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The Great Escape: Dogs That Roam

My client has a 2-year-old male dog that jumps the fences and roams the neighborhood. What advice can I give her to stop this unwanted behavior?



Dogs may escape and roam for many reasons, including exploration, searching for mates (if intact), searching for food, or for social contact. Roaming can be the result of separation distress or a response to frightening situations such as storms or noises. It can be a predatory behavior or motivated by inter-dog aggression. Escape behaviors are self-fulfilling; leaving the house or yard and being free to roam is a great reward. In some cases, the dog is just taking advantage of the opportunity provided by an open door or gate. Intact males are most commonly presented for escape and roaming behaviors, but neutered animals will escape and roam as well.

Investigate the Problem

The first step is to determine why and how the dog escapes. Asking the owner simple questions about the household routine and recent changes may provide some insight. Animals that have recently relocated may be trying to return to their old home territory. Intact animals may be seeking mates. Does the pet show signs of anxiety at owner departure or prior to escape, such as whining, pacing, destruction, or salivation? Where does the pet go and what does it do once it escapes? Does the pet just bolt out the door when it is opened?

Dogs that escape and roam put themselves at risk. They may be hit by cars, encounter toxic materials, or be injured by other animals. The animal may present a risk by aggressive behaviors directed toward other animals or people. Without proper identification, it may never be returned home and could potentially be euthanized by a shelter.

Contain the Situation

Treatment begins with management. Proper containment and a good routine are essential to preventing escaping and roaming. The animal's confinement must be made secure, because each time the dog is able to overcome a repair and escape, its behavior is reinforced and it will likely work harder and longer to get out the next time. Install secure fencing outdoors. For dogs that tend to escape and roam, underground electric fencing is usually not a sufficient deterrent. Gates should latch securely and, if necessary, be locked. If the dog charges out the door when it is opened, secure the animal before opening the door. If visitors or young children commonly enter and exit the house without warning, it may be necessary to use gates and confinement indoors to prevent the dog's escaping.

Anxiety or Phobias

If the animal suffers from an anxiety-related condition such as separation anxiety, or noise or storm phobias, that condition that must be treated concurrently or escape is still likely. While identifying and treating underlying conditions is beyond the scope of this article, many resources for treatment and pharmacologic intervention are available.¹⁻⁴ If the dog is intact and searching for mates, then neutering or spaying is important. A 60% to 90% reduction in roaming behavior can be achieved by castrating intact male dogs.⁵

No Place Like Home

Identifying the principal motivation for roaming may help determine a treatment plan. The goal is to make staying home more attractive than leaving. For example, enriching the home environment with food-dispensing toys or puzzles, increasing social contact time with people, and offering adequate outlets for play and exploration can be helpful. When possible, include daily leashed walks that provide contact time with other dogs, if dog-compatible, and games. If the dog cannot be walked due to unruly behavior or pulling, address this with training and perhaps a head collar or no-pull harness. Regular mealtimes and random treats, especially

continues

for coming when called, can help keep the dog at home.

Equally important is to identify and remove any reinforcement that the dog receives when it roams. Such variables could include play and food from neighbors, or a chance to run and play with other dogs.

Owners often ask about punishing a dog for escaping. Although owners are usually frustrated when they finally retrieve their dogs, the dog sees punishment at that time to be for coming to its owner, not for escaping, and punishment must be firmly discouraged. Not only is the punishment ineffective, it risks making the problem worse. Remote punishment that is activated when the dog attempts to escape may be successful, but direct punishment rarely deters the pet from escaping except in the presence of the owner. Electronic fences are not always reliable and may cause other problems such as fear,

anxiety, redirected aggression, and increased aggressive arousal. Therefore, they should not be relied upon as an option for dogs that escape and roam or that show aggressive responses when in their yards.

Recall Command

The likelihood that a dog with a history of roaming may escape again at some point is high.

Therefore, it is important to teach the dog to obey a recall or “come” command.

- Using a loud, unique sound may help, especially if the dog is to be recalled from a distance. This can be a whistle, duck call, etc.
- The “come” command should initially be practiced in a secure location with minimal distractions; perhaps indoors. A leash may be needed at first to increase compliance.
- The owner uses the sound to encourage the dog to come. When it does, the pet is rewarded with either a delectable food reward or play, if that is a potent reinforcer for that dog.

- If the dog does not comply, no reward is given, and the distance decreased.
- Over time, distractions and the distance are increased and the rewards are given intermittently or gradually phased out. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.

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at a glance

- Determine motivation for escaping and roaming.
- Treat any concurrent anxieties that might be contributory.
- Secure outdoor enclosures and prevent escape out exit doors and gates.
- Provide predictable interactions with people.
- Have daily walks and playtime.
- Neuter intact males.