

What to do if your cat gets outside

Although this is nearly impossible to accomplish, **try not to panic or feel guilty!** It's not all that uncommon for cats to get outside, and if you follow the advice below, chances are excellent you will be able to get the cat back to safety soon.

A common misconception is that the cat chose to bolt because he or she was unhappy. Not true! If the cat has an opportunity to go through an open door or window he or she will. It's not a reflection on you or the care you are providing.

As described in detail below, there are two basic things to do:

1. Let everyone in your neighborhood know the cat is missing, as your neighbor may spot the cat before you.
2. Concentrate your search on first on your property and the adjoining properties. It's possible, but less likely the cat has traveled.

Three strategies for getting the cat back safely

1. If the cat got out a ground floor door or window, try to lure the cat back inside the way he or she got out
2. Try to locate the cat by luring the cat out of its hiding place with stinky food
3. Once you have located the cat, use a humane trap to get the cat back to safety

And two things not to do:

1. Don't shake bushes or make noise trying to find him or her
2. If you see the cat, don't go to him or her. If the cat doesn't come to you, as he or she probably won't, you will probably need to trap the cat to get him or her back inside.

Things we have learned from many foster cats getting outside:

- Chances are, the cat is on your property or a contiguous one, but will be very difficult to locate, as cats have an incredible ability to hide in plain sight.
- Finding a fearful cat is counter-intuitive. The more you look, and the more noise you make doing so, the less likely you are to find the cat. Calling for the cat, shaking bushes, etc. is more likely to cause the cat to flee than it is to result in getting the cat to safety.
- Even if you have a great relationship with the cat inside, when outside and terrified, the cat is unlikely to recognize you or your voice and will most likely view you as threat. For this reason, approaching the cat outside will more likely result in the cat fleeing than you successfully getting the cat.
- Once the cat is outside, he or she will likely panic and find the closest place to hide and hunker down.
- Most fearful cats will follow their natural instincts to hide during daylight and only come out when it is very dark and quiet. Primetime for finding a lost fearful cat is 11 pm to 5 am.
- The cat will most likely stay in hiding until he or she is very hungry, so just because you don't see the cat on the first or second night, doesn't mean s/he is not there, but is perhaps not hungry enough yet to take the risk of coming out.
- **It's important to use smelly junk food to lure a cat out.**

- Cats have a sense of smell that is 50X greater than ours. Cheap junk food has a much stronger smell than higher quality food, so is more likely to be irresistible to a cat who is scared but hungry. (Even if the cat loves the high-quality stuff indoors, it isn't helpful when the cat is outside.)
- **Party Mix** is ideal for the trail of treats described below.
- For wet food, use Friskies. Add boiling hot water to the food to make it smell more.
- If you know the cat is tempted to come out of hiding, or to go into a trap, and Friskies isn't doing the trick, other things to try are Trader Joes tuna-flavored cat food, sardines or Kentucky Fried Chicken (off the bone, torn up on small pieces).

For the tips below, keep in mind that a fearful cat will avoid bright light.

Let your neighbors know that the cat is missing

- Post on your neighborhood list serve
- Put flyers on the porches of all neighbors on your block and on each neighboring block
- Provide this type of detailed information

Please help us find Juniper

[insert a photo or two that will help people know what the cat looks like]

Juniper is a very small orange tabby. (add any identifying features)

She was last seen on March 2, on the 2300 block of Bayo St.

She is a very shy cat and is most likely hiding.

If you think you see her, please do not approach her!

Instead, please call Martha at (510) 555-1212.

Strategy One: Let the cat come back on his or her own

If the cat got out a door on the ground floor, leaving that door open and allowing the cat to come back on his or her own, is the first place to start.

If the cat got out a first-floor window, and can easily jump back in, this strategy may also work.

If the cat got out a door and went down multiple steps (e.g. from a multiple-story apartment building) or jumped out a window that is higher than the first floor, skip this step and go to strategy two.

If there are other animals in the house, secure them in a room with a closed door.

With the door the cat exited open, put a tiny bit of food at the entrance, and a trail of treats deep into the house. At the end of the trail, have a large portion of high-value food (see above for food suggestions).

Leave the lights off, including outside, if possible.

Sit in the dark, in a location where you can easily close the door, but not where the cat can see you.

Sit quietly and wait for the cat to come inside.

If the cat comes to the threshold but doesn't enter, be still and wait until he or she gets up the nerve to go all the way in.

Do not move until you are confident the cat is deep enough in the house that you can close the door without scaring him or her back outside.

Strategy Two: Locate the cat by luring them out to eat

In an ideal world, one person is trying strategy one, above, while another is trying strategy two.

