

Lost Small Animal Pets

What to do if your small animal pet gets loose.

By Harry Robbins

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A pet getting loose can be one of the most heart-wrenching experiences a pet owner can experience. The natural knee-jerk reaction is to drop all your responsibilities and search for your lost small animal pet until it's found. Sometimes, you find that your rabbit got itself in the laundry basket somehow, or your ferret was only hiding in the walk-in closet, and the butterflies in your stomach settle.

Other times, your small animal pet really is lost.

Courtesy of Isabelle Francais / Bowtie Inc.

Losing a close pet can be almost as devastating as losing a family member.

Time Is Of The Essence

Knowing what local small animal organizations are in your area is a good first step. It's best to know this information before your pet is lost. Time is not on your side when your pet is lost. The longer it's out on its own, the more likely it will be hurt or killed. In addition to your small animal being in danger, if it is found and brought in to a local shelter, you must locate it quickly. There is generally a short holding period before the animal is put up for adoption, or worse. If you locate your pet after it's adopted out, the new owners decide if they are willing to return it.

"We hold [the small animals] for the five-day holding period in accordance with the Hayden bill," said Deb Campbell, spokesperson for the Department of Animal Care and Control for the city of San Francisco. Five days seems pretty standard across the country. According to Darlene Rankin, director of customer service of the Humane Society of Broward County in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, they hold small animals for three to five days. Afterward the animal is put up for adoption.

There are unique cases, such as at the TWRC Wildlife Center in Houston. Heather Morris, education coordinator, states that the office facility is set up to house wildlife. Therefore, if a domestic animal is brought in, one of the rehabilitators takes it home to a home-based facility, holds the animal for a month, sometimes two months and posts the found pet on petfinder.com. If the owner is not found, the animal is usually kept by the rehabilitator. The rehabilitators try to find adopters for these pets on their own.

What Animals Are Serviced By The Organization?

The most frustrating thing a small animal pet owner who lost their pet might come across is calling local shelters to find that these don't service small animals. Do your homework ahead of time and know which organizations have resources that be can dedicated to your circumstance. Whether the local city has a quality animal care and control program might sway your decision on whether to move to an area.

If you live in Long Island, New York, the government-run shelter won't have much to offer an exotic pet owner, but staff there will do their best to point you to a private organization for your animal if one exists. Susan Hassett, director of North Hempstead Town Animal Shelter in Port Washington, New York, says they only respond to calls for dogs. It is a government-run shelter and the only laws in the area apply to dogs. If a call is received for any other type of animal, the shelter refers the caller to a surrounding private organization that handles that type of small animal.

It's a different situation in Chicago. "We must take in anything that comes through our door, whether it be a dog, a cat, a ferret, a rabbit or a bird," said Mark Rosenthal, operations manager of Commission on Animal Care And Control. "It's an open shelter. We do not refuse service to anyone." Rosenthal says the shelter always assesses the health of any animal that is brought in. Animal Control would be sent to capture a small animal if a call was received. "We are complaint driven," Rosenthal said. If it is a very unique animal, a surrounding private organization would be contacted and the animal would be transferred to it.

You're also in good hands in San Francisco. "We will always try if there is an animal in distress or need, we will always

try,” Campbell said. People are encouraged to bring in an animal they find if they can capture it, otherwise the Department of Animal Care and Control does its best to find the animal, capture it and bring it in, Campbell said. A species-specific rescue group is contacted if the small animal has behavioral or health problems.

What Do You Do If Your Small Animal Pet Is Lost?

If you can see your pet, but are unable to capture it, try calling a local animal organization, such as your local humane society. Chances are, your call will be one of the lowest priority calls because most humane societies handle emergencies first and have limited manpower. Most are willing to give you advice over the phone to assist you. Rankin suggests looking for an agency that would help you for a fee.

If you don't know where your pet is, Rankin said pet owners should call the local humane society and animal control center and fill out a lost pet report. Also, she said to tell your neighbors, your mailman and people nearby or post signs because most small animals don't go very far. Also, visit the humane society or animal shelter every couple of days and see if your pet has been picked up, Rankin advises. Check with private shelters and organizations in the area that service small animals, because these receive direct calls and drop-offs, and some private animal shelters and rescues receive referrals from the government-run shelters. You could also place a lost pet ad in your local newspaper.

“Keep a tag or some kind of identification on your pet with updated information,” Rankin said. And be sure the information on the tag is always current. “We'll get in pets with disconnected phone numbers on their tags, and [the animals] just sit there.”

According to Rosenthal, the best way to recover a lost pet is through a microchip because it's something that can't be lost. Microchips aren't very expensive. His organization, Commission on Animal Care and Control, charges \$15 for microchips. That includes the cost and placement of the chip. There is an additional charge of \$18 for a lifetime registration of the chip with the owner through the chip manufacturer. The chip manufacturer Rosenthal's organization works with is Avid. If the animal changes ownership, the registration must be redone.

If you've found a small animal pet, check it for any identifiable information with which to contact the owner. Check for local shelters in your area where you can turn the pet over to professionals who can house the small animal and determine if it has any immediate health needs. Yellowpages.com is a great resource for finding local agencies. You might also post a lost pet report on petfinder.com. If you're unable to capture the small animal, call a shelter and see if a staff member is available to capture the animal.