

# How to Effectively Search for a Lost Indoor Cat

A Lost-Cats-Found Guide

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## How to Use this eBook

Make sure to review the section on If You See Your Cat.

Before ... see Checking Sightings.

## What You Need to Know About Lost Indoor Cat Behavior

When their cat goes missing, people often make wrong assumptions about what might have happened and how their cat will behave when lost. This problem is exacerbated by the often-inaccurate information on the internet and suggestions of well-meaning friends and neighbors. This all leads to many people looking in all the wrong places, using unhelpful search techniques, and ultimately giving up way too soon.

How your cat behaves when lost will depend a lot on their personality, circumstances of their disappearance and the environment where they went missing. However, the biggest factor determining lost cat behavior is their experience with being outdoors. A strictly indoor cat will act very differently from a cat that is regularly allowed outdoors unsupervised (i.e. an outdoor-access cat).

**Your cat is most likely hiding somewhere nearby.** Whether they slip out an open door, fall out of a window or escape from a car, indoor-only cats display characteristic behaviors when lost. If your cat is indoor-only, then the outdoors is a scary place. Even cats that intentionally slip out the door to explore, often become frightened by all the new sights, sounds and activities outside. Other indoor cats seem curious yet comfortable outdoors until something (new and scary) happens; their owner attempts to catch them, a loud car drives by, or a person or dog walks down the street. Unlike dogs, which tend to run when scared, the natural behavior of a frightened cat is to find a safe place to hide. Some cats will attempt to run back inside the house, but others will bolt in fear in another direction. Unless chased, most cats will not run very far. The majority of escaped indoor-only cats will hide within 500 feet from their location lost with an average distance of only 160 feet.

**Your cat will probably NOT respond to you or come out of hiding when you search.** Once outdoors and hiding, an indoor cat will enter what is known as “survival mode.” Once in this state, they are not likely to respond to you calling their name or shaking a bag of treats. The cat’s instinct is to stay silent in order to remain safe. In fact, even if they see you, they may not immediately recognize you. It is quite common for an escaped indoor-only cat to run in fear from their owner when approached. (Refer to If You See Your Cat)

**Just because you can’t find your cat, and nobody has seen them, doesn’t mean that they’re not there.** Even if you do a very thorough search of the area, you may not find your cat even if they are nearby. A lost cat in survival mode is very like a small wild animal. Just think, in many places we know that there are raccoons, skunks and opossums living nearby, but you probably didn’t find any of these animals during your search either. Most indoor-only cats are incredibly good at hiding and will often only come out at night. Due to these behaviors, it is not unusual to have zero sightings of a lost indoor cat for a week or more.

**Despite what people may tell you, your lost cat was probably NOT eaten by coyotes or another predator.** As you speak with friends and neighbors, you may hear that coyotes have been seen or heard in the area. Other people may tell you that they lost their own cat and never found them. The sad fact is that many people that lose a cat, do very little to find their cat and often assume that they were eaten by a predator. Most indoor-only cats are incredibly good at hiding and manage to keep themselves safe even in areas with coyotes or other predators.

### Exceptions to Typical Indoor-Only Cat Behavior

The instructions in this guide apply best to indoor only cats that have never been outside before. However, not all indoor-only cats are strictly indoor such as 1) cats adopted as former feral or stray cats, 2) former outdoor-access cats that are now indoor cats, or 3) indoor cats allowed outdoors under supervision, in an enclosure or on-leash. It has been my experience, that many of these cats still behave like typical indoor-only cats. However, if your cat has

prior outdoor experience, especially former feral or stray cats, they may be more comfortable outdoors and travel farther. Indoor cats with very bold, out-going personalities may hide less, be more likely to approach people and possibly travel farther distances.

*Important: if your indoor-only cat was intentionally outside unsupervised (and not in an enclosure) at the time that they went missing, you should also review the information on finding an outdoor-access cat. If your cat is allowed outdoors unsupervised (and not in an enclosure) for even a short time each day, you should review the Search Probabilities section under How to Find a Lost Outdoor-Access Cat.*

## How to Conduct an Effective Physical Search

- **Significantly more lost cats are found when a thorough physical search is conducted.**
- **At least 30% of lost indoor cats are found during a physical search.**

A physical search is also what is known as “boots on the ground” searching. This is the part of the search where you physically get out there and look for your cat. Conducting a thorough physical search is one of the most effective methods for finding an escaped indoor cat, especially if done in the first 72 hours. Many people think that they conducted an effective search for their missing cat, but few actually do. As discussed above, many lost cats will not respond when you call for them or shake a treat bag even if they normally do so inside your home.

If no one saw your cat get outside, then take a few moments to consider whether anything unusual or different happened prior to your cat going missing. When was the last time that you saw your cat and what were they doing? When did you notice that they were missing?

