



*The Pet Rescue Foundation*

## **What to Do If You Find a Stray**

By Leslie Wilson

Many people assume that a wandering dog is just taking himself for a walk or the skinny cat is fine on her own, not realizing that the animal may have strayed from home or been abandoned. But taking the time to reunite a lost animal with its person or finding a new home for an abandoned pet can be one of the most rewarding and significant things we can do to help animals.

### **Be Prepared**

It is a good idea to keep a spare leash, a can of dog or cat food, a towel or a pair of gloves, and a cardboard carrier (folded flat to save space) in your car so you're ready to help should the need arise.

### **Rescuing the Animal**

If you're lucky, the animal will have an identification tag, making a reunion with its owner quick and easy. If the animal has no tag, start by looking around, knocking on doors and asking in nearby businesses to determine whether the animals' person is in the vicinity. If the area is safe and the animal isn't going anywhere, you may not need to catch it at this point. But if you don't quickly locate the owner, the animal is leaving, or the area isn't safe, it's time to rescue the animal.

Be cautious with any animal, and try to assess how willing they are to let you approach. Be calm, patient, and reassuring, and use extra caution with frightened or injured animals. Whenever possible, it is safest to convince an animal to come to you rather than chasing or grabbing it.

Some lost animals, particularly dogs, are desperate for help and will gladly come to you. Those who have been on their own a while tend to be more cautious and suspicious of humans—try canned cat food as a lure. Be extremely careful not to scare the animal into traffic. It may take several hours of feeding and talking quietly to a dog before it is ready to come to you.

When trying to win the trust of a cat, crouch down, speak softly and gently, and hold out a hand for it to sniff before you try petting it. If possible, feed a stray cat for a day or two to win its confidence and assess its behavior. When you are ready to catch it, be deft and deliberate in your actions--using a towel or gloves can make you both more comfortable. If the cat hisses when you approach, runs and hides, and will not come out, it may be

Page 1 of 4

MADDIE'S FUND: 223 Santa Clara Ave #B, Alameda, CA 94501 Phone: 510.337.8989  
Fax: 510 337.8988 Email: [info@maddiesfund.org](mailto:info@maddiesfund.org) Web site: [www.maddiesfund.org](http://www.maddiesfund.org)

feral, in which case attempts to "rescue" it will be fruitless. See [Helping Feral Cats](#) for tips on how to help feral cats.

Next, decide where you will take the animal. A home—whether yours, a friend's, or a family member's—is the best option.

### **Lost and Found**

Once you have the animal in your possession, make every effort to locate his or her person:

- Post "found" flyers for several blocks surrounding the location where you found the animal. Drive around looking for "lost" signs as well. Since people describe the same animal in different ways, respond to any flyers that generally describe the animal you have found.
- Call or visit animal shelters in the vicinity to place a "found" notice and check their lost and found books to see if you can find a "lost" notice for the animal. Find shelters by looking in the front of your phone book under "Animal Control" and in the yellow pages under "Humane Society." While you are at the shelter, find out what your city's stray holding period is--you will need to hold the animal at least that long to give the owner a chance to reclaim it.
- Look at "lost" ads in current and back newspapers. Immediately place a "found" ad—some newspapers will place these ads for free. A typical ad states the type of animal, where found, coloring and other characteristics.
- Ask your veterinarian or local animal shelter if they can scan the animal for a microchip.

### **Taking the Animal to a Shelter**

If you cannot find the animal's person, you may be able to take the animal to a no-kill shelter to be adopted. But because no-kill shelters keep animals for as long as it takes to find a new home, they are often full, so be prepared to wait sometimes weeks for an appointment. [Doing Things for Animals, www.dtfa.org](http://www.dtfa.org), publishes a directory of no-kill shelters and rescue groups in each state. You can also do an internet search for "no-kill shelters" or "pet rescue organizations" to find groups in your area. California residents can visit [www.Rescuers.com](http://www.Rescuers.com) for a list no-kill and traditional shelters in that state.