The goal of strategy two is simply to locate the cat, and hopefully identify his or her hiding place, so you can later set a humane trap.

Using a combo of treats in some dishes and wet food in others, put food out in as many places as you can monitor from a single location

The food should be close to places where you think the cat might be hiding (under a building, in bushes, etc.)

The cat will feel safest to go to food that is in the dark, and near bushes or a fence, or wall of a building, but not out in the open or under bright light. Cats will come out of their hiding places and go under parked cars, where they feel safest.

If the cat comes out to eat, stay still and pretend like you do not see him or her (this is difficult, because you will want to try to get the cat yourself, but is essential). Once you have spotted the cat, the last thing you want is to scare him or her into bolting off the property and having to start the process from scratch!

Resist the urge to call out and/or approach the cat!!!

Since this is the step before setting a trap, you want to put out enough to lure the cat out, but not enough food to get full.

Even if you can't get the cat the same night he or she comes out to eat, the cat is extremely likely to stay put knowing that food is available, and will hover around the same location the next night.

If another animal comes to eat the food, as is very likely to happen, let them. You want other animals to get full and move on, and not interfere with the likelihood of your cat coming out.

Never leave food out unattended. If you find the food has been eaten, but don't know who ate it, it is of no value.

Once you have spotted the cat, it's time to move on to strategy three.

Strategy three: Using a humane trap to get the cat to safety

It may seem harsh to trap a cat, but is the fastest and safest way to get a fearful cat back inside.

You can borrow a trap from Cat Town or purchase one from any major hardware store (get one for a raccoon).

Setting the trap:

Take a full section of newspaper and fold it in thirds length-wise and place that on the bottom of the trap with the loose paper touching the bottom of trap.

A cat likely won't walk on the wire trap, so the paper makes it more inviting.

The reason to use a full section of newspaper is to minimize the movement of the paper in the event it is at all windy (you can also use small rocks to anchor the paper; if it is flapping in the wind, a cat will not enter)

The goal is to place the paper from the entrance of the trap to just over the plate upon which the cat needs to step to set the trap.

Put about ½ can wet food, mixed with hot water, in a bowl, and place that at the far end of the trap.

Place a trail of food, either pieces of Party Mix or droplets of wet food, from the entrance of the trap to the plate. The amount should be minimal – to entice the cat in, but not enough to get full.

Cover the trap with a towel or sheet, so the top and sides are covered but both ends are not. This will give the appearance to the cat of safety.

If you know the cat's hiding place, place the opening of the trap close to the hiding place, so the cat doesn't need to travel any distance to get in.

When the trap is set, test it to make sure it won't close if barely touched from outside – if it's not firmly set, and a light touch will cause it to close, the cat will be afraid to go near it a second time. It's still possible to trap the cat, but it will slow down the process considerably.

If you don't know the cat's hiding place, place it as close to where you saw the cat eating last, using the same strategy as for food placement (in the dark, and close to bushes, walls or fences, and not out in the open or where a light is on)

The trap must be on flat ground.

If the cat starts to walk in and the trap and it moves because it it's placement is unsteady, the cat won't go in.

If it is placed on grass or plants that will prop up the plate, it's possible for the cat to walk across the plate without setting the trap.

If your cat goes into the trap, keep the trap covered with the towel and quickly get the cat inside. Once inside, and the doors are closed, open the trap in an area where the cat has a place to hide. The cat will likely be a little traumatized, but will realize he or she is back in a safe place. Still, give the cats some time and space to settle back in.

If another animal goes into the trap, release them quickly.

Another cat will likely come right out.

If it's a raccoon, possum or skunk (eeks!) use extreme caution. Open the trap from behind, without letting the animal see you, and stay as far back while the animal exits. You don't need to be afraid of being attacked, so this is more about letting the animal get out with minimal fear.

If another cat was in the trap, you can put fresh food (in a fresh dish) in and reset it. If it is any other animal, you must wash the trap, because the scent on the trap will cause a cat to avoid it.

While the trap is set, if it is off your property, place a note on the trap noting that you are trying to locate a lost cat, letting people know it is a humane trap and that it is being monitored. Also include your phone number.

Stay in a location where you can monitor the activity around the trap, but where the cat can't see you. If you are monitoring from inside, it's ideal if you can situate the trap in a way that you can tell if the entrance door is open or shut, so you know when to go check on it.

Never leave the trap unattended!

The best strategy is to stay up as late as possible. If you are going to sleep, close the trap and try again another time.

While you might be super lucky and have a cat go into the trap during daylight or early evening, it is almost always necessary to be up in the middle of the night.

It may take days or weeks to find the cat and get him or her back to safety.

Please don't give up hope!