Consider the following possibilities:

1. Were any areas of the house left open during this time - attic, basement, garage, crawl space, closets, drawers or cabinets?
2. Were any visitors over? This could indicate an increased risk that your cat slipped out an open door or that they became frightened by the activity and hid.
3. Were any windows or doors left open even for a short time? Were any screens loose, open or missing. It doesn't take much of an opportunity for an indoor cat to slip outside even if they have never shown interest in the outdoors before.
4. Were any luggage, boxes or furniture removed from the house? Could your cat have been inside? This happens more often than you think!
5. Was any construction or repair done in your house at the time they went missing? Some curious cats have been known to climb into walls, floors or bathtub frames. They are then sealed inside when the construction is completed.

## Search Inside Your Home

- **If you are not 100% sure that your cat is outside, then be sure to conduct a thorough search within your home.**
- **Around 15% of lost indoor cats are ultimately found still indoors.**

If no one saw your cat get outside and there haven't been any sightings outside, be sure to conduct a thorough search inside your home or the location where your cat was last seen (if lost away from home). You may think that there's no way that your cat is inside, but anywhere from 5-15% of missing indoor cats are ultimately found still inside the house.

If your cat went missing within the past 24 hours or if you have limited daylight available, you might decide to start with your search outdoors, but be sure to later conduct a thorough indoor search if you don't find your cat. If you did not initially search for your cat indoors, still consider doing so even if it has been a week or more. It is not

uncommon to find a cat indoors after one week missing, and some cats have been found trapped and still alive after as long as 4-6 weeks.

### When an Indoor Search is Most Important

An indoor search is most important in the following cases:

- There was no obvious opportunity for your cat to escape such as an open door or window.
- Your cat is a kitten, very skittish or newly adopted. These cats may hide in fear, especially if there is some new or scary change in the household (e.g. visitors, new dog or even new furniture).
- You recently moved, or your cat was lost from a location other than home (e.g. a friend's house or vacation rental).
- Your cat has disappeared or become trapped in the house before. Curious or frightened cats may get themselves stuck in strange places such as the attic, basement, crawl spaces, under floorboards, and even in walls.
- Your cat is a senior, has a known medical condition or could be ill. If your cat feels unwell, they are likely to hide someplace that they feel safe. Sadly, some people do not conduct a thorough search within their home and later find their cat deceased.

### How to Effectively Search Indoors

Don't expect your cat to respond to your voice (e.g. come out or meow) if they are hiding or trapped. Some cats will but the natural behavior of a frightened or sick cat is to remain silent. If trapped, some cats will meow right away, but others will not meow until they have been trapped for several days; anywhere from 3-7 days is common and sometimes as many as 10 days. This is described as the "threshold factor" and it is the point when their desire to be found overcomes their instinct to remain silent. For this reason, you should conduct a thorough search at least twice – once in the first few days and then again around one week missing.

1. First check all the places that your cat likes to hide or sleep. Cats have been found trapped in drawers or caught in blankets in closets. These are also the most likely places to find your cat if they are sick or injured.
2. Check every possible hiding spot with a good flashlight. A cat can fit into any space that their head will fit into, so don't overlook small hiding spaces.

Some places to check:

- a. Behind and under furniture including dressers, beds and heaters
  - b. Inside couches, chairs or box spring mattresses
  - c. Inside drawers, closets or crawl spaces
  - d. Attics and basements
  - e. Garages including inside car engines
  - f. Drop-ceilings or holes into walls and heating vents
  - g. Suitcases, bags or boxes that were packed during the time your cat went missing
3. During your search, check for evidence of anywhere your cat could have gotten outside:
    - a. Open windows or loose screens
    - b. Doors that don't fully latch
    - c. Any other possible ways outside such as from the basement (more likely in older homes)
  4. If you suspect that your cat could be in a room that you were unable to fully search, consider putting out some cat food to see if it gets eaten. This is especially useful in little used rooms such as the attic, garage or basement. You could also try putting out a clean litter box. However, in either case, understand that it may take as long as 7-10 days for a very frightened cat to emerge from hiding. If the food disappears, consider adding a security camera or webcam to monitor the food. You might also consider setting up a humane cat trap.
  5. When searching, don't forget to use your sense of smell. If trapped or hiding for a long period of time, your cat will eventually have to urinate and poop.

6. If you strongly suspect your cat may be in a wall or floor, you could try and check with your fire department about using a thermal imaging camera. Note that this needs to be a high-end thermal camera (and not one you can buy for a couple hundred dollars) for it to show heat signatures through a wall. A cheaper option would be a borescope (i.e. inspection camera), but this requires having a hole in the wall to insert the camera. Some people have even had success taking video with their cell phone if you can fit your hand through a large enough gap.
7. When searching for your cat, be sure to spend some time just sitting and listening. You might hear them meowing or scratching if they are stuck somewhere. Remember that some cats are more likely to meow after being stuck for 3-4 days or as long as 7-10 days.
8. If you live in an apartment building, be sure to talk with your neighbors. I have had a few cats that got into a hallway only to get into another apartment and hide without being seen. One cat even got into the neighbor's attic.

## Conducting Your Physical Search Outdoors

Most missing indoor cats are ultimately found outdoors, and about 30% are found by doing a thorough physical search of the area.

