



Operation Paws for Homes



Lost Dog Handbook

Lost Dog Volunteer Role

Thank you for becoming a lost dog volunteer! Operation Paws for Homes (OPH) rescues over 1,000 dogs a year and places them in great homes—but sometimes dogs escape, either from the foster or from the adopter. This is a scary and stressful situation for both the dog and the foster/adopter. We want to help find lost dogs and get them home as quickly as possible. Volunteers are essential to making this happen!

After this training, you will know about the mindset of a lost dog, the process of locating and trapping a lost dog, and how OPH manages lost dog searches. You will be ready to be a part of this effort!

The Big Picture

We do our best to prevent lost dogs (and we can always do more)—but dogs will occasionally get loose, even for the most experienced fosters and adopters.

There are typically multiple OPH dogs that get loose every year—often, around 20–30 annually. Over the 11 years of OPH's existence, we have dealt with hundreds of lost dogs. In almost every case, the dog is eventually found. On very rare occasions, lost dogs are hit by cars and killed, and a very small number of dogs are never found. But almost all our lost dogs

are eventually caught. It can take a lot of time and hard work, but we almost always catch the dog! So while it can be discouraging in the middle of a lost dog search, remember, there is almost always a happy ending.

Many dogs are caught in the first few hours or days. If that does not happen, and the dog is very scared, it often takes 2–3 weeks before a dog is hungry enough to come out of hiding and be seen and trapped. In some cases, it can take much longer than that to trap a dog!

Lost dogs very often stay close to where they got loose—even if it is an unfamiliar location. They will often run away but eventually loop back and end up close to where they got loose. This does not always happen, but is very common.

About Lost Dogs

Sometimes dogs get loose and come right back to their person, or run around the block and go back home, or run up to a stranger to say hello. But, for many dogs—especially shy ones—if they get loose, they panic and run. They often go into what's called “survival mode.” In this mode, they are frightened and confused, and focused just on staying alive. They will usually run away from people—**even people they know**. Once dogs are in survival mode, they will very rarely go up

lostdog@ophrescue.org

to a person—they will need to be trapped. Approaching a lost dog in this state will only drive the dog away.

It can be very hard for people to understand this. For many people, the default behavior is to call out and/or chase a loose dog. But this almost never leads to a dog being caught—it is more likely to scare the dog away.

Lost dogs in survival mode need to find a place where they feel safe—often a park or wooded area or other quiet place—and where they can find food and water. Once a dog has settled into their safe place, we can work on trapping them.

It is important for volunteers, adopters, fosters, and others to NOT take it personally when the dog does not come to you! They are in survival mode and must be left alone until we can capture them. Once they are caught and back home, they typically come out of survival mode and settle back into their normal selves.

The most important things to remember:

- **DO NOT call the dog!**
- **DO NOT chase the dog!**
- **DO NOT go through woods looking for the dog!**

A dog needs to feel safe before he/she stops moving. If people are following/chasing the dog, the dog will continue to travel and not settle, making trapping difficult! This is the key message of this training, and a message that you as a lost dog volunteer should share with everyone involved in helping to find the dog.

Calming Body Language

If you do see the dog while hanging flyers or setting feeding stations:

- Sit and turn sideways from the dog.
- Do not make eye contact with the dog.
- Make slow movements.
- Quietly talk to yourself, sing softly, or hum.
- You can pretend you're eating and say "yum, yum, yum." If the dog is not frightened by that action, gently toss food toward the dog but not too close to scare them.
- Do not follow the dog if it walks away from you, note the direction the dog travels.



These behaviors allow the dog to evaluate the threat level without immediately running away. A person standing and staring directly at them would most likely register a "flight" response from the dog causing the dog to run away.

