



10

Stray Dog Rescue Tips

by Lavanya Sunkara

There's no stopping a New Yorker hustling to work. Coffee in one hand, cell phone in the other, headphones in the ears—the only goal is getting in and out of the crowded train with minimal distractions. So I was surprised to find a small crowd surrounding a lost black lab when I arrived at the train station one morning. The dog had a collar but no tags or leash. With white fur on his face and a skinny body, he looked old. His fur was dirty, his nails were long, and he'd been found wandering in the parking lot.

"Someone must have abandoned him because he is old," I overheard the station manager saying. My heart melted.

I kneeled down and let the dog sniff me. He wagged his tail and stared at me with his brown eyes. The people walking into the sta-

tion distracted him, and he scanned the area as if searching for his owners. I decided I had to do something to help this precious boy. Work had to wait.

Leaving the dog in the custody of the station manager, I ran to my car in the parking lot and grabbed the spare leash and water bowl I keep in the trunk. I found dog cookies in the glove box and brought them too. As the lab devoured the cookies and drank water, I made calls to local shelters and found a no-kill place willing to take him. After putting blankets down in the backseat of my car, I lifted the dog onto the seat and drove him to the shelter where loving volunteers promised to care for him until his owners could be located or until he could find a forever home. The next day, the shelter called to let me know that the owners claimed the dog. I felt relieved and happy,

especially after learning that Ace recently turned 17. He had simply gotten lost.

In the past year, I participated in a couple of animal rescues when I was visiting my friend Melanie Sue Bowles in Georgia. Melanie and her husband, founders of Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary, have been rescuing both horses and dogs for the past two decades. Before I met Melanie, I wasn't equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to rescue stray dogs. Although I'd had help from the people at the train station, given my experience, I felt personally responsible to ensure Ace landed in a safe place, and I am so glad I was able to help.

Whether you live in the country or the city, find puppies in a box on the side of the road or a lost dog in a parking lot, I hope Melanie's expert tips here will help you as much as they helped me.

1 Everyone Can Help:

"The most important thing to remember is that everyone can do *something* to help a stray animal. Even if you're on your way to work, or late for an appointment, or you have children in the car, you can still do something," Melanie says. It could be as simple as making a phone call to the local animal control or humane society and providing them with the dog's size, colorings/markings, breed and exact location. If you're able, stay with the dog until help arrives.

2 Safety First:

Go slow and listen to your instincts. It is very important to read the body language of any dog you're trying to help. A hungry or frightened dog may react in an unpredictable way and you don't want to startle him. Use a calming voice. If you are getting out of a car, do so as quietly as possible.

3 Encountering a Threatening Dog:

It is never worth getting hurt. If the dog is unapproachable, make note of his size, colorings/markings, breed and exact location, and call your local animal control or humane society. Never approach a dog if he shows aggression.

4 Approaching a Stray Dog:

"What you do depends on what the dog does. If you gently call to him and he comes willingly with a wagging tail, I would simply open my vehicle door and invite him to jump in. This has worked more often than not," Melanie says. If the dog resists jumping into the vehicle (or if he's too small) but appears calm and friendly, pick him up and set him on the back seat. If you call to a stray and he doesn't come, approach slowly, and then evaluate whether or not it is safe to pick him up. If you approach a stray and he bolts or appears aggressive, call the local animal control or humane society. "In twenty-plus years of rescuing dozens of dogs, I have only encountered one dog who bared her teeth and tried to snap," Melanie says.

Dog Body Language

A posture is a whole body signal using most of the body parts.



This dog has his tail down, his ears are up (but not forward), his head is high, and the corners of his mouth are relaxed. This dog is in a **relaxed** posture. He does not feel threatened, afraid, or overly excited.



This dog is clearly not relaxed. His tail is straight out, his ears are forward, his mouth is shut tight, and he is standing on his toes and leaning slightly forward. This dog is very **alert**.



This dog is not relaxed and is definitely showing that he is more than alert. His tail is up and stiff, his hackles are up, his ears are forward, his nose is wrinkled, the corners of his mouth are forward, he is standing on all toes, and he is slightly leaning forward. This dog is in an **offensive threat** posture. He is threatened and wants the world to know it. He will do what he has to do to defend himself. If you were to approach this dog, you would likely be bitten.