### Determining the Search Area

- **Search within a 3-5 house radius (250-1000 feet) of where your cat went missing.**

To conduct an effective search for your missing cat, you need to set realistic boundaries for your search. You can use an online program like Google Earth to create a radius around the area where your cat went missing. See the [Online Maps Resource](#) page on Lost Pet Research and Recovery for more information and instructions. In general, useful radii to include on your map are 250 feet, 500 feet, and ¼ mile (or 75 m, 150 m, and 400 m) for the search area and ½ mile to 1 mile (800 – 1600 m) for the poster area.

Most escaped indoor-only cats are found within 500 feet (150 m) from their location lost with an average distance of only 160 feet (50 m). This generally equates to a 3-5 house radius (e.g. 3-5 houses in each direction from your house or location lost). In rural areas or condo complexes with few hiding spots, you may want to expand the search radius up to ¼ mile (400 m). In more urban areas, you may want to start your search focusing on only a 250-foot radius (75 m).

Some indoor-only cats may travel farther such as cats with previous outdoor experience or those with very bold, out-going personalities. In these situations, expand your search area to ¼ mile (400 m), but still conduct a very thorough search within 500 feet (150 m).

### What to Bring on Your Search

In order to conduct an effective physical search, you need the right tools.

- A bright flashlight or spotlight (and not just the light on your cell phone)
- A camera or your cell phone for searching in small spaces
- A small can of cat food or some treats to lure your cat out if you find them hiding
- A towel, small blanket or pillow case to wrap your cat up securely if you find them. Your cat may panic when picked up. Don't make the mistake of finding them and then trying to carry them home only to lose them again. You could bring their cat carrier if they are comfortable using it. However, if they are likely to struggle when you try to put them inside, then this is not the best option.
- Flyers! If you have time, be sure to bring along some lost cat flyers. If you don't yet have flyers, bring some business cards or post-it notes with your name and phone number.
- A small notebook or phone app. Try to keep notes on what yards you search, where you couldn't search, and which yards have good hiding spots. This will be helpful if you don't find your cat right away. You might think that you'll remember but searching for a lost cat is very stressful and there's a good chance that you will forget.

- Additional tools for the high-tech searcher might include a borescope (for checking inside walls or under sheds) and a thermal imaging or infrared camera (for checking outside at night or up in trees). These can sometimes be rented from large hardware stores like Home Depot. (See LPRR store for recommended items)

### Search Safety

A thorough search can often take at least 2-3 hours. Make sure to dress properly and bring water. Long pants, boots and bug spray are recommended. Many good cat hiding spots are rampant with poison ivy or poison oak. Make sure that you know what it looks like. Also, don't forget to thoroughly check for ticks after your search.

If possible, do not search alone. This is just safer and having a second set of eyes can be invaluable. Your cat may run out from under one side of a deck or shed while you are looking under the other side, and if alone, you may never even see them. At least have someone available by phone. This way if you locate your cat but need assistance getting them out, you have someone to call. You may even need them to bring a humane trap while you keep an eye on your cat. However, in general I do not recommend search parties! Too many people searching together are much more likely to scare your cat away rather than locate them.

### How to Effectively Search Outdoors

You may feel like you are looking for a needle in a haystack, but just try to focus on doing the most thorough search that you can. If you do not find your cat during the initial search, you still have a very good chance of finding them using other methods.

**Don't expect your cat to respond (meow) or come out of hiding.** Even if your cat is strongly bonded with you or very vocal at home, they are unlikely to respond when lost outside. Some cats will but the natural behavior of a frightened cat is to remain silent. Since some cats will respond, it is not a bad idea to call for your cat or shake a treat bag when searching. If calling, don't yell or call loudly. Cats have very good hearing and calling works best if you do so using the tone and phrases that you typically use to talk to your cats when indoors. If calling, make sure to spend some time standing and just listening. When cats do respond, they don't always do so immediately.

### Start in Your Own Yard or Location Last Seen

- **Use a flashlight to thoroughly search all potential hiding spots within your own yard.**
- **Don't expect your cat to respond or come out of hiding.**
- **Be careful about searching in the woods as you may scare your cat farther away.**
- **Re-check good hiding spots in your yard every morning for the first week. Don't just search once!**

You want to make sure that you do the most thorough search on your own property or the location your cat went missing. Check under any porches, sheds, decks or garages. These are favorite hiding spots of lost indoor cats, and the best ones are low to the ground with a small gap or hole. Make sure to get down on the ground and look thoroughly with a flashlight from all angles. If there are spots that you can't fully see such as under the stairs, you can use a digital camera or your phone to stick your hand inside and take photos. A borescope (i.e. inspection camera) also works very well for these situations, but most people do not have one. Check inside any outbuildings that have been open since your cat went missing including sheds, garages or basements. Check under and behind everything, and don't forget to look up in any loft spaces. If the outbuildings are closed, check for any possible gaps or holes that your cat could fit inside. Also check less obvious places like under tarps, grill covers, inside hot tub housing or the car engine of any cars parked in your driveway. A frightened cat can hide in some really small spaces. As a rule, if you think your cat's head could fit into a hiding space, then check it.

