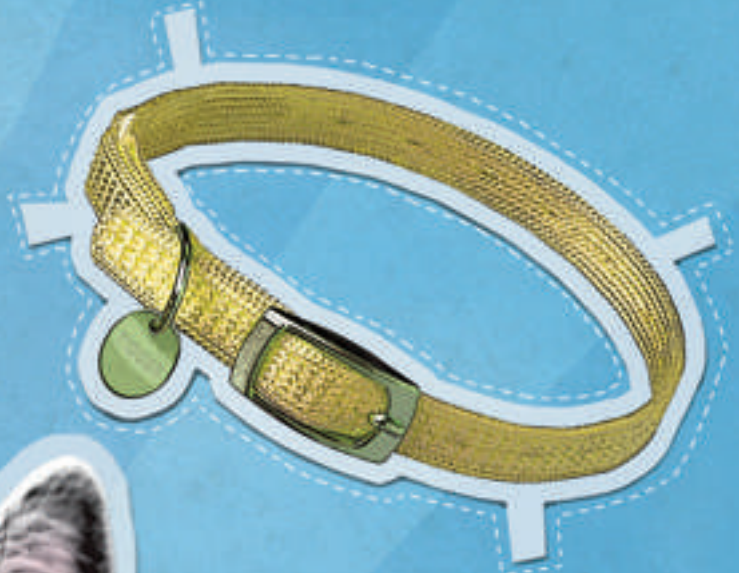


LET'S SEE SOME I.D.

Tag—you're it! Lost cats fill shelters nationwide, but here's how you can help

BY ARNA COHEN



**PLACE
COLLAR &
TAG HERE**

It may seem like a simple proposition: A collar and tag—like the one placed on this cat at the Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society in Massachusetts—can reunite a lost kitty with his owner. But for millions of cats entering shelters each year, a lack of visible identification means they can't go home again.



Echoing in the classifieds and online postings of desperate people in search of their loved ones is a sad refrain of remorse:

Lost: Small shorthair tortoiseshell cat ... no collar.

Found: Siamese, very friendly, wants to be indoors badly ... no collar.

Lost: Ragdoll, looks like long-haired Siamese, blue eyes ... no collar.

Found: Female tortoiseshell, hungry, crying, very sweet ... no collar.

The endless recitation of regrettable omissions and last-ditch hopes reveals the one thing that most often foils the reunion of a stray cat and his family—the absence of a simple I.D. tag that could serve as his one-way ticket home.

The oversight may seem minor in the case of a single cat and a single owner. But the cumulative results are overwhelming. “[In 2008], we took in 2,604 strays. Of those, only 44 were reclaimed,” says Jaime Johnson, front office supervisor at the Sacramento SPCA in California. “...None had collars.”

Compare that with the shelter's much higher reunion rate for stray dogs—almost 580 out of about 1,700—and the situation for cats looks particularly bleak. And that's just one shelter in one state. At a time when the homeless cat population is at crisis levels nationwide, only 2 to 5 percent of the millions entering shelters each year are reunited with their families. For dogs, the figure can be 8 times as high.

The statistics mirror the disparities between the presence of visible identification on dogs versus cats: One recent study found that only 14 percent of lost cats were wearing any I.D., compared with 43 percent of dogs.

“If every pet cat in the country had a collar and tag, the number of cats euthanized in shelters in the United States would drop

dramatically,” says John Snyder, vice president for The HSUS's Companion Animals section. As former director of a Florida animal services agency, Snyder has firsthand knowledge of the problem. At his facility, it was so rare to take in a stray cat with I.D. that when the occasional one showed up, “it was like Christmas,” he says. “We celebrated. We called up the owner and thanked them for putting a tag on.”

The reasons for the anonymous-cat phenomenon vary. Some people assume their animals will be safe without tags if they're kept indoors. Others are reluctant to fit collars on independent-minded felines whose first instinct is to try writhing out of them.

But the practice of letting cats wander around naked-necked is more deeply rooted in cultural attitudes that have historically left these animals out in the cold. Though some communities have comprehensive cat I.D. programs and encourage safe confinement, cats still straddle a nebulous area in the public mind-set. Treated like communal property, they are too easy to lose and too hard to find, darting among the shadows of a society that argues heatedly over their place among humans.

While millions of dollars are spent each year trying to help those left behind, too often the efforts represent band-aid solutions to a problem that cat owners could have helped prevent in the first place. Even worse, some shelters that receive public funding for the rescue and care of dogs receive none for cats. In areas of Massachusetts, for instance, “hold periods for stray cats are nonexistent,” meaning that the animals can be euthanized the day they come in, says Leslie Harris, executive director of the Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society. “In most towns, officers are forbidden to help cats

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by town fathers who don't want to spend money on cats."

