



STOLEN!

Take steps today to protect your horse against thieves—his life may depend on it.

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RIGHT NOW, as you read this, a cunning predator is stalking someone's horse—maybe yours—in hopes of pulling down his next “meal.” He could be waiting near your pasture, crouching behind some shrubbery, or slinking toward your barn. And chances are, the equine victim's normal prey instincts won't even come into play as the hungry hunter comes near. That's because this predator is a human—a thief who steals horses, to live off quick resale proceeds.

Think your horse couldn't *possibly* be a target? Think again, because the incidence of horse theft is a growing concern in our national livestock community. Although there are no sources for official statistics, a leading international horse-recovery organization estimates that as many as 50,000 horses per year are reported stolen or missing in the U.S. alone. Worth as much as a dollar a pound for meat, stolen horses represent cash on the hoof. And the easiest horses to steal are those that are kind, trusting, and easily handled—a description that most likely fits *your* beloved horse to a T.

If your horse does get stolen, the last thing you'll be concerned about will be statistics. You'll just want to get him back! Unfortunately, more statistics show that if he isn't found within 24 hours, the odds that you'll ever see him again are drastically reduced. In just one day's time, his thief will have the opportunity to haul him across several state lines; run him through one or more auctions; unload him on a far-off private buyer; or—your worst fear—take him directly to a slaughterhouse, where it's likely he'll be killed on the same day he arrives.

continued on next page

True Crime Episodes

In this article, compiled from the advice of experts in horse-theft investigation and prevention, we'll give you a strategy for helping to ensure that such a nightmare never happens to you. We'll tell you how to protect your horse and your property against rustlers, and also will advise you on what to do if these theft precautions fail. Then, for a glimpse into the mind and methods of your thieving adversary, we'll even take you behind bars, for candid confessions from a convicted horse thief.

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR HORSE

To minimize your horse's attractiveness to thieves, and to maximize chances of getting him back alive if he's stolen, experts recommend that you take the following steps:

- *Physically—and visibly—identify your horse.* Thieves prefer anonymous-looking horses, so a large, visible brand on your horse can be an effective deterrent. If your horse is visibly marked and still gets stolen, he'll be relatively easy to spot from the catwalk of a slaughterhouse holding pen, on the grounds of an auction barn, or anywhere else he might end up. Ideal brand placement is on the jaw, hip, or shoulder. (Sometimes, owners will hide a freeze-brand under the horse's mane: an advantage, perhaps, to aesthetics, but a disadvantage in that it's not instantly visible in a herd. The same goes for lip tattoos.)

- *Don't rely on visible brands alone.* Both freeze-brands and hot-brands can be altered. A freeze-brand produces white hair, which can be covered with hair dye or shoe polish. A hot-brand produces a scar, which is harder, yet not impossible to alter; for instance, a wily thief could change the initials "LP" to "ER." (Read below for advice on how to virtually "foolproof" your horse's identity.)

- *Implement a backup ID.* On the wave of high-technology has emerged the computer microchip implant, inserted in the horse's nuchal ligament (which runs beneath the crest, from ears to withers). An identifying number on the chip is read by a special radio-frequency scanner; each chip's number corresponds to a computer entry that includes all the horse's permanent data (birth date, etc.). The chip, which is next to impossible to remove, is not recommended as a sole means of ID, but it's an infallible means of proof if your first line of defense—the brand—has been expertly altered. In short: A visible brand, coupled with a microchip, will help ensure that you're covered when the

The following "timeline" of a horse-theft case reads like the synopsis of a TV crime-show episode—except that it's real. This saga comes from the files of the livestock-theft division of the Texas & Southwest Cattle Raisers' Association.

This case involved two thieves working together, with an occasional third party. Shortly before the thefts, the two main perpetrators, who stole 13 horses and one mule, had worked at or near all six of the properties that were eventually targeted. Most thefts took place sometime during the night (though one occurred at suppertime) at Texas ranches located on rural back roads.

At all six locations, the thieves cut the wire fences of pastures where the horses were kept, lured them with feed, slipped on halters they'd brought with them, and led the horses down the road to their waiting trailer. And at all the locations (except the one hit at 5 P.M., when the owner was away), the property owners were asleep in their homes on the premises when the crimes occurred.

Here's a case synopsis. Last names are omitted to protect victims' privacy.