Occasionally an escaped indoor cat will get stuck in a tree though this doesn't happen very often. The easiest way to check up in trees is to go out at dusk or nighttime with a powerful flashlight or spotlight. Shine it up into the trees and watch for the reflective eye-shine of your cat. You can also try just listening, especially at dawn or dusk. There's some chance your cat will meow, especially after at least 3 days. However, also listen for the alarm calls of

song birds or squirrels that are upset that your cat is in the tree. Larger birds like crows will sometimes also harass a cat in a tree. (Refer to alarm calls)

**Re-check good hiding spots in your yard. Don't just search once!** This is very important for lost indoor cats as they will often come out of hiding at night, travel closer to home, and then hide again. At least once every day (morning is best) check any good hiding spots in your yard. Again, the most important potential hiding spots are under/in any sheds, decks, porches or garages. Do this for at least the first week that your cat is missing. Just because your cat wasn't there the first or second time that you checked, doesn't mean that they won't be there now. Most of the searches that I conducted with my cat detection dog, the lost cat was found somewhere that the owner had already looked.

### Search Your Neighbors' Properties

- **Get permission to search within your neighbor's yards. This is really important!**
- **Don't just rely on your neighbors to look for you.**

Use your search map to determine properties within your search area. In general, this is a 3-5 house radius from your home or location that your cat went missing. Many people will search within their own yards but are reluctant to ask permission to search their neighbor's yards. **Searching your neighbors' properties is really important!** You need to knock on your neighbor's doors and get permission to do a thorough search of their property. If possible, bring a lost cat flyer and explain that your cat is an escaped indoor-only cat and is likely hiding in fear. Also ask if they had any sheds, garages or basements left open (especially overnight) since your cat went missing. If so, ask if you can search those too. Most people are very sympathetic and will let you look. If they won't (perhaps because they have a dog), then make a note of it and move on.

When checking other people's yards, do so with the same thoroughness and techniques that you used to search your own yard (see above). If you are unable to check inside any outbuildings or garages, call for your cat from outside and listen for a minute or two.

If possible, you also want to re-check any really good hiding spots in your neighbor's yards, especially your immediate neighbors. If your cat is trapped inside an outbuilding, they may not meow until 3-7 days and sometimes as many as 10 days. Do this at least 2-3 times in the first week, but don't spend so much time in your neighbors' yards that you wear out your welcome. You may need their help later if they see your cat in their yard and you need to trap them.

**Be careful about searching in the woods. You may scare your cat away rather than find them!** If your cat is a kitten, elderly, potentially sick or injured, or wearing a leash, you may want to conduct a thorough search of the woods. However, in most other cases, you have a much greater chance of scaring your cat away, especially if you are bushwhacking through dense vegetation or walking on crunchy, dry leaves. When searching the woods, try to stay on trails or edges of yards/fields. Look thoroughly into any thick bushes within yards or at the woods edge with a flashlight. In general, I do not recommend search parties in the woods. Also resist the urge to dismantle any good hiding spots (i.e. don't take apart a wood pile). If you do, you risk injuring or scaring your cat. It is best to keep plenty of good hiding spots near your home as it increases the chance of finding them through methods other than searching.

### Expanding Your Search Area and Night Searching

- **Search around the neighborhood from the street using a powerful flashlight or spotlight.**
- **This is most effective at dawn, dusk or (best yet) the middle of the night.**

If you don't find your cat in your initial search, you may want to expand your search area up to ¼ mile. Even if you can't thoroughly search every yard, you can still do a good night search. This search is best done at dawn, dusk or the middle of the night when your cat is most likely moving around. Walk along the road and check under cars and in front yards with a powerful flashlight. Be careful about accidentally shining it into people's houses. You want to

avoid having them call the police on you. Make sure to quietly call for your cat and spend some time just standing and listening. In my experience, even some skittish indoor cats have responded when this was done in the middle of the night.

### Search Enough but Not Too Much!

- **Don't search constantly, especially all night. You may be scaring your cat!**
- **Be sure to give your cat some quiet time to return home on their own and/or enter a humane trap.**

As previously mentioned, it is important to check potential hiding spots more than once. Some cats will move around, especially at night, and then hide again closer to home. Cats stuck inside buildings or up in trees may not meow until they have been stuck for at least three days and perhaps for as long as 7-10 days. *While searching is important, it is just as important to NOT search continuously.* Some people are out at all hours of the day and night looking for their cat. This can actually scare your cat away from returning home or hiding someplace nearby. Often the most critical time to stay inside is between 12am-4am when your cat is most likely moving around. Occasional searching during this time can be helpful, but don't do it every night.

### Remember That Searching is About More than Just Looking

When searching for your missing cat, don't just look for them. You will conduct a much more effective search if you remember to use your other senses as well.

