

Escaping and Roaming

Young dogs with strong territorial drives commonly attempt to escape the confines of your home or yard. Inadequate attention and exercise, such as regular walks or play, contribute to the urge to escape. Social isolation (from people and other dogs) and separation anxiety also promote escape attempts. Roaming usually subsides as general levels of activity decrease toward the age of five or six years and is less common in older dogs.

A single escape substantially increases the probability that more attempts will follow, unless the dog has an overwhelmingly negative experience while it is roaming, such as being hit by a car. Roaming gives a dog mental and physical gratification. It enables a dog to locate sources of food (even if these are in trash bins), potential mates, or rivals.

Finders Keepers

Your dog's roaming behavior does not mean it does not appreciate you. It is easy to become frustrated by this behavior, particularly when it is inconvenient to retrieve your roaming dog. When at least you locate your pet, do not scold it! Your dog will associate punishment with you and its home. As difficult as it may be, never command a dog to "come" in angry tones. It may quickly learn to run in the opposite direction. When you find your dog, convey a positive attitude. You may find it helpful to bring along a treat to reward the dog for approaching you. Make sure to bring a leash with you.

If the dog hesitates to approach you, command it to "sit/stay" instead. Give plenty of verbal praise before approaching the dog or repeating the command to "come." Turn any further hesitation into a game by running away from the dog. Calling it to "come" in a playful tone will encourage it to chase you. Your anxiety is best forgotten and directed instead toward preventing further escapes.

Solutions

- The best way to control roaming is to prevent escape and minimize the desire to roam. Increase your dog's physical activity with frequent leash walks. This also allows it to safely patrol its territory. Play with your dog every day, engaging in activities that incorporate obedience skills.
- Apply obedience skills at every opportunity during your daily schedule, so that your dog's attention does not wander. If your dog is well exercised and mentally stimulated by you, it is less likely to attempt escape.
- Neutering may help to control escape attempts. A dog that roams, however, should be neutered anyway to prevent any contribution it might make to pet overpopulation during its escapades.
- Teach your dog to strongly associate your yard with positive experiences. Withhold your dog's food for 24 hours. Resume feeding in your yard at frequent intervals and in small portions. On subsequent days, gradually increase the time between meals and resume feeding the normal portion at each meal. The time of feeding should remain inconsistent for an extended period of time. In this way, your dog will associate food with the yard but will not be able to anticipate when it will be fed and will be less tempted to escape.
- Install a permanent and sturdy fence to enclose your yard. If your dog learns to dig under or jump over it, you may need to extend it in depth or in height. Electric fences and collars should be used only under close direct supervision of a qualified veterinary behaviorist who feels comfortable with their use. Otherwise, they may injure your dog and cause unintended behavioral consequences.