December 13, 1994: At morning feeding time, the owner of a 25-acre farm in Iola, Grimes County, called authorities to report that he'd discovered the theft of two animals boarded on his property. Gone were a 2-year-old gray Arabian mare with no brand, but with a distinctive scar on her left hip; and a brown, unbranded 2-year-old jenny mule, without any distinguishable markings. The animals had been taken to the home of one of the thieves. Two days later, they were sold at a livestock sale conducted less than 100 miles away. The Arabian mare fetched \$398; the mule went for \$390.

December 16, 1994: Shortly after dawn in Sealy, Austin County, three Quarter Horse mares were discovered missing by their owner, Bill. Two of the horses had lip tattoos; all three were the sole inhabitants of a pasture illuminated by a utility light. The mares were taken to the thieves' home, where a soldering iron was used in an attempt to alter the lip tattoos. On December 17, the horses were hauled approximately 100 miles to Livingston—where they were bought at auction (for a total of \$1,388) by a meat-packing company. Soon thereafter, all three mares were slaughtered.

December 18, 1994: In Richards, Grimes County, a woman who kept three horses on her 50-acre ranch alerted authorities to the horses' apparent theft. The thieves had struck at 5 P.M., while the owner was away. Later that evening, they unloaded the horses at a sale about 70 miles north, collecting \$1,695 for the three.

New Year's Day, 1995: At her 5-acre farm in North Zulch, Madison County, a woman named Mary came out in the morning to find her bay Quarter Horse broodmare missing. Her two other horses were still in the pasture. The thieves had pulled off their caper despite the presence of guard dogs, utility lights, and locked pasture gates. Later that day, they sold Mary's mare—which had a visible brand—for \$650 to one of the thieves' brothers (who later told authorities he didn't know he was buying a stolen horse).

That same morning, at a 50-acre farm not far from Mary's place, a young girl named Miriam discovered the disappearance of her unbranded sorrel Quarter Horse gelding, a barrel racer. Here too, the thieves had left behind two other horses. And as in Mary's case, they'd gotten past guard dogs, utility lights, and locked gates. Miriam's horse was sold for \$600 to one of the thieves' allegedly unsuspecting friends.

At yet another North Zulch farm on New Year's Day, a woman named Lou reported that her three Quarter Horses (all unbranded) had been taken from her 10-acre property during the night. The horses, which were used for breeding and showing, were the only equine tenants. They were subsequently taken to a livestock sale conducted two counties away, where they were quickly sold for unrecorded amounts.

January 5, 1995: Acting on an accumulation of incriminating evidence gathered during the 3-week theft period, investigators arrested the two main suspects at their homes. The thieves confessed to all the crimes detailed above, and provided the details necessary for tracing the horses' whereabouts. As of press time, the two men—one 32 years old, the other a 17-year-old minor—were still being held in a Grimes County jail, awaiting trial on charges of horse theft.

All of the horses, and the mule, were traced to their presumably innocent buyers through sales receipts and/or the thieves' information. Sales receipts also uncovered the final destination of the slaughtered mares. All but one of the surviving horses have been reunited with their owners. The remaining horse, a 7-year-old mare owned by the woman in Richards, has been located—but proof of ownership is pending.

One Rustler's Tale

Luther "Jody" Flowers was 17 years old the first time he was caught stealing horses. He was sentenced to 2 years' probation for the offense. But the youth couldn't resist the enticement of quick, easy cash, and promptly returned to horse thievery. He's been caught, and convicted, three more times; now 25, and serving his third jail sentence, he's up for parole next year. Claiming to be a "horse lover" who never sold a stolen horse for meat, he willingly shared details of his criminal past with *H&R*, as an exercise in remorse for his deeds.

First, a brief description of his methods of operation: During the longest stint of his "alternative career," Flowers had a legitimate job with a company that kept him on the road a lot, during which time he'd scout out potential horses and farms. He also claims to have trained horses on the side, and, over time, to have accumulated a regular clientele of about 30 buyers, all located in his home state of Texas. Somebody would tell him they needed a reining horse, or maybe a jumper; Flowers would go find a prospect, and steal it.

"A lot of people knew they were buying stolen horses, but they didn't care, because they were getting a cheap price," Flowers explains. His buyers, he says, weren't the kind who'd take horses to the killers; rather, they'd keep them to ride themselves, or sell them to other private buyers.