#### Don't Forget to Stop and Listen

Most escaped indoor cats will not meow, but some will. When searching be sure to spend some time just standing and listening. If you move too quickly in your search, you may not give your cat time to respond. It is easiest to hear your cat when it is really quiet outside. If you think that you hear something, you can increase your ability to hear by cupping your hands behind your ears. This can also help you determine the direction that the sound is coming from. Don't forget to look up in trees, on roofs and even the attic. If you think you keep hearing your cat, but can't figure out where it is coming from, you might consider purchasing an amplified listening device. These are most effective if they are directional. Don't get tricked by the cat bird. The call of this bird is somewhat like the "mew" of a cat.

Don't just listen for your cat, listen for alarm calls of birds, squirrels and chipmunks. Since cats are their natural predator, these animals will often raise an alarm to alert others if they see a cat. If your cat is hiding in a bush or stuck in a tree, birds may surround your cat and make alarm calls. Squirrels and chipmunks will also alarm call, but they usually stay farther away from the potential danger. Learn more and listen to example alarm calls [here](#). You don't need to memorize the calls. If you listen to a few of them, you will find that the nature of the calls are fairly similar. An alarm call is often a series of loud, repeated notes.

#### Use Your Sense of Smell

When checking potential hiding places, don't forget to use your sense of smell. If your cat is trapped or hiding for any length of time, they will eventually have to urinate and/or poop. Cat pee in particular is a very strong, pungent odor.

Most indoor cats can survive outside for a long time, so you are unlikely to find them deceased. However, be sure to notice any smells of decomposition during your search and try to find the source.

## Proactively Waiting for Your Cat to Come Home

- **Around 35% of lost indoor cats are found when they return home on their own.**
- **Most cats return home between 12am-4am on nights 4-7, but some return as early as the first night or as late as 8-10 days.**

- **Most cats do NOT meow at the door. So if you don't take the right steps, you may never know that your cat came home.**

A lot of pet detectives don't like to suggest "waiting for your cat to come home" because it is a passive activity. Indeed, if all you do is put out some food or litter and wait for your cat to show up at the door, you probably won't find your cat. However, I like to focus on "proactive waiting." It may sound like an oxymoron, but what I mean is engaging in activities that encourage your cat to come home AND that help you catch your cat. Many indoor-only cats will return to their yard, but most do so in the middle of the night and many don't even try meowing at the door. So, if you don't do things right, you'll never even know that your cat was there, and they will likely wander off again and you may never find them.

If your cat was lost from a location away from home such as the vet's office or while traveling, your cat may still return to the point of escape. Cats have even been known to return to the vet's office or near the point of escape from a vehicle. This is less common but still happens. On the other hand, an indoor-only cat is highly unlikely to return to your home if they are lost away from home. This is referred to as a homing instinct and is very uncommon with cats that lived indoors their entire life. If your cat has previous outdoor experience, you may want to review this article for the latest research on cat homing behavior to see if it is likely in your situation.

## Luring Your Cat Home

At least 35% of missing indoor cats are found because they return home. This number is probably even higher, but many people use the wrong methods. Putting out food or cat litter may help attract your lost cat, but they also carry the risk of attracting other cats and wildlife, which could scare your cat away. Learn when the benefits outweigh the risks below.

### When to Leave Out Food

- **Don't put out any food the first three nights unless it is in a humane cat trap.**
- **After this time, the benefits of putting out food often outweigh the risks.**

During the first few days that your cat is missing, they are less likely to be attracted to food. For this reason, I generally do not recommend putting out food for the first 1-3 nights unless it is inside a humane trap. This will give your cat some time to return home without the risk of attracting other cats or wildlife. After this point, the benefits of putting out food often outweigh the risks. Your cat needs to eat, and if they are unable to find food nearby, they may be forced to travel farther away. Good locations to start with food are near the point of escape or inside a porch, shed or garage. If you do put out food outside of a trap, it needs to be monitored in some way such as with a wildlife camera, security camera or baby monitor. For more information on leaving out food, see Feeding Stations.

### Know the Risks of Putting Out Cat Litter

- **Despite what you may have heard, there's no proof that dirty cat litter attracts a lost cat.**
- **A cat cannot smell their litter from a mile away.**
- **Don't put out cat litter without understanding the potential risks involved.**

You may have heard that you should put out your cat's litter box or spread dirty litter around your yard to help them find their way home. You may have even heard that your cat can smell their dirty litter a mile away. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that a cat can smell their litter box from that far away. More realistically, they might be able to smell it up to a few hundred feet away (depending on wind and weather conditions) and often a lot less. You may have found examples of people swearing that dirty cat litter really works. However, in many cases, lost cats return home on their own for other reasons, and the presence of cat litter is likely just a coincidence. In some cases, cat litter is more likely to reduce the chance of finding your lost cat.

