

# When Your Pet is Lost or Stolen, Call New Jersey's Pet Detectives

BY SAMANTHA J. HENRY  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**Y**OU CAN'T SAY "PET DETECTIVE" WITHOUT PAYING homage to the film, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, in which actor Jim Carrey brilliantly portrays a professional who finds lost and stolen animals. Carrey's movie character rescues the stolen mascot of the Miami Dolphins (a bottle-nosed Dolphin named Snowflake), and his comedic, on-screen exploits made him a hero and earned him a sequel: *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*.

But there is nothing funny about lost or stolen pets, and a new criminal trend called "pet flipping," where people steal or find someone else's pet and sell the animal, is gaining popularity in the United States. According to the American Kennel Club, there has been a 27.8 percent increase in the number of dog thefts between January and May 2013 versus the same period in 2012.

"Pet theft is a money-driven crime," says Annalisa Berns, a certified Missing Animal Response (MAR) technician and a real-life, New Jersey-based pet detective. "In tough financial times, people are more enthusiastic about picking up someone's pet and keeping it for a reward or selling it to someone else."

According to Berns, the author of the *Lost Dog Recovery Guide* and the *Lost Cat Recovery Guide*, "too often, pet owners leave their animals unattended on their property without any ID such as a collar tag or a microchip, and their pet wanders off and escapes on its own."

Dr. Neil Shaw, DVM, chief medical officer of Blue Pearl Veterinary Partners, agrees that proper identification is key to protecting pets from being lost or stolen. "Talk with your family veterinarian about having your pet microchipped," suggests Dr. Shaw. "Microchipping is a relatively inexpensive procedure that can easily reunite a lost pet with their family. See if your veterinarian recommends using advanced technology like a GPS tracking enabled collar and never leave your pet unattended outside. Also, keep current photographs of your pet and utilize your local veterinary community and Web sites like Craigslist to try to find your pet."

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New Jersey pet detective Rob Smith, a certified MAR technician who works with Berns has a Web site, [helpfindlostpets.com](http://helpfindlostpets.com), to help people find their lost pets. He says time is the biggest factor when it comes to increasing the odds that a pet will be found and reunited with its human family.

"If I get called early enough, the success rate can be as high as 70 percent to 80 percent, provided that I can minimize the radius where a pet can reach before we start searching," says Smith. "Reptiles and amphibians are easier to find because they can't travel as far as a dog or cat."

Berns says her research shows that pet owners who follow the general guidelines offered by veterinarians and shelters recover their pets between 10 percent and 33 percent of the time. "In 2012, our success rate was around 80 percent, and that is with the techniques that we use as pet detectives, which can also be found in my books."

Finding lost pets also depends on what kind of "creatures" are missing—cats and dogs versus reptiles and amphibians versus other missing exotics.

"You are going to use different methods if you have a lost dog versus if you have a lost mouse," explains Berns. "To find domesticated animals like dogs and cats, we ask about their personalities and their past histories to help us recover them."

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where every pet  
has a family  
and every family  
can keep their pet.**

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Says Smith: "When I am helping people search for a missing snake or a turtle, they always look very surprised when I ask them the question, 'Tell me about your snake's personality?' I think it's extremely important to ask because just as dogs have personalities, so do snakes, turtles and frogs that can cause them to act in different ways. This definitely influences the way in which I look for them. It's a very important factor."

How do you track a lost pet based on its personality? "A woman who lives in a condo with a fenced-in rooftop gave me a call and told me that she was missing her Egyptian tortoise," explains Smith. "Some of the things I asked were: 'What is the turtle\* like? Does it like to get out and move about, or is somewhat docile and like to stay in one place? If someone new goes to pick it up, does it go back into its shell or is it personable? She told me it was a personable type of turtle, and personable turtles usually have the ability to travel farther and explore. So, I had her send me pictures of the rooftop and its surrounding areas, and I was able to identify a closed and dark space where I thought the turtle might go. And that is exactly where she found him!" ■

*\* The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) has strict rules for turtle ownership in New Jersey. Please consult with the NJDEP to inquire about your specific situation.*

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