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Strategies for STOPPING THIEVES



If it's on your farm, and it can be sold for money, someone would like to steal it. Here's what you can do to protect your horses and your property.

By Debi Metcalfe

Here's a question I wish more horse owners would think about seriously: Which items on your farm are likely to attract thieves? Your horses? Your tack? Your vehicles? Your hay? The answer, of course, is "all of the above" and more.

We've all heard about the "classic" scenario, where someone cuts through a pasture fence and leads the horses away. That's dreadful enough, but it's just one of many types of theft I hear about these days. As founder of Stolen Horse International, a nonprofit group that offers resources to help people recover horses who have been lost, stolen or gone missing for any reason, I've learned one universal truth: If it's on your farm, and it can be sold for money, someone will try to steal it.

Recovering missing horses and other stolen property can be difficult, if not impossible. But for most of us the concern regarding expensive tack, vehicles and equipment pales compared to the anguish that would come from not knowing where our beloved horses are—and fearing the worst.

Far better to take some basic steps to reduce the risk that



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Keep gates locked, especially if they provide access to remote parts of larger pastures.

these crimes will occur. No farm can be completely theft-proof—determined professional criminals can get past just about any barrier. But you don't want to make it too easy for them, either. Any steps you can take to deter the opportunists may be enough to make the difference. Here are my suggestions for protecting your horses, property and gear from thieves.

5 WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR HORSE

- **Don't make it easy to catch him.**

Leave halters off horses turned out in pastures and paddocks, and do not hang halters on the stall door or a convenient gatepost. Instead, keep them out of sight, preferably in a locked tack room.

- **Avoid feeding or giving your horses treats near the gate.**

Horses will congregate near feeding areas, and if they are used to coming to

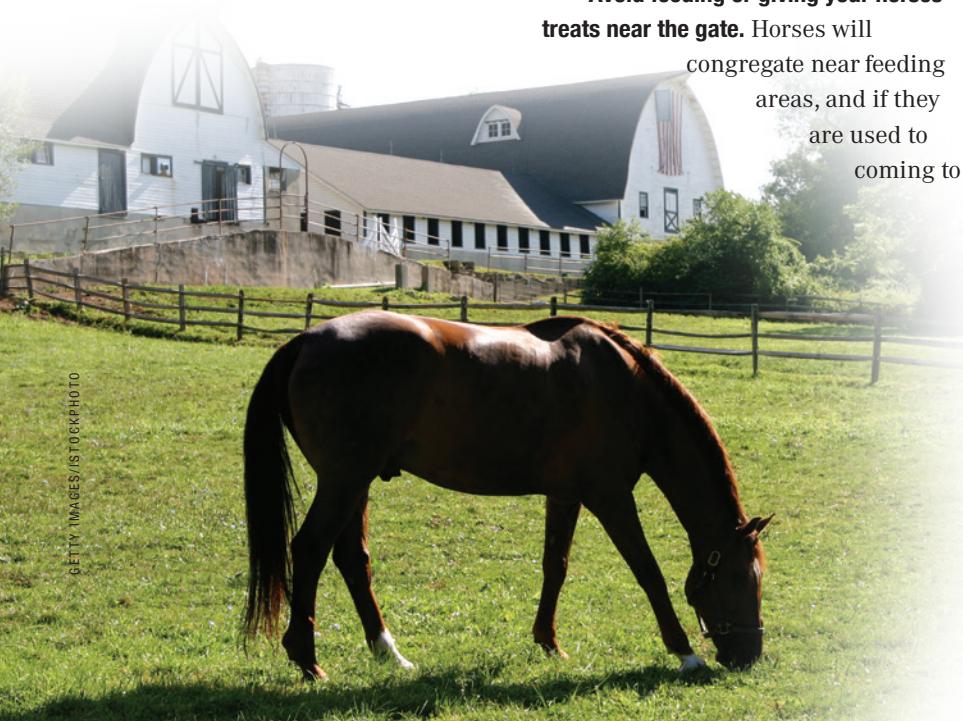
the gate to greet people, it will be easier for thieves to catch and load them.

Sure, you don't want to trek all the way across the pasture to fill a hay feeder, but what's convenient for you is also convenient for the thief.

- **Permanently identify your horses.**

Brands and tattoos are time-tested methods of marking a horse for identification; if you go this route, make sure you take close-up photos of the marks for your records, and register them with any relevant databases. A microchip, implanted in the neck, is one of the best ways to connect a horse with his owner—just make sure you keep your contact information in the national database up-to-date with your current phone numbers. It may also be helpful to post signs at gates and key areas around your property announcing that your horses are marked with permanent ID.

