat lover who set up humane traps and wildlife cameras. And then, success: Captain popped up on camera more than a month later.

Laura took off for Montana to get him, finding him not far from where he initially bounded into the woods. He was dehydrated and anemic, and had lost nearly eight pounds, but he was alive. "Captain had lived through three snowfalls in the 40 days he was gone, and there was another huge storm on the way," Laura says. "He wouldn't have survived much longer in his condition."

While Captain's story is unique because he was lost so far from home, it's a great example of the way that Kat advises people to look for their missing cats. "Do everything," she says. "Use every possible search method immediately when a cat is lost, including conducting a thorough physical search, distributing flyers and putting out humane traps. Go over the same



Tips for successful searching

The following active approaches will make you and Fluffy more likely to have that reunion you're dreaming about.

The action items on this list are meant to be repeated — often.

- **Search thoroughly** around your property, inside as well as outside. Vary your search times, keeping in mind that cats tend to be most active late at night and early in the morning, when it's quiet.
- **Ask neighbors** for permission to search their property and try to expand your search three to five houses in either direction. Make sure to look inside their garages or any other structures where a cat could get trapped.
- **Repeat your search** and recheck the same spots. Cats may get spooked out of their original hiding spot and find another one in a place that you've looked already. If your cat is used to being outside, expand your search.
- **Post large eye-catching posters** (e.g., use brightly colored paper) with your lost pet information around the immediate neighborhood.
- **Post your lost pet information** on social media sites like Facebook, Nextdoor.com, and PetAmberAlert.com.
- **Set humane traps** in spots where you can check them frequently; shelters will often rent these traps to the public. You can also use your house or garage as a trap by leaving doors open.
- **Check all the shelters** that serve your area, not just the one nearest to your home. (Make sure your cat has a microchip, or wears a collar and ID tag, so you can be reunited easily if he or she ends up in a shelter.)

For more tips on finding lost pets, go to missinganimalresponse.com.

ground multiple times and at multiple times of day." And don't discount the human factor, because cats do get picked up and taken to the shelter. They can also assimilate into a nearby cat colony, so get to know the people in the neighborhood who feed outdoor cats in case they spot a new arrival.

"Above all, don't give up," Kat concludes. "Your cat is out there somewhere, waiting to be reunited with the family she loves." 🐾