Domestic cats are among the most popular companion animals. Due to their free-roaming nature, they can become lost and separated from their owners (Lord et al., 2007). That this is a real problem is supported by the observation that around 15% of cat owners reported losing their pet in the last five years (Weiss et al., 2012). Being separated from their pet can have a strong emotional impact on owners, but can also burden animal shelters where these animals can end up.

Apart from their free-roaming nature, several factors can contribute to cats becoming lost or not coming home. A common cause are traffic accidents (Wilson et al., 2017). Other kinds of trauma can originate from falls and dog attacks (Hernon et al., 2018). Profound changes in their living environment (such as introduction of a dog) are also sometimes mentioned as risk factors for cats not coming home.

To mitigate the risk of a cat becoming lost, several actions can be taken. Certain measures can help to identify cats that are found. The main examples of such measures are microchipping and identification tags (Lord et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2016). Other methods are used to find a cat that went missing such as searching the neighbourhood where the animal was last seen (Weiss et al., 2012). Social media are also used to reunite owners with their lost pets, both on a small scale (e.g. circulation a post among friends) and in dedicated communities (e.g. Facebook groups). A less commonly used, but possibly very effective, strategy is localization using trackers. These devices are usually attached to the animal’s collar and provide the location of the animal through a range of possible means, including GPS signals. However, there are also certain disadvantages. The trackers can be quite large and often require a paid subscription. Moreover, cats can get stuck when wearing a collar or lose the collars the trackers are attached to if those collars have a safety release. Apart from these measures, starting to look early and looking after cats that are obviously lost or hurt should be a first reflex.

The success rate of reuniting cats with their owner is not fully clear. The percentage of cats that are eventually found ranges between 53 – 75% in the literature (Lord et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2018). It can be expected that this percentage is highly dependent on several factors, such as the search methods used and the area where the animal went missing. Having a better understanding about the success rate of the different strategies can be a start to reuniting more owners with their pets.

The amount of literature about factors surrounding cats getting lost or localization strategies is very limited. A systematic review could provide a structured overview of the current knowledge and provide a direction for further research. A subsequent cohort study could identify risk factors that are linked to a higher risk of cats getting lost and identify the most effective methods in locating lost cats. Due to the nature of the problem, prospective interventional studies are not feasible.

References

Wilson JL, Gruffydd-Jones TJ, Murray JK. Risk factors for road traffic accidents in cats up to age 12 months that were registered between 2010 and 2013 with the UK pet cat cohort ('Bristol Cats'). Vet Rec. 2017;180(8):195.