- **Keep your fencing secure.** Horses who escape their pastures on their own can meet a bad end in many ways, including this: If an unscrupulous



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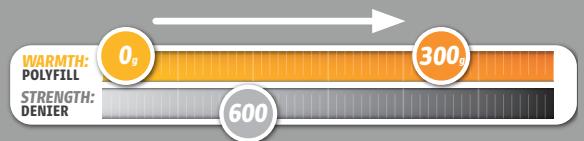


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person is the first to find the wanderers, he or she may sell the horses instead of returning them to you. If you don't have one already, you might also consider installing a perimeter fence around your property, outside of your pasture fences. That way, if a horse escapes from a turnout or stall, he will still be contained on the premises.

- **Plant natural barriers.** Does a distant pasture fence run along a little-used back road? Planting a hedge of native shrubs or other dense foliage along your property line will make it harder for potential thieves to park a truck and cut through the fence. Bonus points if you plant sharp-leaved hollies or thorny plants native to your region.

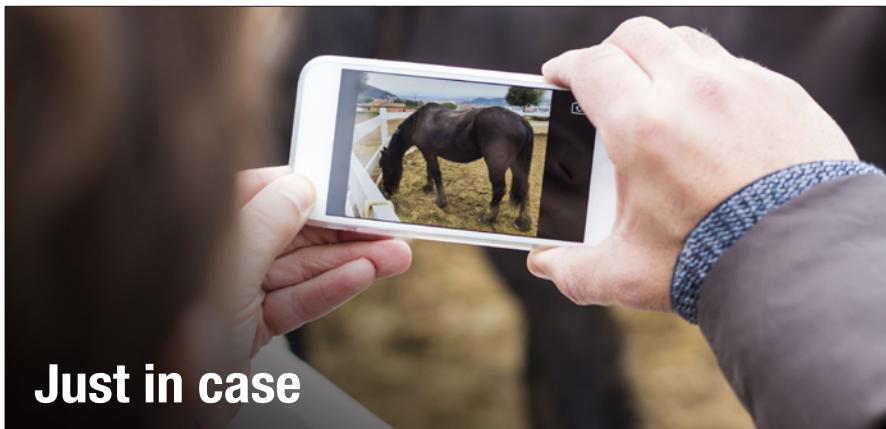
9 WAYS TO SECURE YOUR BARN AND PROPERTY

- **Block off property access points.**

Install gates on driveways or drivable tracts that lead onto your property, especially ones that provide access to remote parts of larger pastures. Keeps gates locked. Your options range from simple chains and padlocks to electronic systems. If you install a keypad, make sure you share the code with the local fire department; some systems have features that will automatically open for the fire department and other emergency first responders.

- **Lock everything.** Install good-quality door locks, and secure your tack and feed rooms as well as any sheds or other storage areas where you keep hay, tractors or valuable equipment. Also secure vents, skylights, air conditioners and windows that can be used to access your buildings or vehicles.

- **Install floodlights with motion detectors.** Keeping bright lights on



Just in case

Recovering a stolen horse can be difficult, but it's not impossible. One thing you need to consider ahead of time is how you would identify your horse to law enforcement and prove your ownership in the case of a dispute. The best time to protect yourself is long before you need to do so. Here are some steps you can take now to make the process easier:

- **Photograph your horse.** Get multiple videos and still pictures: Remove all tack and get a full body view of your horse from each side, in his winter and summer coats, and when he's clean and dirty. Also get close-ups of any brands, tattoos, scars, markings, whorls or other distinguishing features. Get a few photos that include yourself, with a background that is clearly on your property. Keep these photos in multiple places, including in a file on your computer, in the cloud as well as printouts in a filing cabinet, in case one set is lost or destroyed.

- **Keep relevant paperwork on file.** Also keep both paper and electronic files of all paperwork pertaining to your horse. A bill of sale is an important proof of ownership: When you buy a horse, make sure you have a document that includes a description of the horse, with any identifying marks or registrations, as well as the date of sale, the purchase price, any terms and the signatures of both buyer and seller. You'll also want to have on hand any paperwork pertaining to equine brand, tattoo and/or microchip registrations; a current Coggins; veterinary records that show your name on the invoices; any insurance paperwork; and breed registrations and transfer-of-ownership paperwork.