Typically, Flowers would have his eye on a particular horse for a particular buyer. He'd drive to the targeted area late at night, park his trailer a half mile or so down the road, then walk—with bridle, grain bag, and small tools in hand—to the property, where he'd usually cut or dismantle a fence to get to the horse he wanted. After catching the animal, he'd ride it, bareback, out of the pasture, and on down the road, to his waiting trailer. The next morning, Flowers would haul the horse to a prearranged rendezvous with the buyer. He was careful never to sell a horse in the same county from which he'd stolen it. Average price tag: \$500. Cash only, please.

Sometimes, Flowers would take a truckload of stolen horses to the grounds of a rural auction. He'd park just outside the gate, and usually managed to sell every horse before the sale even started. He'd provide tack so that prospective buyers could try out the horses on the spot.

Of his nighttime forays, Flowers says he never was spotted riding the horses down the road. If he heard an approaching vehicle, he'd veer off through nearby fields. He usually hit the property between midnight and 1:00 A.M.: That was late enough that the owners or caretakers were likely to be asleep, but early enough to allow a good 6 or 7 hours before the theft would be discovered.

Other elements of his M.O.:

- **Horse logistics:** The horse would have to be sorrel, chestnut, bay, or roan—and the plainer, the better. No palominos, buckskins, pintos, ultra-whites or ultra-blacks ("too distinguishable"), no Appaloosas ("too temperamental"), no horses with brands or lip tattoos. Unlike less experienced horse thieves, Flowers knew to look for freeze-brands hidden under manes, and he took the extra effort needed to check for a lip tattoo. He generally stole Quarter Horses (or Quarter types), and also the occasional Thoroughbred, if someone wanted a jumper.

- **Ranch logistics:** The ranch would have to be in a remote locale, off a low-traveled road, with no neighboring houses in sight. Flowers would covertly observe the ranch routine for a week or so, noting when people left for dinner breaks, etc. If he knew for certain that everyone was gone, he'd sometimes steal a horse in broad daylight. He says he avoided places with aggressive dogs, or evidence of security systems—including posted warning signs.

Often, Flowers would drive unannounced to a ranch (pulling a horse trailer for added effect), posing as a prospective horse buyer or boarder. Since many ranches have horses for sale at all times, and/or offer boarding, the proprietors usually were delighted to give him a complete tour—during which Flowers would scope out the facility and its horses.

- **Barrier logistics:** Flowers chose places with wire fences (easy to cut), or board (easy to pry off with a hammer). Pipe fencing was more of a deterrent: Flowers never risked using a blowtorch, but he would use bolt cutters to get through a gate's chain and lock. Cattle guards were laughable to this thief: He says he'd simply lay down a 4-by-8-foot sheet of plywood, and lead the horse across. Well-lit pastures weren't necessarily a deterrent, Flowers says, because a utility light's rays don't always reach the far perimeters of a particularly large pasture—and those far perimeters are where a thief does most of his work. Flowers says he rarely stole from barns, because the horses he targeted were almost always left outside at night.

- **An alternate theft scene:** Flowers sometimes took advantage of the crowded, chaotic setting at big rodeos or horse shows, where parking lots are jammed with horse trailers. At these venues, people often leave their horses, unguarded, tied to their trailers between classes. Dressed in appropriate Western attire, Flowers would simply untie a horse, and lead it away to his own waiting trailer. Nobody, he claims, thought to question him.

burden of ownership proof falls on you. Consult your veterinarian on how to obtain a microchip, and ask if he/she can perform the implant procedure, which must be done by a veterinarian.

- **Stash the halters.** Don't leave halters on your stabled or pastured horses; otherwise, you're just making it that much easier for a thief to catch them and lead them away. For the same reason, don't leave halters and lead ropes hanging out in plain sight.

- **Create a visual record.** If your horse is missing, investigators will ask for identifying photographs, and you may want photos in order to create and post fliers. But that faded shot of you and Buttercup posing with the 4-H trophy simply won't do! You'll need sharply focused, color photos of your horse, taken squarely from all four sides, against an uncluttered background. Every marking and/or brand must be clearly visible, and the entire horse should nearly fill the frame. If your horse grows a heavy winter coat, take two full sets: one winter, one summer. Save the negatives; you may find it necessary to make and distribute extra sets to numerous law enforcement agencies, as well as to slaughterhouses and auction barns.