This dog is not relaxed. His tail is tucked, his hackles are raised, his ears are back, his pupils are dilated, the nose is wrinkled, the corners of the mouth are pulled back, and the body is lowered. This dog is afraid and feeling threatened also. He would rather run away than confront what is making him feel this way. However, if he feels cornered or threatened he will defend himself. This is a **defensive threat** posture.

5 Bringing the Stray Home or to a Shelter:

Whether to bring a stray dog home or not is an individual decision. Ask yourself if you have the time, the room, and the resources to take good care of the animal. Can you put in the effort to find an owner who may be looking for him? Are you able to keep the animal if no one ever steps forward or network on his behalf to get him adopted? If the answer is "no" to all of these questions, it might be better to take the stray dog to your local shelter.

6 Approaching an Injured Dog:

If you encounter an injured dog, move slowly toward him. If the injuries are minor, try to move the dog into your vehicle and take him to the vet. If the injuries are serious, and the animal is unable to stand or is in tremendous pain, make every effort to call a vet to the scene. If no vets are available, call another professional, such as animal control. Be prepared to assume financial responsibility for the dog. Some animal hospitals that help unowned dogs receive funding from the state, but don't assume the hospital near you will do the same.

7 Rescuing Abandoned Puppies:

In rural areas, it's common to find unwanted litters of kittens and puppies abandoned. "I have rescued many, many litters from the side of the road. I bring them home and then network to get them adopted. But we have the time, the room, and the resources to tend to an abandoned litter. Not everyone does," Melanie says. She suggests that if you see one or more puppies or kittens on the side of the road and you are not able to care for them, you can still help by bringing them to the local shelter.



8 Deciding to Keep the Animal:

A stray animal with no tags or microchip may still have a concerned and grieving owner. "Many deeply loved dogs have slipped their collars or wiggled under fences," Melanie says. Upon bringing the dog home, immediately notify as many local animal agencies as you can, including veterinarians' offices. Also, place ads and check the "missing pets" section of your local paper and super market bulletin boards. Place flyers around town with a picture and description of the animal. If, after a certain time period (which varies from state to state), no one comes forward to claim the stray and you decide to keep him, then he is yours.

9 Deciding to Find the Stray a New Home:

If you cannot keep the dog and have failed at every attempt to find an owner, take the dog to the vet for spaying/neutering and get a thorough checkup for the animal. Then, begin networking among friends and post on websites like Petfinder.com to find the animal a new home. There are also local breed-specific rescues that will take the animal.

10 Be Prepared with a Kit in Your Car:

Rescuing an animal can save his life. Be prepared by keeping a leash and dog collar in your car along with several towels. "We have horses, so I also keep a halter and lead rope handy as well, just in case. You never know when you might come upon an AWOL donkey or two," Melanie says.

To read about all the wonderful rescued dogs in Melanie's family, check out her latest book, *The Dogs of Proud Spirit*, which chronicles her life with her thirteen rescued dogs in an endearing and entertaining way. Visit HorsesofProudSpirit.com for information on Melanie's horse sanctuary. 🐾



Dog Body Language (continued)

A posture is a whole body signal using most of the body parts.



This dog's body is lowered, his tail is tucked, his ears are back, his forehead is smoothed out, the corner of the mouth is back, he's using groveling movements, and he may lick the mouth of other dogs. This dog is exhibiting **active submissive** posture. He is showing that he is submitting to the other animal, that he is no threat, and that the other animal is superior to him.



This dog is rolled onto his back, he is avoiding eye contact, his tail is tucked, and his belly and genitals are exposed. This dog is exhibiting a **passive submissive** posture and lacks confidence and self-esteem. He is exposing his most vulnerable parts to other animals as if to say, "I'm not worthy; you can easily kill me."



This dog has his tail down, his ears are back, he is rapidly panting with the corners of his mouth pulled back, he is sweating through his paws, and his body is lowered. This dog is very **stressed**. He is exhibiting calming signals and stress signals.



This dog's tail is up and wagging; his rump is up; his front paws are out in front of him; he may be vocalizing and bouncing around, swatting with his paws...This dog is in a **play bow**. He is initiating play and showing that he means no harm and is not afraid.

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