

Finding a Lost Dog
By
Susan Bulanda

Losing a dog can be devastating. A person's first reaction is usually fear, confusion and panic. However, with a good plan in place, looking for a lost dog can be less stressful and successful. There are a few simple points to consider when looking for a lost dog.

1) If you organize a group of people to look for the dog, use all safety precautions so that the searchers do not become lost. Stay in touch using cell phones or hand held radios. The radios can be purchased for a nominal fee at any store that sells outdoor equipment. Radios will work in areas that cell phones may not. However, they have a limited range so be sure that a chain of people can relay messages over distance. Also establish radio protocol so that one person does not tie up the frequency preventing communication with others. Communication is essential to let the other searchers know what is going on, if the search is being suspended, or the dog has been found. Because people feel safer and calmer if they know what is going on this will allow the searchers to do a better job.

Be sure that searchers wear the appropriate clothing, (long pants and long sleeves), hats, and substantial foot wear. They should have a snack, water and a flashlight. Flashlights are necessary during the day to check dark places. Each searcher should have a small bowl and water for the dog as well as canned cat food with the strongest aroma, (or similar treat) to lure the dog. Small cans of cat food work well because they can be carried easily and kept fresh. Searchers should always work in pairs for their own safety and in the event two people are needed when the dog is found. A meeting area and time should be established in the event that communications break down. No one leaves until all are accounted for.

2) A dog who is frightened will bolt in any direction, but usually to the least noisy, darkest area. So given the choice of an open field or woods, the dog will go for the woods. If the dog is lost in the city or suburbs, the dog will look for a dark, quiet spot to hide after it has run to exhaustion. Therefore estimate how far the dog will run (this varies with the dog's size and condition) and add a mile to that. On a map of the area mark where you last saw the dog as the center of a circle and draw a perimeter around the circle based on the furthest point where the dog could be. The circle will be the area to start looking for the dog. If you saw the dog run, you can focus in that direction. Be sure to check small dark areas, such as under porches, stairs, garages, sheds, etc. If you have a number of people to help look, have some start at the perimeter of the circle and some from the center. Be sure to *look* for the dog, never assume that the dog will come when called.

3) If the dog simply runs away, they usually run **into** the wind. That means that the wind will be blowing toward the dog, into the dog's face. Check with a local airport to see what the wind direction was when the dog ran away. Then start looking into the wind from the

point where the dog was last seen. Dogs who wander away will usually meander along unless they find something to chase or that interests them. This means that the search area will be smaller. If searching in the woods or a park, look for a game trail and look for fresh dog tracks to see if the dog went that way. If you do find tracks, you will not be able to tell for certain if they are from your dog, so do not give up searching the rest of the area. If you are searching in an urban or suburban area, listen carefully if neighborhood dogs are barking. Often they will bark at a stray dog. If you hear a lot of barking in one direction, check that area first.

4) When searching for a dog, travel slowly and make frequent five minute stops. Many people will drive around in a vehicle, calling to the dog. Unless the dog is within a few seconds of your location, he will not be able to find you if you move too quickly. Keep in mind that a dog can hear you calling from quite a distance away. They need time to determine the direction of the sound and then get to it. Wind and other environmental elements can distort the direction of sound (tall buildings, large hills, etc.) making it difficult for the dog to find the source of the sound. By stopping and continuing to call, the dog will have time to find you.

5) When you sight the dog, do not act excited and/or run toward the dog. Sit down or stand still and let the dog approach you, *even if it is your dog*. Sometimes a dog can become so frightened, hurt or weary that they may not think straight. Their survival instincts may take over, making them more cautious than they would be at home. Depending upon the direction of the wind, you could be downwind and the dog may not recognize you right away. Give the dog time to feel safe. Running to the dog may make him run away from you and lose what little trust in human's that he has left. If you feel it will work, you can, at a distance, slowly move so that you are upwind of the dog, and then open the can of cat food. But still let the dog come to you. When the dog comes to you do not try to grab the dog. Let the dog stay there and relax. Slowly pet the dog until you can attach a leash without frightening the dog. If the dog does not want to be caught, you will most likely not be able to grab the dog fast enough to catch him, even if he is next to you. Dogs are about 500 times faster than humans.

6) If the dog does not approach you, do not give up. Stay in that area and/or return to that area. You can leave food etc. but do not try to catch the dog.

7) If you leave food for the dog, do not assume that because the food was eaten that it was the dog. Other critters may eat the food, so continue to search the area. If you can, spread sand around any food that you leave so that you can check for footprints to determine if a dog ate the food. If sand is not available, loose soil will work as well.

8) If you have to search for the dog over a period of time, keep a log of the weather and the location of water sources. The dog will generally head into the wind and seek water.

9) Never forget to advertise. Use every means possible to let the people in the area know that there is a lost dog. Always have an up-to-date photo of your dog. If the dog is a breed that looks like others in the breed, a similar picture will do. Remember, the average pet

lover will not notice the fine differences between your dog and others of the same breed. So do not panic if you do not have a recent photo. Be sure to expand the area that you advertise to at least five miles from the point where you last saw your dog.

10) Lastly, never give up. Dogs have been found months after they disappear.

Susan Bulanda is an animal behavior consultant specializing in dogs and cats, certified by The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. She has piloted a program at Kutztown University for students who wish to become dog trainers and is currently developing a program for students who wish to become dog behaviorists. Susan is an award winning author.

She and her husband served for over twenty years as search and rescue Incident Commanders with Phoenixville Fire Department Land Search K-9 Unit, (PFDK-9SAR Unit).

Susan is available for lectures and seminars on canine behavior, training, search and rescue, and writing. For more information visit her web site at www.sbulanda.com