- **Store a DNA sample.** If you ever run into a legal dispute about whether or not a particular horse is rightfully yours, it may be helpful to be able to provide indisputable evidence that he was once yours. One way to do this is to pull a sample of mane and tail hairs, including the root, which can be used for a DNA test. Place these hairs inside a plastic bag and enclose it in an envelope, along with a copy of the bill of sale and some photographs of your horse and your own photo ID, and other paperwork listed above. Seal all of this into a sturdy envelope and mail it to yourself. When it arrives in your mailbox, do not open the envelope: Place the entire packet in a secure, fire-proof place, such as a home safe or a safe deposit box. The DNA could be used to prove that you are claiming the correct horse, and the postal cancellation gives you a legally documented date of your ownership.

all night, every night isn't always advisable—and sometimes they can attract too many unwanted insects. However, lights with motion detectors will come on only when someone or something is moving around on your property. Animals will trigger the lights occasionally, and you'll get tired of always checking. But a thief won't know when you're looking and when you're not.

• **Set up surveillance, especially in places you can't see from your house.**

You have a range of options, from a few well-placed trail cams with motion detectors to sophisticated alarms and video monitors. Most systems allow you to check in on the cameras from your computer or cell phone. Putting up signs announcing that your farm is protected by video surveillance may deter would-be thieves. And photos or

Barking watchdogs have long been man's best theft deterrent, but other animals that make a lot of noise can help, too.

videos can become crucial evidence for identifying and prosecuting thieves.

• **Employ animal alarms.** Barking watchdogs have long been man's best theft deterrent, but other animals—including guinea fowl, geese and donkeys—also have a reputation for making a lot of noise when disturbed. If you keep these animals, learn to distinguish their alarm calls from other noises they make, and take action when you hear them.

• **Vary your schedule.** It's easy to fall into a routine when feeding and doing other chores around the barn. But someone casing your place may make note of when you're there and when

you're not. Make it a point to show up at random times.

• **Store unused tools properly.** Of course you'll want to keep more expensive items out of the way, but also consider things like crowbars and ladders, which a potential thief could use to break a lock or gain access to your hayloft. Don't leave these lying around, either.

• **Mark your property, and keep inventory.** Whenever you make a major purchase, take a photograph for your files, and note any relevant serial numbers. Consider engraving or stamping permanent identification into saddles or other pricey items. You may even put microchips into saddles and other equipment for proof of ownership.

• **Hide spare keys thoughtfully.** Stand back and take a look at your door and consider the first places you would search for a spare key if you were a thief trying to break in: Under the mat? Over the lintel? In a planter or

When you're at a show

Thieves are often attracted to shows because a large number of valuable horses, trailers and tack are concentrated in a busy area, and it can be all too easy for a stranger to slip in amidst the activity and walk off with something when no one is looking.

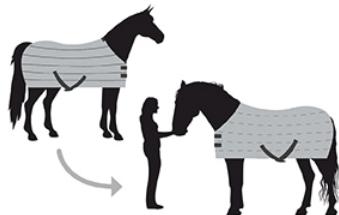
• **Do some research before you go.** Contact the event organizers to ask what security measures will be in place. Find out who checks for proof of ownership when people arrive. Ask if the paperwork, with pictures and microchip numbers, is checked against the horses in each trailer. Ask if the same check is done on trailers leaving with horses. Also see who secures the grounds at night and how is it done. You may be stunned to learn that many events have very little or no security in place. If that's the case, and you decide to go anyway, you'll want to be extra vigilant with your horse and property.

• **Keep everything under lock and key.** Valuable tack left unattended for even a few minutes is a temptation. Stow unused gear in your tack trunk or storage lockers on your trailer, and lock them even if you're leaving the area for only a few minutes. Secure your trailer, too, when it's parked.

• **Park in plain sight.** When staying overnight at a hotel or at the show grounds, choose a parking spot that keeps your trailer in view of as many people as possible. If you can, find a spot near lights and a security camera.



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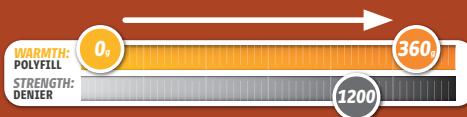
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flowerpot? Don't use any of those places. Those fake rocks are pretty easy to spot now, too. Find a place farther away from the door and less obvious, such as in a doghouse or a birdfeeder, nailed to a nearby tree, or in a magnetic box hidden on your car. Also, keep tabs on who has keys or knows where the spare is hidden; change the locks periodically and keep track of duplicate keys.