- **Conduct frequent head counts.** If you care for a lot of horses, this can be a pain—but a worthwhile effort, nevertheless. A head count should be the last thing you do before going to bed at night—and the absolute first thing you do in the morning. Remember, for recovery of a stolen horse, every hour counts.

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR PROPERTY

Once you've taken horse-protective steps, enact measures to make your pasture or barn less attractive to thieves:

- **Get a watchdog, or some honking geese.** Better yet, get some of both—and give them the run of your property at night. The noisier the barking, the less likely an intruder will be to stick around. Ditto for the geese: They usually can be counted on to sound their cacophonous alarm when anything strange is going on. (Just be sure you don't fall into the habit of ignoring the alarms when they go off!)

- **Install a security system.** This doesn't have to be a full-scale, high-dollar, elaborate design on a par with that of the Pentagon. You could start with something as simple as an air hose across your driveway (like those found at gas stations), which could be wired to trigger a bell inside your house and/or barn.

Your local electronics store probably offers a moderately-priced array of other security options, many of which you can

install yourself: Ask about motion detectors that set off alarms or trigger floodlights; contact-type alarms for barn doors, which also could activate floodlights; or centrally placed floor mats, put out at night, that set off alarms in the barn and/or house when stepped on.

- **Post warning signs.** Even if you can't, or haven't yet installed any type of electronic security on your property, let potential crooks think you have, by placing "protected" signs around your property. (Example: "Warning: This property is electronically monitored. Trespassers will be caught!") If your signs look professional, most thieves won't take the time or the risk required to call your bluff; instead, they'll be likely to move on, looking for a less risky place to invade.

- **Bolster your borders.** Horse-theft investigators agree that if a professional rustler is determined to get onto your property, even the strongest gates, locks, and fences won't keep him out. Still, you can attempt to thwart his progress, by making wise choices in the types of enclosures you choose.

Wire fencing is the weakest design, as it's easily cut and removed. Board fences can be dismantled in minutes with simple tools. Metal pipe fencing requires a blowtorch to penetrate—a deterrent, for sure—but some thieves will go to that extreme, especially in a remote area where there's little risk of the flame being seen. If wire fencing is all you can afford, you'd be wise to take every other available preventive measure. Lastly, horses kept in a pasture right next to your house are a lot less alluring to a thief than those turned out on the back 40.

- **Lock your gates and barns.** This is simple advice that's rarely followed, particularly in rural areas. It's true that most locks and chains can be snapped with bolt cutters, and that all locks can be destroyed by a blowtorch. Still, the time factor can be on your side; generally, the more you spend on a high-quality lock, the longer it's going to take to cut. Horse thieves like to get in and out quickly, and will avoid taking unnecessary risks.

- **Light up your horse world.** The more light you can shed on your pastures and barns, the better. Even just a single high-power utility light can illuminate a medium-sized pasture, or average stable yard, like a full moon. And before you dismiss this suggestion because of increased electric bills, weigh those costs against the net worth of your horses—not to mention the immeasurable emotional expense you'll suffer if they're stolen.

Who Ya Gonna Call? Thief Busters!

The International Equine Recovery Net, which handles an annual average of 1,500 horse-theft cases, is the only organization known to act on a national (and beyond) scope in prevention, education, and investigation. For an annual fee of \$10 per horse, you can register your equines' entire identifying info on a computer database.

If a recorded horse is stolen, that information instantly is sent electronically to all necessary law enforcement agencies, slaughterhouses, sale barns, and state horse councils (or related organizations) in your locale. As a member, you'll be provided with a 24-hour emergency phone number that activates the database; you'll also receive a detailed handbook on horse-theft prevention and equine identification, with a variety of resources listed by state, and the Canadian provinces.

For membership information, or information on horse councils and similar organizations in your state, contact: The International Equine Recovery Net, 131 E. Exchange Ave., Ste. 116, Fort Worth, TX 76106; (800) 842-8725.