Lost Dog Basics

The basic process for getting a lost dog back home is the following. Not every step will be needed for every lost dog, but in general:

- Put up **flyers** in a one-mile radius around where the dog was lost.
- Post about the missing dog on **local social media** (lost dog sites, Facebook, NextDoor, Ring) and encourage people to share the post.
- Call **local shelters and Animal Control** and notify them about the lost dog. See if the dog has been turned in. Also notify the **microchip company** to make sure your contact information is current.
- Set up one or more **feeding stations** close to where dog was lost. Move the feeding station closer to sightings as appropriate.
- Set aside a **scent item**, like a blanket the dog has slept on, in case a tracker is needed later.
- Keep track of sightings and determine where the dog has settled (this could take time). Information to ask when you receive a sighting: did they get a photo of the dog, when was the dog seen, exact location, which direction was the dog headed, what speed of travel, did the dog look healthy, wearing a collar, harness, leash? Make a map of those sightings.
- Set up **trail cameras** (or place in view of home security cameras) to observe the dog's routine once there is a general sense of where the dog is. Use **scent trails** to the feeding stations to lure the dog to the food.
- Once the dog has visited a feeding station, set up **OPH box trap** baited with high-value food.
- When trap is open and set, do a **stakeout** near the trap. (Trap is locked open if there are no volunteers on a stakeout).
- When dog is trapped, move entire trap with dog inside to an **enclosed space** before letting the dog out.

More detail on each of these steps is below. Each lost dog search is unique, and dogs may be caught in other ways than via a trap. But the flyer and posting is always a first step, as sightings by passersby can help us figure out where the dog is. And remember:

DO NOT call or chase the dog or go looking for the dog in wooded areas!

OPH Lost Dog Program

- The OPH Lost Dog team is available to help with lost OPH dogs, both foster dogs and dogs who have already been adopted.
- OPH has a Lost Dog Coordinator, Mike Garcia, who oversees the lost dog program. There are also several experienced volunteers who, along with Mike, can usually be on-site and/or provide phone and email/text advice about lost dogs.
- OPH owns a humane trap and two cellular trail cameras.
- OPH may be able to reimburse the cost of flyers being printed at places like Staples, Office Depot, etc., if the dog is an OPH foster dog.
- OPH lost dog volunteers work closely with a network of other regional lost-dog experts who may share traps, cameras, and generally help each other out.
- OPH has a lost dog email account (lostdog@ophrescue.org). When that account is emailed, it generates an auto-reply with some basic information about lost dogs and what to do. That account is also checked frequently by the members of the Lost Dog Team, who will reach out to the person with the lost dog ASAP to talk about next steps.
- OPH has a Finding OPH Lost Dogs Facebook group that is used to share information on lost dogs and help coordinate volunteer support when a dog is lost.

When an OPH Dog is Lost

- When an OPH dog is lost, we usually find out via an email to the lost dog email account, a phone call or text to the Lost Dog Coordinator, or a post by the foster or other volunteer on the OPH Family or Finding Lost Dogs Facebook pages.
- Once this happens, someone at OPH will create a “Missing Dog” flyer using a standard template and a photo of the dog from OPH’s online Dog Management System (DMS).
- The Lost Dog Coordinator or another experienced volunteer will call the foster or adopter who lost the dog to get more details on the location and circumstances. The foster/adopter will be instructed to put out scent items, create scent/food trail near the house (if appropriate), put up flyers in the area, and post to local social media like NextDoor.
- Lost dog volunteers will post the missing dog flyer on regional lost dog sites and ask people to share the post more widely.
- The OPH social media team will put up a post on the main OPH Facebook feed about the lost dog.

- Typically, the lost dog team will create a group text with the foster/adopter and nearby volunteers and will help coordinate the process and get additional volunteers involved to help out. When enough is known about the dog’s location, lost dog team members will bring trail cameras and, when appropriate, the OPH trap to the location.

Communicating with Adopters, Fosters, and Helpers

As a lost dog volunteer, you may be in a position to talk to the foster/adopter, other volunteers, and people on the street who ask about what is going on and how they can help. Here are some tips and messages if you are talking to people:

- Stay calm and provide moral support. The person whose dog is lost may be very upset.
- Emphasize that we almost always catch the dog safely.
- The process can take time, patience, and hard work—but it works!
- Set expectations appropriately—it could take weeks to catch the dog.
- And remember, the most important message for everyone is: **DO NOT call or chase the dog and do not actively search for the dog!** This **cannot** be overemphasized!
- Also, the best way people can help out is to put up flyers and share on social media. People often want to drive or walk around to “look for the dog.” But **flyering and posting/sharing** is much more useful as it gets many, many more eyes looking for the dog!

