

Can Pets Remember and Tell Time?
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Our Dalmatians, Mocha and Ashley, are again at “summer camp” while we are out of town. They are spending a week with our friend in Gunnison, who also took care of them last summer while we were traveling. Our first report from Kathy was that both dogs definitely recognized her house when they arrived. Mocha went right to the back door, wanting inside, while Ashley immediately ran to the side of the house to say hello to the other dogs.

Owners frequently ask us if their pets can remember things and if they can tell time. As Mocha and Ashley demonstrate, it is certainly true that dogs (and cats) remember past events. If they didn’t, it would be impossible for them to learn anything.

Animals definitely can remember particular people and places. They can remember people who have been good to them, such as our friend Kathy, but they can also remember people with whom they have had bad experiences with as well. We don’t know how long animals can remember such people and places but some individuals may be able to remember events for years.

Although Mocha and Ashley remembered being at Kathy’s, it’s much harder to know if they can judge how long ago they were there. All species of animals seem to have internal clocks that allow them to regulate their internal physiological processes and behavior. Some animals clearly use their clocks to tell time.

Honeybees can tell what time it is to within 15 minutes. It is not clear whether dogs and cats can tell time in the same way but they probably can tell roughly what time of day it is (early morning, late afternoon and so on) and can probably discriminate between the passage of just a few minutes from several hours.

The observation that dogs are often just as excited to see their owners if they’ve been gone five minutes or five hours probably has less to do with the amount of time that has passed than it does to the fact that excited greeting behaviors have become a conditioned response.

When Mocha and Ashley come back home, they probably won’t know whether they’ve been gone for a week or for several days. And because animals are not spiteful or revengeful, we also know they won’t be mad at us for not taking them along. We know they will remember us, and we’ll be just as happy to see them as they will to see us.