HOW ELSE TO BE PREPARED

The experts we consulted also recommend that you take the following preparatory measures:

- If you live in a state that mandates equine brand inspection, make sure all your horses are properly registered.
- If your state doesn't require equine brand inspection, become a member of any available, alternative brand inspection organization. (One of the largest such organizations is the Texas & Southwest Cattle Raisers' Association, in Fort Worth.) Your state horse council or similar organization can tell you who to contact.
- Prepare a pre-printed sheet describing each horse, and including ID photos. This will enable you to fax an immediate, useful alert to the necessary people.
- Create a file that includes each horse's ID photos and negatives, bill of sale (or cancelled sales check), breed registration papers (or any other type of physical identification papers), and health/vaccination certificates.
- Record, and post by your phone, the telephone/fax numbers of: your local law enforcement agency, and state police (know in advance whether they'll automatically send bulletins to sale barns and/or slaughterhouses, and if so, within what geographic radius); every sale barn and slaughterhouse in your county, plus all surrounding counties (in case your local law enforcement agency won't be contacting those places); all your neighbors and horse-loving friends (so you can ask them to help spread the word of your missing animal); your state horse council and/or related organization (which can offer valuable assistance/advice).

WHEN ALL PRECAUTIONS FAIL

Let's say you've followed all the previous advice, and your horse gets stolen anyway; here are some suggestions for how to react, in order to activate the fastest and most direct action toward your horse's recovery. Upon discovering that your horse is missing, you should:

- **Secure all remaining horses.** Quickly make sure there's no way the remaining horses can escape through a broken fence at the scene.
- **Call your local law enforcement agency.** Immediately report the theft to the police or sheriff's department in your area, and to the state police. If you're too hysterical to speak coherently, have someone else make the calls. Calm, complete, and expedient disclosure of information will be essential, because precious minutes will be ticking by.
- **Summon reinforcements.** Alert a family member or friend to the situation, and tell this person to call other friends and neighbors, in the effort to help spread the

continued on page 108

STOLEN

continued from page 52

word, and to ask whether anyone noted suspicious activity. Enlist at least two people to separately cover the area by car, to ensure that the horse hasn't just wandered off—and to look for any clues.

- *Contact sale barns and slaughterhouses.* Remember, law-enforcement agencies may not do this automatically. Along with phoning, fax your descriptive sheet. Include all facilities within a 600-mile radius.

- *Print and distribute fliers.* Using the same horse-description sheet you faxed to sale barns and slaughterhouses (but omitting your home address, for safety reasons), print up a few hundred fliers. Ask your volunteer force to help distribute them to local tack shops, feed stores, riding or boarding stables, and any other equine-oriented facility; also include general retail areas that are heavily trafficked. Make sure your flier has the bold heading "missing" or "stolen" on it—otherwise, it might be perceived as an ordinary "for sale" flier.

- *Appeal to the media.* If you live in a rel-

atively small community, chances are good that local radio or television stations will gladly and promptly sound the alarm. Newspaper stories also can help, though the publication date may not be timely enough. But don't discount the print media's usefulness—you'd be smart to scan the daily livestock sale ads for a possible description of your horse! Check your state's large metro newspapers as well.

- *Personally search slaughterhouses and sale barns.* Again, you can divvy up your friends to do this. Investigators and others who work in horse-theft prevention wholeheartedly agree that the vast majority of employees at these facilities are extremely helpful, and genuinely concerned. Many of them are horse owners, too—and nobody likes the thought of unwittingly selling, or killing, someone's beloved animal. But if you approach these facilities with an accusatory attitude, the staff is likely to respond in kind—especially if you provide little or no useful, identifying information. Give them as many details as you can, in a respectful manner, and they're likely to let you look around. (In the weighing room of one Texas slaughterhouse, the walls are

plastered with poster photos of missing horses—which workers diligently check against every horse that's processed.)

- *Stay on alert.* Make sure there's someone available to answer your telephone 24 hours a day—you never know when you might get some news, or a new lead for investigators to follow. □

The editors thank the following experts for their generous assistance with this article:

Amelita Donald, president/founder of the International Equine Recovery Net; Jody Henderson, Hal Dumas, Butch Davis, and Steve Westbrook, of the Texas & Southwest Cattle Raisers' Association livestock-theft investigation force; John LaFleur, of the Grimes County (Texas) Sheriff's Department; and the staff at Capricorn Equestrian Center, Garland, Texas.

"The statistics I uncovered while researching this story were appalling enough," says freelance writer Anne Lang, "but what made it chillingly real for me were the tales of the veteran horse thief." Photographer Gerri Hernández is a Dallas, Texas-based freelancer, whose work has appeared in *Texas Monthly*, *New York Times Magazine*, and *Shape*.