There is some chance that the scent of your cat's urine and feces MIGHT help them find their way home. However, before you go and put out the cat litter, you should be aware of the potential risks involved. The most likely risk is inadvertently attracting other cats. With an escaped indoor-only cat, your yard may be within the territory of one or more outdoor-access or stray cats. If you put out your cat's litter, other cats may see this as a threat to their territory. They may be attracted to the litter box and possibly use it or spray objects around the box. If your cat smells the scent-marks of the resident cats, they may feel too threatened to return home. Worst case, you might attract an aggressive territorial cat into your yard, which might chase your cat away.

Many wild predators like foxes and bobcats use their feces to mark their territory. To do this, they place their scat on prominent locations such as on top of rocks or logs. Domestic cats on the other hand tend to bury their feces. This may be an instinctive behavior to protect them from detection by other larger predators like coyotes and bobcats. By putting your cat's dirty litter outside, you risk attracting area predators around your home. Depending on where you live, the risk of attracting predators may be relatively low, but do you want to take that risk?

I generally do not recommend putting out dirty cat litter due to the potential risks of attracting other cats or predators. However, I cannot conclude at this time whether or not it is a potential attractant for a lost cat. If you feel compelled to put out your cat's litter (just in case), please at least follow these guidelines:

- Don't spread the litter around your yard. Keep it in a litter box or bowl.
- Don't put the litter box near the point of escape. This is the location that your cat is most likely to return to on their own. Don't risk attracting other cats that might scare your cat away.
- Only put out the litter box in an enclosed area such as a garage, shed or basement where it is less likely to attract predators.
- Use some sort of surveillance or wildlife camera to ensure that you are not attracting other cats or predators.
- Most importantly - don't just put out cat litter and hope your cat will return home! If you aren't proactive in your search, the chances of finding your cat are very low.

#### Using Other Scent Articles and Lures

- **If you decide to put out scent articles, it is safer to use items that smell like you or other family members rather than your lost cat.**

Some people also try putting out items that smell like their missing cat or someone (human or animal) that the cat is strongly bonded to. This method often works for attracting lost dogs, but the evidence is less clear how often it works for lost cats. Research has found that stressed cats in shelter environments are not very attracted to the scent of their owners. Putting out scent items (such as cat beds or blankets) with your cat's scent may attract territorial resident cats or possibly predators. If there are other cats in your neighborhood, I would not recommend putting out other scent articles for the first few days. Give your cat a chance to return home first without the risk of attracting other cats. If you try putting out scent articles and they are sprayed by other cats, then promptly remove them.

Scent articles that smell like you or another person that your cat is bonded with are probably safe to put out at any time. Keep scent articles near the point of escape, inside open porches or sheds or placed along the edges of your yard. You don't want to put them all over the place and confuse your cat. If you put out clothing, make sure that it won't blow around in the wind and possibly scare your cat away.

Just by walking around and searching, YOU are leaving scent trails that your cat might possibly follow home. This is another reason that conducting a thorough physical search is so important. While the chance of finding them is only around 30%, you may be increasing the probability that they will find their way home.

See Trapping Lures for information on other non-food scent lures.

### Does Spraying Urine Really Work?

- **There is no solid evidence that spraying your urine around the yard will attract your cat home.**

You may also have heard the suggestion that you should collect your own urine and place it in a spray bottle. Some people suggest spraying it around your yard or in trails leading back to your house. There is currently no research on this method and no evidence that it works. Just by walking around, YOU are leaving scent trails that your cat could possibly follow home. Work with scent trained dogs has found that spraying water along your trail, can enhance the odor trail (at least until it dries). To make the odor stronger, you could soak dirty clothing in the water. Again, there is no research that this works on cats, but if you want to try, I would recommend just using water and not urine.

### Using a “Magnet Cat” to Attract your Cat

In some cases, a “magnet cat” placed inside a cat carrier may draw the missing cat out of hiding or at least get them to meow. Place the magnet cat securely inside a cat carrier. The last thing you want to do is risk losing another cat! Then place the carrier near the point last seen or near the most likely point of escape. This method is most effective if the magnet cat will meow while in the carrier. Be sure to stay somewhere nearby and don’t leave your cat out too long as this process can be distressing for them. This method probably works best when the missing cat is bonded with the magnet cat.

If you feel that it is unsafe to bring another cat outside, you could try recording the meowing of another cat and playing that outside. If you don’t have another cat available, you could even try playing Youtube videos of other cats meowing.

Though most often used outside, this method can also work inside the house. In this case, it may be most effective for drawing out a newly adopted cat or kitten that has disappeared. Or if you recently moved and your skittish cat has disappeared.

### Leave a Way for Your Cat to Return Home

- **Leaving a way for your cat to get back into the house is one of the fastest and most effective ways to find a lost indoor cat.**
- **Only do this if it is safe to do so for yourself and other pets.**

### Leave a Door Open Directly into the House

Not everyone can do this, but if done correctly it is one of the most effective and quickest ways to get your cat home. If at all possible, leave a door open leading directly into your home. Make sure that the door is open enough, so your cat can easily enter. Usually one foot is sufficient. Place some food inside the house at least 10 feet from the door. This method is most effective for a cat that escaped out an open door, and where you can leave that door open.