From a pragmatic standpoint, it's easy to see why stray dogs have received more attention; large animals traveling in packs are more threatening than solitary creatures quietly roaming on the fringes. But the underlying message—that cats can fend for themselves—is largely responsible for the dichotomy in their status, as the most popular pet and also the most discarded.

IT CAN HAPPEN TO ANY CAT

Too often, cat cohabitants recognize the need for collars and tags only after it's too late, initially assuming their indoor-only pets will follow the implicit rules of the human household. "When I do a report with someone about a lost pet, I'd say more than 90 percent of cat owners say they don't make them wear collars, either because they're never outside or they're afraid it will get caught on something," says Melissa Gray, lost and found coordinator at the SPCA Tampa Bay in Largo, Fla.

Many people cling to an "it won't happen to me" mentality, says Harris. But wanderlust is a powerful draw, and few people live in a Kitty Fort Knox. "Accidents happen," she says, detailing the many ways a cat can elude his owners: "Think about a fire, a service person who leaves a door open, a child leaving a door open, a cat clawing its way through a screen."

When Jason Brown's black cat, Meow Meow, went on a week-long adventure, Brown became painfully aware of the importance of a collar and tag. "We went to the shelter several times," he recalls. "There were so many cats, it was unbelievable. We had a really hard time trying to find her."

The family got lucky: Meow Meow came back on her own. But they've since left nothing to chance and converted their cats to permanent collar wearers—a move that more recently reunited them with 1-year-old Marshmallow, their adopted door darter. Within a day of making a run for it, Marshmallow was safely back home with Brown, after staff at the SPCA Tampa Bay spotted her tag and contacted him immediately.

Reluctance to enforce a kitty dress code is often based on the notion that cats will become entangled or perform an ungainly strip tease to shed their constricting attire. But shelter veterans say these concerns are overblown, especially in light of how many more lost

animals are euthanized because their families cannot be found.

"I've been doing this for 20 years," says Harris. "I have seen a lot of cats die in shelters because there are not enough homes for them, and no one could find their cat. I've never seen a cat hung in a tree, ever."

Though tales of collar-caused deaths are rare, ill-fitted neckwear can get caught in cats' mouths or on their paws or legs—a frightening prospect but one that can usually be resolved by choosing a breakaway or elastic stretch collar and fitting it correctly. In a soon-to-be-published study partially funded by The HSUS and led by veterinarian Linda Lord, only about 3 percent of 538 cats caught their collars in their mouths or on an object or a forelimb—all without any adverse effects. Almost 73 percent wore collars successfully for six months.

The researchers randomly distributed three types of collars—buckle, elastic stretch, and breakaway—and also microchipped the cats. If a cat removed the collar, the owner could put it back on; owners who chose not to do so could withdraw from the study.

Most influential to the results were owners' perceptions of how well the cat would tolerate the collar, says Lord, an assistant professor of veterinary preventive medicine at Ohio State University. Those who perceived their cats would do better ended up having a better experience. "Maybe that's because those owners knew their cats better or the owners' expectations were different," Lord says.

The more times a cat got his collar off, the more likely an owner was to abandon the project; perseverance in ensuring the right fit was important to long-term success. "When people first put a collar on a cat, they have to know how to place it and how tight to make it," says Lord. "Most people make it too loose." (See p. 30 for tips.)

CLEAR VISIBILITY

Based on study results that found functioning microchips in nearly all the cats at the end of the six months, Lord and her fellow researchers also recommend the chips as backup identification. Implanted under the skin on the back of animals' necks, these tiny transmitters are encoded with serial numbers. If a pet is lost, shelters and veterinary offices can use scanners to retrieve the serial number and the phone number of a microchip registry; the registry then contacts the pet owner.

A prolific researcher of pet identification issues, Lord also found strong evidence of the effectiveness of microchips in a separate study. The records of 53 shelters in 23 states revealed that reunion rates were 20 times higher for cats with microchips—and 2½ times higher for dogs with microchips—than the rates of return for all strays entering the shelters. But although microchips can increase the odds of reunions, they are hardly a guarantee. Of the 1,221 stray cats taken in by the SPCA Tampa Bay from January through November last year, 58 had microchips, yet only 25 of those chips led to reunions.