4 WAYS TO AVOID BEING A TARGET OF THIEVES

I've heard more stories about crimes on horse farms than I could count, and one theme is common: Prospective thieves often "case the joint" first. That is, they may visit the farm on a seemingly innocent pretext with the intent of noting where you store valuable items and what security measures are in place.

Keep this in mind if you've ever noticed unusual activity in or around

Some potential thieves may visit your property as deliverymen, contractors, utility workers or other service people. They may even belong to companies you've hired.

your farm. Have you seen suspicious vehicles creeping along local roads? Have you ever found anyone on your property without a legitimate purpose for being there? Has anyone ever turned up at your door offering to buy a horse or sell something? Most of these encounters likely are innocent, but they may not be.



Signage that deters criminals

A number of different types of signs, posted on entry gates, barn doors and other prominent locations, may help to deter thieves from targeting your farm. Here are three that may be especially helpful:

- **No Trespassing.** Even just setting foot onto private property without the owner's permission is illegal, and intruders may be charged with a felony or misdemeanor, depending on the state and the circumstances, even if nothing is damaged or stolen. State laws vary, but you will almost always have more legal recourse if you post written notification that trespassing on your farm is unwelcome. Check with your state law enforcement agency for specific details about the required wording, design and placement of No Trespassing signs on your property.

- **Warning: Video surveillance.** If you invest in a video surveillance system, post signs declaring that all activities on your farm will be caught on camera. This alone may deter casual intruders.

- **Farm Watch.** If you've joined a Farm Watch group, post signs declaring that fact. A number of wordings and designs are available, but some of these signs also state that your animals and equipment are marked with permanent identification—which is an important fact to broadcast. Even if you have only an informal group, or none at all, post the Farm Watch signs anyway. Strangers won't know the difference.

Kristina Ferguson of Lawndale, North Carolina, once had the tail of her mare cut off during the night. She recalls that a day or two before the theft occurred, she saw two people who had stopped their car in the road to take pictures of the mare in the pasture. She didn't think much about the incident at the time, but after the theft she realized what must have happened: "I believe they were going around getting pictures and then pre-selling the tails. Once they have

a buyer, they go in the middle of the night and cut them off," Ferguson says. "It was so shocking to see, and it leaves you feeling so violated knowing that someone walked up to your horse and put their hands on her."

If anything seems amiss, pay attention to that gnawing in your gut and take extra steps to protect your horse and property.

- **Keep an eye on strangers on the farm.** Some potential thieves may visit your property as deliverymen, contractors,



Many Farm Watch groups are run by local law enforcement officers, who keep members informed about the crimes occurring in the area.

utility workers or other service people. They may even belong to companies you've hired—but maybe the company hasn't fully vetted every laborer they send out. Make it a habit to photograph the vehicles, including tag numbers, of any new people on your property. You might even be so bold as to ask to see the person's driver's license and to get a picture of the stranger him- or herself. If asked, explain that you keep track of everyone who visits the farm to share with law enforcement in case a crime is committed. Make sure you actually do contact law enforcement if you think someone is acting suspicious.

• **Be wary of unusual behavior among "friends," too.** Sometimes, a thief turns out to be someone the victim knows.

In November 2011, five horses plus some tack and a trailer were stolen from the barn used by the rodeo team at Southern Arkansas University. The perpetrator turned out to be one of the victims' own teammates, Jaci Rae Jackson. Jackson, her mother and her mother's boyfriend were all found guilty and sentenced to jail for the crimes. According to the arrest warrant, Jackson had been seen "making notes regarding the locations of stalls where the stolen horses were taken as well as written descriptions of the stolen horses."

Trust your instincts if anyone you know—relatives, friends, that new boarder at the barn, even a veterinarian or farrier—seems to take an unnatural interest in your horse,

your property, and your routines and habits. A career con artist can be superficially charming and may be a master at gaining your trust, all while waiting for the opportunity to commit a crime.

• **Join or form a Farm Watch group.** For years, city Neighborhood Watch groups have helped combat crime. Now, rural horse owners and farmers are forming Farm Watch groups to address threats of crime in rural areas. Many are run by local law enforcement officers, who help keep members informed about the types of crime that happen in the area and offer suggestions for protecting property. You'll also be alerted to incidents in your area and encouraged to document and report suspicious behavior. If a formal program is not



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Reporting a theft

As soon as you discover any farm theft, your first step is to call the local law enforcement. Especially if your horses are involved, you will be understandably upset, so it may help to know ahead of time what to expect.