NOTE: Very often, when there are flyers or posts about missing dogs, **scammers** will call the number on the flyer/post and say they have the dog or know where the dog is, and require money or some other action in order to release the dog. This is a scam! If you encounter this, or are talking to the foster/adopter, **please do not respond to messages or calls like this.**

Flyers

- Colorful to catch pedestrian and driver’s attention!
- Minimal words: “Lost Dog. Do Not Chase! Call with Info.”
- Large photo and phone number





- It is usually not recommended to put “Reward” on flyer because it might make people chase the dog or actively search for the animal.
- Place flyer in a plastic sleeve with the opening at the bottom. Tape the bottom closed.
- Use packing tape.
- It is illegal to post on mail boxes, bus stop shelters, and utility poles.
- Put flyers on street signs, give to vet offices/animal shelters, ask for permission to post them at stores, coffee shops, etc.
- Print at home or try UPS Store, Staples, Office Depot, or Fed Ex.
- Don’t include pet’s name on flyer. This will help discourage people from trying to call the dog.
- Flyers **produce sightings** which helps pinpoint a location. If there are no sightings after a few days, post additional flyers in an expanded radius.
- The **contact person** for the flyer should answer all calls, keep the phone ringer on even at night, and keep the phone battery charged!

Posters

- Buy neon poster board, cut in half and you get two 14"x22" posters.
- Use large photos and bold letters/numbers.
- Square street sign posts work best. Add cardboard strips for extra strength. Cut small slits at top and bottom. Put top zip tie through the post holes so poster won’t slide down.
- Covering poster with packing tape protects it from the weather.



Feeding Stations

- Rotisserie chicken, Royal Farms chicken, sausage, cheeseburger, kielbasa, hotdogs . . . good smelly food to use at feeding stations. Heating the food prior to placing at the station gives added scent.
- Chum with Liquid Smoke, bacon soaked paper towels, chicken skin, or beef/chicken broth. Also use some of the food to chum (rub on tree trunks, low branches, grass, bushes, etc.). It provides a scent trail to the feeding station and also keeps the scent in the area in case wildlife eats the food.
- Dry dog food does not have much scent so it is not a good option.
- Don’t need a bowl . . . food can be scattered on the ground in view of the camera.
- Refresh food in the morning and evening until you know when the dog visits the food.
- Put a bowl of water near the food.
- The location of the feeding station should only be known by a few people.
- A trail camera at the feeding station is key to knowing if the lost pet or wildlife ate the food.

Trail Camera Placement

- A cellular trail camera will send immediate photos when there’s activity at the camera.
- Make sure the camera battery strength is sufficient and the cellular signal at the location is strong.
- Place the camera 6–10 feet from the food.
- The camera should be locked on an object (usually a tree) at an appropriate height for the size of the lost pet.
- Ideally, the camera should be placed so people don’t see it. You don’t want to attract attention to the feeding station. Avoid pointing the camera toward a road or busy sidewalk/trail . . . you will get a lot of random photos.
- Use the camera strap to secure the camera as well as a cable lock so theft is not an issue. (Master Python cable locks are perfect.)
- Add your name/phone number on the camera or a flyer (fold it up and stick it between the strap and the tree) for the lost pet so anyone who finds the camera will know how to contact you if needed.





- Aim the camera so it has a wide view of the feeding station so it provides for more possible photos of the lost pet.
- Once the camera is set, check to see that it is sending photos and that the placement is good.

“Go Bag” when Trapping

- Trap
- Towel or blanket for bottom of the trap
- Bungee cords (2)
- Slip leash with “stop”
- Knife and/or scissors
- Weed clippers
- Flashlight
- Binoculars
- Trail cameras
- Locks for cameras
- Extra batteries and SD cards
- Small pieces of scrap wood can come in handy when positioning the cameras
- Camera stand if there are no places to attach camera
- Reflective safety vest
- Gloves
- Bowl and water
- Paper plate for food (to be used in the back of the trap so the food doesn’t fall through the trap bottom. It should not have raised edges that might prevent the pressure plate from closing the door).
- Hand wipes/paper towels
- Liquid smoke (spray bottle comes in handy when using the liquid smoke) and good stinky food for chumming.
- High-value hot foods for trailing a dog inside the trap and then placed at the back of the trap (have plenty of food in case you have to refill due to wildlife eating food in the trap).
- Once trapped, the dog should not be removed from the trap until in an enclosed area (garage or house) so a vehicle is needed that can transport the trap.