Subject to human whims and errors, the system can break down at several points. Many shelters now have universal scanners that can read microchips of different frequencies, but the serial numbers on the chips are often still untraceable—either because they have never been registered in the first place or because pet owners fail to update



A door left open for just a few tragic seconds can be an indoor cat's gateway to the streets.

their contact information with microchip registries when they move.

For these reasons, an old-fashioned I.D. tag is the most visible way to convey that a cat is owned, especially in areas where animal control services are limited or nonexistent. If someone walking down the street decides a cat needs help, a tag provides an obvious starting point for locating the owner. Microchips would not be of much use because, as Harris puts it, “the neighbors don’t have scanners.”

Even in communities with animal control services, some people are reluctant to take a stray to the shelter, concerned that he may become another statistic. When Karen Parsons of Griffith, Ind., found a small black cat wearing a rhinestone collar without a tag, she put out food but hesitated to report her missing because she was unsure of the policies of her local shelter. Her own cats would not have responded well to a late-night intruder, so she opted to leave the cat outside and see if she returned.

When the cat showed up again and Parsons noticed she was declawed, she feared for the cat’s safety and called animal control. An hour after an officer picked up the animal, Parsons received good news: Someone had filed a lost report three weeks earlier. “The girl was crying hysterically—she went to the shelter, and it was her kitty,”

says Parsons, adding that if the cat had been wearing a tag, “I would call immediately.”

Most shelters work hard to reunite and adopt out as many animals as they can, keeping lost and found reports and attempting to match up cats and dogs without any forms of I.D. But agencies with few resources and limited space are unable to do so indefinitely as a never-ending number of new strays and relinquished pets stream through their doors. The presence of a collar and tag can buy extra time. At the SPCA Tampa Bay, the holding period for a cat with no signs of ownership is five days, after which she may be adopted or euthanized, says Gray. Cats with collars are held for nine days, allowing shelter staff to keep searching for a potential owner.

At the Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society, Harris has a novel approach to calls she receives about found cats who appear to be owned but are probably just galavanting around the neighborhood. “We tell people to put a collar on,” she says. “We give them Jiffy tags and they write, ‘I found your cat. Call me.’”

The message is intended to alert the owner that a visible I.D. tag will prevent further misunderstandings. “We can be the safest place for an animal,” Harris says, “but we want to be a last resort.” ■



Fitting Sessions

In the world of cat collar fashion, there seems to be a style to suit every cat (and owner), from understated elegance to over-the-top rhinestone. But when choosing a collar for your feline, focus on fit and safety. Keep these tips in mind:

- ▶ “Breakaway” collars have plastic fasteners designed to open automatically when the collar is pulled; such collars may come off more easily but will help ensure a safe release if the cat becomes caught on something. An alternative is an elastic stretch collar or a collar with an elastic insert.
- ▶ Look for collars that adjust by sliding, which offer a better fit than those that use a traditional buckle-and-hole closure. When outfitting your cat, you should be able to comfortably slip two fingers (side by side, not one on top of the other) between the collar and the cat’s skin. A proper fit keeps the collar from sliding off at the mere swipe of a paw and also prevents it from snagging on something.
- ▶ When acclimating your cat to a collar, distract him with a tasty treat, a favorite game, a catnip toy, or something else he likes. Try rubbing the collar on the cat’s body. “Cats feel safer when everything smells like

them,” says HSUS cat programs manager Nancy Peterson. “I would suggest putting the collar on when your cat is sleeping. If your cat fusses, only remove the collar when he isn’t taking issue with it. In other words, don’t reward anti-collar behavior.”

- ▶ Be sure to check the collar frequently to ensure it still fits properly, particularly during the first couple of days. “If a cat is going to have a problem, our experience is that it will happen then,” says veterinarian Linda Lord, the lead author of a recent study on cat collars. It may help to get cats used to their new accoutrements gradually, at first keeping the collars on only while you’re home to supervise, says Betsy McFarland, senior director of The HSUS’s Companion Animals section. “Once he was used to it and stopped messing with it, I left it on all the time,” McFarland says of her first cat. “All three of my cats now do great with their collars, using the same method.”
- ▶ If jingling tags drive you or your cat crazy, stick them together with Velcro or double-sided tape. Or use engraved nameplates that slide onto or attach to the collar. For maximum kitty comfort, avoid large dog tags and opt instead for something cat-sized.
- ▶ For extra insurance, Lacey Kingston of Wilmington, N.C., writes “I am lost” on her cats’ collars with an indelible marker. “It isn’t unusual to see a cat wandering the neighborhood,” she says, “so who would realize yours wasn’t supposed to be there?”