When a theft is reported, ideally, law enforcement follows a specific chain of events:

- An officer takes a detailed report from the victim, questions any witnesses and collects any physical evidence.
- The officer gives the victim a report number for the incident. You will need this to file any insurance claims.
- The report is reviewed by a supervisor to determine whether it will be assigned for follow-up investigation.
- If the case is selected for follow-up, it will then be assigned to a detective, who will contact the victim for further information and will seek leads.

In reality, however, it can be difficult to get your case investigated. “Most sheriff departments are limited on staff so the deputy who takes the report generally investigates the crime,” says David Spears, current chief of police in Savanna, Oklahoma, and a former coordinator for the Investigative Services Unit of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, where he handled cases of arson, livestock and equipment thefts and other agricultural crimes. “To be completely honest, most just take a report, sometimes over the phone, and it’s the end of the story.”

Time is of the essence. “Cattle are

usually slaughtered within 72 hours after being sold,” says Spears. “Horses and equipment can be 500 miles out of your jurisdiction within 10 hours. But most sheriff and police departments don’t do a very good job at jumping on the investigation, which is sad.”

A delay in investigation may be a matter of bad timing, as well. A department that is already working at capacity dealing with a homicide or fatal car crash is going to delay investigating a theft. “One thing to keep in mind is that a sheriff’s department has lots of crimes considered a higher priority than horse theft,” says Spears. Still, he adds, “If they don’t have the resources they should call around and ask for assistance.”

Another problem is that investigators may have very little experience with livestock-related crimes. Thefts of trailers or other vehicles with vehicle identification numbers are more similar to car thefts. “If the owner has serial numbers—it’s always important to keep these in a secure place—the patrol deputy could enter that into The National Crime Information Center as soon as the report is completed,” says Dwight Sloan, retired from the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office in Alabama. However, a horse theft is rare and unique to officers in many parts of the country, so they may not be sure what steps to take.

Which isn’t to say that a missing horse case will never be taken seriously and investigated promptly. “In our department the report would be taken by a patrol deputy, then it would get assigned to a property crimes detective. If it involved animals then it usually came to me,” says Sloan. “Our system is now set up where the detective receives the case by the next day.”

Spears, too, worked in an area that was more responsive to agricultural crime. “I usually had success because I had good relationships with the sheriff and department in which I worked,” he says. “In the counties I was assigned, when I worked as a state officer, I would ask that they call me immediately because time’s not on your side when anything is taken.”

So, when your horse goes missing, is it better to be more proactive and take steps on your own to find him? Or should you sit back and wait for law enforcement to solve the crime? It depends. Talk to the officer taking your report and see if you can get an assessment of the time they will be able to spend on your case. But, in the meantime, don’t hesitate to get in touch with Stolen Horse International, at NetPosse.com.

We can help you create flyers and get the word out. Our network of volunteers can also help with advice and services, and many of us have been through this ourselves, so we’re here for moral support, too. It may feel hopeless, but sometimes miracles can happen.

Park your trailer and other big-ticket items where they can't easily be seen from the road or during a casual visit to your property.



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available where you are, get together with your neighbors and create an informal network. You can use email and cell phones to send messages and photos to each other quickly if anyone notices suspicious activity.

• **Avoid “oversharing” on social media.**

Facebook groups and other forms of social media make it easy to form a sense of friendship and community with people you've never met. We join groups of other riders, we share pictures of our horses, and we may discuss upcoming shows or trail rides we're planning to attend. Most of the time, other members of your online groups are enthusiasts just like you—but thieves and scammers are also known to use social media to cultivate relationships with targets. Then, when you announce your show schedule, vacations or other travel plans, they know exactly when your home will be unprotected. Wait until you get home to post pictures of your trips, and

make it a policy to never let people online know too much about you and where you live.

5 WAYS TO REDUCE CAR THEFT

• **Park trailers and other vehicles out of sight.** You don't want people to be able to spot these big-ticket items from the road or during a casual visit. Park your trailer away from the barn, too—having it close by makes it too easy to grab it, load it and run. I've known of cases where the owner's trailer was used to haul off horses and tack.

• **Secure trailers and other vehicles when not in use.** Do a little shopping and you'll find a variety of hitch locks, tongue locks and coupler locks designed to prevent a thief from easily hitching your trailer to his own vehicle and driving away with it. Wheel locks are another option—these

clamp onto the wheels and prevent the trailer from moving until they are disengaged.