If you take a stray animal to a traditional or municipal shelter, the animal may be destroyed if nobody claims or adopts it. If you must take the animal to such a shelter, be sure to claim "First or Last Rights," also known as "Call Before Euthanasia" or "Call

Interested Party." This gives you the right to reclaim the animal if its owner does not reclaim it and no one adopts it. Be aware that you may have to go through the adoption process and pay any adoption fees to get the animal back. In any case, be an active participant in the animal's welfare while it is at the shelter: Ask for the animal's intake number when you drop it off--this will make getting updates easier. Find out how long the stray holding period is and if the animal will be put up for adoption. Daily calls, even visits, to check on its health and well-being will help ensure that you get the animal back if the owner does not appear.

Since many people do not know to look for their lost pet at the shelter, continue with the lost and found efforts described above.

### **Finding a Good Home**

Finding the animal a home yourself rather than taking it to a shelter is almost always preferable. This is because most shelters are already working at capacity, and finding a home for the animal yourself will ensure that it gets more individualized attention. Also, a home environment is less stressful than even the best shelter, and a happier animal means a better adoption.

Start out by keeping the animal in a small part of the house, such as a bathroom, laundry room, or garage. Once you've observed the animal for a few days, you can make a better judgment about how much free rein to allow it in your home. If you cannot keep the animal in your home, ask friends and family to help you out, or look for a boarding facility in which to house the animal. Don't house the animal too far away from your home or it will be hard to show the animal to potential adopters later.

Have the animal spayed or neutered--you'll have better luck adopting it out. If the animal appears sick or underweight, seek the advice of a veterinarian. Many veterinarians give discounts for rescued animals--don't be shy about asking, but remember, veterinarians have to make a living too.

Once you've provided the animal with a clean bill of health, start looking for a home (unless you decide to keep it!) As almost anyone who has rescued strays can attest, friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors are valuable adoption resources. Not only are they potential adopters, but they can help spread the word to others as well.

If this avenue doesn't work out, start advertising in newspapers, with flyers, and on internet rescue sites. When writing an ad, be sure to make it catchy--mention a particularly interesting quality the animal has, such as big paws, a loud purr, or a squeaky meow. If the rescue was particularly exciting, send out a press release. One couple rescued a kitten from inside the wall of an abandoned building and sent out a press release. The story ran on the evening news, and they received dozens of calls from people wanting to adopt the lucky kitten.

Post flyers at veterinary offices, pet supply stores, grocery stores, libraries, cafes, or anywhere around town. Be sure to talk to people about the animal whenever you can--you never know who might be interested in adopting.

Local rescue groups, while they are usually at capacity, may be willing to let you share their adoption space at local pet supply stores. There are also websites where you can post adoption ads--do an internet search for "pet rescue," or "pet adoption board" to find websites that serve your community, or visit [www.petfinder.org](http://www.petfinder.org).

### **The Adoption Process**

Soon people interested in adopting will start calling you. You will want to screen them to ensure the match is a good one. Start by finding out what they are looking for in a companion animal and if your rescue fits. Let the animal's personality be a guide for what questions you ask. Is the animal good with cats, dogs, and kids? Does she have any characteristics that warrant a more experienced pet owner? Other questions you might consider are: Will the animal be allowed inside the house? What does the potential adopter think about declawing? Have they had pets before? Ask local shelters and rescue groups for copies of their screening forms and adoption agreements for more ideas.

Once you've done some initial screening and have a good candidate, bring the animal and person together to meet. Ask any additional questions, and decide ahead of time whether you will charge an adoption fee or ask the adopter to sign an adoption agreement. Let adopters know that if the adoption is not working out that they can bring the animal back to you.

After a week or so, give the adopters a call to find out if they have any questions or concerns and find out how the animal is adjusting to its new home.

Once it is all over and done with, pat yourself on the back. Thanks to you, a former stray will have a second chance at life!

**About the author:** Leslie Wilson is a special projects consultant for several humane organizations in northern and southern California.