What About Dog Trackers?

There are some organizations or individuals in the region who offer the service of dog tracking—e.g., having a trained dog follow the scent of a lost dog to try to determine the lost dog’s general location. Dog trackers can be costly (usually in the range of \$200–\$600).

OPH does not usually use these services. We can often achieve the same results with flyering and posting on social media to determine the general location of the lost dog. We do not have a budget for dog tracker services. In some cases, fosters or adopters choose to pay for dog tracking services themselves. There are instances where it can be helpful to use a dog tracker, especially if we have no idea if a dog is still in the area or has traveled farther away. In those cases, an item with the dog’s scent (like a dog bed or a collar) is needed for the tracking dog.

Note that a dog tracker will almost never *catch* a dog—they may help to determine a dog’s general location, but after that, we will most likely still need to set up feeding stations and cameras and a trap to catch the dog.

After a Dog is Caught

- If the dog has been caught in the box trap, **do not** open the trap until you are in an enclosed area (garage, house, vet office)! As soon as you approach the trap, place bungee cords across the front and back doors of the trap to prevent them from accidentally opening while transporting the dog. Put the trap in a vehicle and move to the foster or adopter’s home. **Do not open the trap until it’s in a secure location!** If the dog escapes being removed from the trap, it will be much harder to trap the dog again.
- Check the dog for injuries, fleas, and ticks. Remove ticks if you find them.



- If the dog has been loose for more than a short time, the dog should be seen by a veterinarian. If the dog is a current OPH foster dog, the OPH medical coordinator will set this up. You can reach the medical coordinator at meds@ophrescue.org.
- If the dog has lost a lot of weight, begin by feeding small portions to not overwhelm the dog's digestive system.
- Provide fresh water but don't allow the dog to drink too much water all at once because that could cause an imbalance in their system.
- Once a dog has been found, he/she will need several days or weeks to decompress and for stress levels to go down. Give the dog time and space to get back to normal!
- Being lost can be traumatic for dogs—but don't worry, previously lost OPH dogs have all done fine with some time and TLC!

Preventing Lost Dogs

Ultimately, we would prefer to prevent dogs from being lost, rather than going through the grueling process of finding and trapping them. OPH communicates as much as possible with fosters and adopters about the best ways to prevent dogs from being lost, such as:

- Use a martingale (self-tightening) collar *and* a harness on the dog.
- Use “double leashing” with a leash attached to the collar and another leash attached to the harness.
- Be aware of your body position when walking a dog so the dog can't squirm out of their collar/harness and escape.
- Make sure you have a good grip on the leash *before* opening a car or house door.
- For dogs that are escape artists, have the dog on the other side of a baby gate before opening a door to the



outside. Make sure you do this when you have people coming to your house to do repairs, cleaning, etc, as they may not be careful when opening the door.

- Register your dog's microchip (all OPH dogs are microchipped), and have tags on the dog's collar with your address and phone number.
- If your dog goes off-leash in your yard, make sure that the fence is high enough (at least six feet for dogs that jump). Make sure it is solid and secure along the entire perimeter, and cannot be easily dug under. (If your dog is a digger, do not leave them in the yard unattended).
- Make sure gates and doors are always securely latched/locked. Be especially careful with lever-type door handles that a dog can open by pushing down on the handle.
- If your dog is considered a flight risk, consider getting a GPS tracking collar like the Fi or Whistle collar.

As a lost dog volunteer, you can help to reinforce this message whenever possible!

Ways You Can Help

- Sign up as an OPH volunteer, and take the Lost Dog Training to get added to our volunteer list.
- Join the Finding OPH Lost Dogs Facebook group.
- When a dog is lost, we'll reach out to volunteers asking for help with:
 - Sharing and posting on social media
 - Putting up flyers and posters
 - Setting up and refilling feeding stations
 - Transporting the trap and trail cameras if needed
 - Taking a shift on a “stakeout” when a trap is live
- In general, help to spread the word about how to prevent and find lost dogs!



Thank You for volunteering with OPH! We look forward to working with you on getting lost dogs back home!