• **Do not leave keys in trucks or other farm machinery.** Keep them in a secure place that is not too obvious to a casual observer.

• **Record your vehicle identification numbers (VINs).** Keep a file on all of your vehicles—cars, trucks, trailers, tractors, utility vehicles, etc.—and record the VIN on each one. Include photographs of the vehicle as a whole as well as close-ups of the VINs and any distinctive decals or other unique features. Keeping an electronic file with photographs is fine, but it's a good idea to have printouts in a paper file, too. These will help you file a police report if something is stolen. Check with the manufacturer if you can't find the VIN on a vehicle.

• **Personalize your trailer's appearance.** If you were a thief casing a row of parked trailers at a show or trailhead, would you steal the one covered with

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Think like a thief. Pull up your address on a mapping program that offers close-up satellite views. Chances are, you'll be able to see your house, your barn and outbuildings, your turnouts, and all roads in the vicinity. A thief can see all of this, too, and may be able to use it to plan an approach and getaway that will reduce their chances of being seen. Look at your property objectively, and think about how you would get on and off with horses or other valuable property without being detected. Then take steps to block access and/or improve surveillance in vulnerable areas.

bright decals? Or the generic white one that looks like every other? The generic one, of course, will be harder to identify at a distance and easier to resell. Custom paint jobs are a costlier option, but you can also personalize your trailer with some decals, reflective strips or bumper stickers. Just make sure that whatever you apply cannot be easily removed.

Rachel Moore of Locust Grove, Georgia, is one of the lucky ones. After her two horses, Buddy and Henry, were stolen, she called the police, but, she says, "The truth is, police don't have resources to search for horses. We knew if it was going to get done we were going to have to do it."

Moore filed a report with Stolen Horse International, Inc., also known as NetPosse, and alerts were sent out, both by flyers and over social media. The tips that came in were fruitful, and both Buddy and Henry were found and returned home. In the aftermath of the case, Moore learned that her farm had been chosen at random by two total

Some potential thieves may visit your property as deliverymen, contractors, utility workers or other service people. They may even belong to companies you've hired—perhaps the product of of an inadequate vetting.

strangers, who were apparently trying to sell the horses for money to buy drugs. Both of the perpetrators were charged with livestock theft and damage to property, and they took a plea deal to serve one year in jail plus nine years of probation.

Since then, Moore has taken additional precautions to deter future thefts. She had a new, stronger fence built and now has two fence lines. She also installed a huge floodlight in the pasture, and she put in security cameras along with signs stating that video cameras are watching.

Still, even though it has now been a couple of years since the theft of Buddy and Henry, Moore says, "I'm afraid every morning until I see them standing at their feed buckets. And the last thing I do every night is find them with the flashlight to make sure they are still here. When I am not home I look at the cameras to check on them."

And despite her precautions, Moore knows she can never be completely free from worry: "Let's be honest, if someone wants them bad enough, they are going to get them." ●

About the author: Because there was no one to help when her horse Idaho was stolen in 1997, Debi Metcalfe started Stolen Horse International (www.netposse.com), a nonprofit organization dedicated to aiding individuals and their families who have missing horses and equipment. She also gives presentations to teach owners how horses can disappear (theft, disasters, civil matters, runaways) and how to protect and recover them when the worst happens. She is the author of *Horse Theft, Been There—Done That*.



Thwart tack thieves!

Tack is a big investment. In fact, next to your horse and your trailer, it may be the most valuable thing you store at the barn. So it only makes sense to take some simple steps to protect your property against theft. Here are a few to consider:



Invest in strong locks

A deadbolt lock may be enough of a deterrent for a potential intruder to move on and look for a softer target. Also be sure to secure windows.



Get a dog!

Barn dogs don't have to be ferocious or even particularly large, just vocal and attentive to activity. Local humane societies are good places to start your search.

Install motion-sensor lights

Lighting your property and barn entrances can scare off intruders before they even get close to stealing. Position the lights so that they are visible from the house if they are tripped.



Add an alarm system

For the highest level of security, consider a home alarm system adapted to work in a barn environment. Those tripped by motion might not be a good idea, given the activity of barn cats, but a system that sounds an alarm and alerts police when a door or window is breached can help stop a robbery in progress.

Mark your property

It may not keep your tack from being stolen, but putting your name on items using a permanent marker can help you recover them later. Be sure to alert local auctions and tack resellers immediately after a theft.



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