Only do this if it is safe to do so and you can securely lock up any other pets in another room. Depending on your location and level of comfort, you may want to either sleep or sit watch in a nearby room. This way you can scare out any unwanted visitors such as other cats or raccoons that might come inside, and you can close the door after your cat comes inside. If the door is just left open, some cats will come inside, eat, and then leave again. I know it makes no sense, but I have seen it happen. The good news is that they usually come back and do it again. If you do stay awake, be quiet and don’t be too close to the open door. Some cats may be scared from coming inside by your presence.

If you can't leave your door open all night, consider leaving it open for a few hours. The best time is between 12am and 4am. And the majority of escaped indoor cats return home on nights 4-7. Some cats do return as early as the first night while others may take 7-10 days before they attempt to come home.

If your cat comes inside, be aware that they may still be very fearful and one wrong move could cause them to run back out the door. If this happens, do NOT go looking for your cat. Wait at least an hour to see if they come back in. Then just check nearby hiding spots and stay out of the woods so you don't scare them farther away.

### Leave a Window Open

If you can't leave a door open, some people leave a window open. This might work if the window is on ground level or can easily be entered, such as a low window on a porch. I even know of one cat that came back in a window using a fire escape (this was also the likely point of escape). However, in general a cat is less likely to come back in through an open window, especially if it requires jumping or climbing.

### Create a "House Trap"

To turn this into a "House Trap" you need to rig a method to shut the door or window after your cat comes inside. A rope tied to the door handle, so you can quickly pull the door closed, is most effective. Since most doors open inwards, you may need to run the rope outside and then back in through a window. If you do this, make sure that you can close the door quickly and your cat is far inside the house before you try to close the door. You don't want to risk them getting scared and running back outside or worse getting hit by the door and then escaping. A bowl of food placed 6-10 feet inside can help lure your cat away from the open door.

### Alarm the Door

A door alarm could be used with a house trap to alert you when your cat (or another animal) comes inside. Possible alarms include security cameras, wifi cameras, cellular wildlife cameras, video baby monitors or driveway alarms (see Surveillance for more information). Even an audio baby monitor can help. Just place the monitor near some dry food, and hopefully you will wake up to their crunching. Some cats will even meow to be let back inside.

### If You Can't Leave a Door or Window Open...

- Try sleeping near a door or window that is open, but still has the screen in place. You may hear your cat attempt to come home.
- Put a door alarm (see above) near the point of escape, so you can see or hear if your cat comes home. Some cats have even been found by meowing on a baby monitor placed outside the door, but many cats don't meow.
- Put a humane cat trap near the point of escape (see Trapping). This is recommended even if you use other methods.

### Create a Safe Place for Your Cat to Return

You can help create a safe place or "comfort zone" for your cat by leaving open a door to the basement, garage, porch or a shed. Place a box or crate with a blanket or towel, some food and maybe a clean litter box. If you try this method, be aware that your cat is unlikely to return and just hang out. They will either eat and leave or just hide. This method is more effective, if you add a baited humane trap to the location and/or some sort of surveillance. If you leave your garage open, always check your car engine in the morning to make sure that your cat has not hidden there. If you close any of these locations, be sure to thoroughly search them first. Just in case, I would also recommend leaving out some food and checking it periodically for at least one week.

In general, I don't recommend putting out a dirty litter box in the comfort zone, especially if any other cats live in the area. See "Know the Risks of Putting Out Cat Litter" before trying this method.

## Try “Simply Sitting”

I have had a handful of cases where I was helping set up cameras and/or traps and the lost cat just appeared and starting meowing. This has happened anywhere from 3 days to two weeks after the cat went missing. Most people spend far too much time frantically searching and not enough time just sitting and listening in their yard.

“Simply Sitting” is a technique where you sit calmly in an area where your cat has been seen or near the point last seen with the goal of luring them out of hiding. This may be more effective than actively searching because most cats will not respond to their owner if they are walking around. Try just sitting with occasional talking or singing. Read a book out loud or talk on the phone, but make sure to spend some time listening as well.

Some people also suggest playing with your cat’s favorite toy while sitting. In most situations, your cat will probably be too scared or stressed to engage in play. However, if you are missing a very bold, adventurous cat, this might be worth trying, especially if you see them.

## What to do if you see your cat

- **Never chase your cat!**
- **You will have a MUCH better chance of catching your cat if you lure them to you rather than attempt to approach them.**
- **If your cat runs off or disappears, don’t panic! You still have a very good chance of finding and catching them.**

If you see your cat, resist the urge to approach them and definitely do NOT chase them. An escaped indoor cat is often in “survival mode” and may not recognize you even if they see you and you call to them. If you approach, they will most likely run or walk away. Even a slow, quiet approach may be seen as a threat. If your cat is meowing at you, then they probably recognize you, but you may still scare them away if you are not careful.

