

Guide: Lost Dog Behavior

How Far to Search?

It is difficult to predict how far lost dogs will travel because there are just too many variables.

The distance that a lost dog will travel depends upon:

- its individual temperament,
- the environment (terrain and weather), and
- the circumstances surrounding the disappearance.

The question to ask when searching for a missing dog is “Who has my dog?”

One complicating factor with lost dogs is that people who pick up stray dogs often transport them out of the immediate search area. Because a large amount of lost dogs end up in foster homes and rescue adoption programs, you should contact all rescue groups and breed rescue groups within your area (Use a search engine and the keywords “animal rescue groups near [your city]”).

Elderly, Disabled, and Small Dogs:

In general, elderly dogs, disabled dogs, and small dogs tend to be recovered quickly, often ending up within a few blocks from their escape point.

Your target search area:

Within a 1 to 2-mile radius of your home.

Factors to Consider:

- Highly populated areas (apartments, condominiums, etc.) could mean a smaller radius
- Sparsely populated areas (rural farmland, mountains, desert, etc.) could mean your dog will travel farther.



What to Do:

- Place highly visible lost dog posters in the area of disappearance.
- Utilize a flyer distribution service that will mail notices to homes within a one-mile radius from where the dog escaped.
- Use the 12 Step Action Plan from Pet FBI for more ideas. (petFBI.org)

Friendly and Purebred Dogs:

In general, wiggly-friendly dogs that readily go up to strangers for attention and purebred or rare breed dogs will be “rescued” much quicker than mixed breed dogs that often go unnoticed. This is likely because the average (non-rescue oriented) person who sees a mixed breed dog trotting down the sidewalk probably doesn’t notice it, but when the same person sees a dog of value (like an English Bulldog, Afghan, or a Great Dane) they will immediately pull over.



Your target search area:

Within a 1 to 2-mile radius of your home.

Factors to Consider:

- People may want to keep your dog for themselves or to sell.
- People may have “rescued” your dog quickly, assuming that because it is a valuable dog that it must be lost (and they stop to help).

What to Do:

- Start an aggressive flyer distribution campaign with highly visible poster boards in the 1-2 mile radius.
- Notify the Police and Animal Control, and pay attention to ads selling dogs, especially if your dog is a purebred.
- Use the 12 Step Action Plan from Pet FBI for more ideas. (petFBI.org)

Aggressive, Panicked, and Skittish/Shy Dogs:

Aggressive dogs, panicked dogs (fireworks, involved in car accident), and dogs with skittish, shy temperaments will be more difficult to capture and are at risk of traveling farther on their own.

These dogs will often run blindly and can travel for miles before intervention. When they eventually slow down, they will often seek out areas where they can avoid all human contact.

Your target search area:

- Start at the escape point and in areas of sightings
- Encompass 5 to 10-mile radius, including areas that dogs can easily avoid human contact





Factors to Consider:

- Your dog may be panicked or hurt and may not seem to recognize you or want to be near you.
- Your dog may run blindly if chased and avoid all human contact, seeking wooded areas, etc.

What to Do:

- Start an aggressive flyer distribution campaign with highly visible poster boards initially at the escape point and eventually in areas of sightings.
- Use the 12 Step Action Plan from Pet FBI for more ideas. (petFBI.org)
- Use a friendly dog (“Magnet Dog” that your dog is familiar with on a 30-foot leash to attract your dog. Hire a MAR Technician to help. (See below.)
- Be aware of the 3 zones of a panicked dog: (1) The Awareness Zone (2) The Alert Zone (3) The Action Zone, and proceed accordingly. (See below.)
- Use a humane trap if necessary.

Magnet Dogs and MAR Technicians

Many panicked dogs will not come to their owner and instead will bolt in fear. Even though they don't recognize or respond to their owner, sometimes they are willing to approach or to be approached by another dog. You can use a second dog (on a 30-foot long leash) as an attraction device to distract your dog so you can get close enough to capture him. MAR Technicians are trained in how to use a “magnet dog” to attract and distract a panicked dog so they can make a quick capture with a snappy snare. If you don't have access to a MAR Technician then use an extremely friendly dog or one that the panicked dog is familiar with. The primary thing to keep in mind when approaching a panicked dog is this: dogs are normally predators but when they are panicked and afraid, they behave like “prey.” This means they will view all humans as predators. Thus the manner that you use to approach them can actually cause them to run away in fear.

3 Zones of Panicked Dog Behavior

There are three zones when approaching a displaced, panicked dog:

- (1) The Awareness Zone
- (2) The Alert Zone
- (3) The Action Zone.

The Awareness Zone is where the animal is first aware that you are there. If you can see the dog, it already knows that you are there.

When moving closer towards the dog, the Alert Zone is when the dog's body language begins to change. At this point the dog might start looking for a way to escape. This zone can be reduced by patience and by using correct body language (calming signals). If you stare at the dog, walk really slow and directly at it, and talk in a monotone voice, you will likely freak the dog out and cause it to bolt! We often think that if we creep slowly, a dog will understand that we are not going to hurt it when in reality we are simulating how a predator would slowly stalk its prey.

Thus when you reach the “Alert Zone”, you should stop, talk normally in various tones to the dog, and do not advance forward. As the dog becomes accustomed to your presence, then you can advance a foot or two, never walking straight at the dog, always shuffling sideways with your hip facing the dog.



The Action Zone is the area where the dog will react—either fight (bite) or flight (bolt and attempt to run). But this is the zone where animal control officers are typically able to use either a catchpole or a “snappy snare” device to loop around a dog’s neck and capture it. If you do not have access to a catchpole or a snappy snare, it is possible that you can work close enough up to your dog where it will suddenly recognize you (through scent, sound, time, etc.) and that it won’t react with fight or flight response.

If, after all attempts at getting close to your panicked dog has failed, then you may need to resort to setting a large humane dog trap. These traps (along with catchpoles and snappy snares) are available at www.animal-care.com.

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For More Information

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