## Use Calming Signals to Attract your Cat to You

You are much more likely to catch your cat if you allow them to approach you. If possible, sit down on the ground and don’t directly face your cat. If you can’t sit, then stand calmly and turn to the side. Talk to them in your “indoor voice” using any pet names and familiar phrases that might help your cat recognize you. Try to remain calm and remember to breathe. Staring directly at your cat may be perceived as a threat, so only glance occasionally and otherwise look off to the side but keep them within sight. Slow eye blinks and yawning are calming signals for cats. You can try these too. Continue to talk quietly or even sing. It may take a while for your cat to approach you, so try to be patient. Sometimes sitting or even lying down on the ground can make you appear less threatening and your cat approach you sooner.

If you have food or cat treats on you, then you may be able to lure your cat closer by crinkling the treat bag or tossing a few treats farther away. Feeding your cat by hand can also help calm them down.

## How to Catch your Cat

If your cat does approach you, don’t try to grab them. Cats have incredibly fast reflexes and you will most likely just scare them away. If you do manage to grab your cat, they will probably panic, and a panicked cat can do a lot of damage. If you decide to commit to this course (not recommended), then realize that your cat will probably bite and scratch. Do not let go!

If you want to try and pick up your cat, wait for them to come close to you and be relatively calm. Let them smell you first because this will help them recognize who you are. Try touching and petting them before slowly going to pick them up. If your cat starts to panic, either put them back down or commit to holding them in which case they may bite or scratch.

Rather than picking their cat up, some people are able to successfully lure their cat back into the house. This might be done with treats or just talking to them and moving toward your house. If your cat is being very skittish, you might combine this method with the “House Trap” method. In one case, I placed food about 10 feet inside the house and hid behind the door. The cat probably knew that I was there, but was hungry enough to go after the food, and I quickly shut the door behind them.

#### If Your Cat Won't Approach You or Runs Away

If your cat won't approach you within 30-60 minutes, then trying a humane trap is probably your best option. You can even set up the trap nearby and watch it from your house or car (depending on where your cat is located). Some cats have been caught rather quickly using this method. See the sections on Confirmed Sightings and Trapping for more information.

If your cat hides somewhere secure, such as under a shed, do NOT attempt to scare them out. First try sitting nearby and using calming signals as described above. If your cat won't come out, you could try and get them out, but this carries a high risk that they might escape and run off in the process. If you want to try this method, first make sure that all ways out are secured except one. Then attempt to remove your cat through the remaining opening. If available, I would recommend using a net and heavy gloves. A pillow case can also work. A humane cat trap may be a safer option in this situation.

If your cat walks or runs off, don't follow them. You will just risk scaring them farther away. If you can't resist, then stay far back and don't walk directly toward them. Keep your distance and you may see where they are hiding out. This is not recommended if your cat runs into dense woods as you may accidentally scare them farther away without seeing them.

If your cat disappears on you, you still have a very good chance of catching them. You just need to be patient and use the right techniques.

- Continue to use the methods under Waiting for Your Cat to Come Home
- See the Section on Confirmed Sightings, especially if your cat is not near your home
- See the Sections on Trapping and Surveillance

#### If your cat is outside your door or window

The most effective method is to open the door or window and leave it open for an hour or more. If you are going to do this, then first make sure to secure any other pets in the house. Slowly approach and open the nearest door. Do not turn on any bright lights, especially outdoor lights. Don't be surprised if the act of opening the door scares your cat away. Most likely they will not go far as long as you don't follow them outside. Refer back to the sections on ...

#### If you see your cat away from home

Always try to be prepared if you are out looking for your cat, walking the neighborhood or driving around. You never know when you might see them. At the very least, have cat treats or food and a towel or small blanket. If you have a spare trap, keep that in your car too.

Try the methods described above for luring your cat to you and catching them. If you are any distance from your home or your car, then I would recommend having a towel or small blanket with you. The farther that you have to walk, the more likely your cat is to panic and escape. Wrapping a cat in a towel or blanket can help you secure them without getting scratched or bitten. If your cat continues to panic, then cover their eyes or head. Some people try to place their cat into a carrier or trap, but if you aren't skilled at doing this and/or your cat doesn't like the carrier, this can carry a high risk of escape.

Find video and instructions on wrapping a cat.

If you are unable to lure your cat to you or if they run away, see the section on Confirmed Sightings for next steps.

## Appendix

### Appendix A: List of Areas to Search

Think that you have already checked everywhere? Use this list to help. These are locations where missing indoor cats have actually been found.

- Under the floorboards, especially crawl spaces or attics
- Under the stairs
- Inside the wall, especially during remodeling or basements
- Inside the ceiling, especially drop ceilings in the basement or garage
- Inside the closet and wrapped in blankets
- Inside a closed drawer (sometimes a cat can crawl underneath a dresser, bed or cabinet and up inside to get into the back of a drawer)
- Wedged behind a dresser
- Inside a couch or large chair
- Inside a mattress or box spring
- Inside kitchen cabinets. Some cabinets have “dead space” between cabinets and appliances that the cat can crawl inside from behind or under the cabinets.
- Inside car engine in the garage.