THE PROBLEM OF PET THEFT

"Darkness had just settled over Fayetteville on November 8, 1988, when Cheryl Burley let her dog Baby out for her evening constitutional." It was the last time Cheryl was ever to see Baby.

"On the afternoon of January 14, Chester Webb watched his two dogs trot over a hill toward a pond near his Bedford home." That's the last time he saw them.

Stories such as these have appeared in countless local newspapers across the country. Cheryl Burley and Chester Webb are but thousands of other Americans who have been victims of pet theft. Action 81, a nationwide organization dedicated to recovering lost pets, estimates that more than 2 million dogs are stolen each year.

Pet theft is on the increase in certain parts of the country. Why?

After receiving information that the number of dogs reported missing each month in the Fayetteville area had doubled, Northwest Arkansas Times reporter Debora Robinson began a two-month investigation to discover the fate of the animals. The result was an in-depth, five-part series of reports.

Dealers will also sell dogs for the guard-dog trade. With the escalation of crime in many metropolitan areas, the guard-dog business has become big business. Dishonest dealers do not wish to be seen by owners and are stealing dogs for resale to middlemen. To thwart dishonest dealers, a citizens' coalition has been formed to alert the public and gather more information. It expects to be able to go to the state's attorney with enough evidence to prosecute the bunchers.

In Lawrence County, Indiana, experienced a dramatic increase in the reports of stolen pets during two periods in 1988. According to Lawrence County Humane Society Shelter Director Kathy Howe, more than 50 dogs were reported missing in a six-month period. Almost all of the reports were for large dogs such as huskies, German shepherds, and malamutes. The state police launched an investigation, and The HSUS offered a $1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the bunchers.

Researchers are willing to pay $150 or more (as documented by USDA) license applications for health certificates such as these.

Local humane groups suspect that most of the dogs stolen are sold to research laboratories, because the market is the steadiest and often pays the highest going rate for dogs. Although laboratories will knowingly buy a stolen pet, but some will. Research is a key component in the use of random-source animals that actually promotes pet theft.

In areas where pound seizure, the practice of taking animals from a shelter for research, is permitted or mandated, pet theft has actually increased. Despite the lack of extensive data, there are documented cases of stolen dogs being found in research laboratories, often hundreds of miles from where they were last seen. Action 81, which tracks lost-animal reports and trends, reports a high rate of pet theft in areas where a pound sells to research facilities or in which there is an active animal dealer. In a 1980 survey in Virginia conducted by Action 81, it was learned that more than one half of the stolen dogs in a specific area were concentrated in the vicinities of pounds selling animals to research or of active dealers. If researchers seek animals with specific qualities, e.g., purebred dogs such as German shepherds, or dogs with a specific body size, dishonest dealers often fill orders from a standing inventory or an inter-dealer network. They steal many of the animals.

Dealers will also sell dogs for the guard-dog trade. With the escalation of crime in many metropolitan areas, the guard-dog business has become big business. If an unusually large number of German shepherds, rottweilers, or Dobermans is missing in an area, it is suspected that dog thieves are at work. Sometimes, no theft pattern will immediately emerge, but, if a local shelter keeps good, accurate records of lost reports, such a pattern will eventually become evident. For example, in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the figure of 25 missing dogs per month dropped to 50—for a total of 300 in six months—from June to December of 1988. In one week, in another community, 8 dogs disappeared. In another two-week period, 16 dogs disappeared in a four-block area. Of the 16, all were the same size and coat length; 4 of the 16 were basset hounds. In Lawrence County, Indiana, 250 dogs were reported missing in six months; the previous average was 10-12 per month. Of the 250, 40 to 50 were beagles; a dozen were huskies; 8 to 10 were schnauzers. A Virginia community has seen a doubling of its lost-dog reports on specific breeds during certain times of the year. Dog thieves use lures such as a female in heat in the back of a truck or a piece of drug-laced raw meat to attract individual dogs. Dog thieves often will "case" a neighborhood in advance and know exactly what dogs they want and where they are. They will also determine which homeowners are gone all day. So as not to arouse suspicion in a neighborhood, dog thieves often drive trucks or vans that are falsely marked as animal-control or humane society vehicles. To thwart dishonest "bunchers" (dealers who sell animals for research purposes) from using that tactic in Fayetteville and to let residents know what to look out for, Lib Horn placed a photo of her agency's vehicle and uniformed animal-control officers in the local paper. Dishonest bunchers have also been known to answer "free to good home" ads or may even place an ad in the paper themselves stating they will buy litters of puppies or purebred dogs. Researchers are willing to pay $150 or more (as documented by USDA) license applications for health certificates such as these.
travel to research are as varied as the animals themselves. While some dogs and cats find themselves undergoing experimentation in a matter of days, others endure severe deprivation during a journey that may take weeks or months and thousands of miles. One tattooed dog was reunited with its owner after being stolen two years before. The dog was sold by a dealer to a laboratory in New York State, researchers found the dog’s tattoo and were able to have the dog returned to its owner.

PROBLEMS WITH REGULATION

Dealers are regulated by the USDA’s Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS), which has the responsibility under the Animal Welfare Act to ensure humane treatment of dogs and cats by dealers (see the article on page 12). The USDA is charged with inspecting dealers’ premises and research facilities, but, to date, has done a relatively ineffective job. Lack of funding, coupled with apathy on the part of many inspectors or their superiors, have prevented a crackdown on animal dealers and illegal activities. Dealers are required to provide adequate housing, handling, sanitation, veterinary care, and transportation. Animals are supposed to be tagged and an inventory kept of where the animal was purchased and its description. Without adequate regulation and enforcement, pet theft is easy.

Because of numerous problems with enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act, the USDA has created a new division to work exclusively on enforcement. The Regulatory Enforcement/Animal Care Program (RE/AC) will have five offices across the country with a dedicated staff to Animal welfare. While the new offices were supposed to be open by January 1, 1989, the animal welfare issues have continued.

Dealers and bunchers regularly frequent trade days and auctions to obtain dogs. In an interview with the LaPorte Herald Argus, a dog breeder confirmed that animals are traded to other bunchers in Indiana and surrounding states or to universities in Ohio. The newspaper reported that the breeder said “mainly looks for bound dogs that weigh more than forty pounds, which are the animals preferred in medical research.” Bunchers trade dogs all over Indiana, usually at flea markets, he said.

In researching her series of articles on pet theft in Fayetteville, Arkansas, Ms. Robinson learned that bunchers frequently travel long distances to auctions. In an interview with Gloria J. Genteman, a Humane Midwest Monitors, Ms. Robinson reported that bunchers make more money at an auction than selling to a animal dealer. Humane Midwest Monitors is a group that keeps tabs on buncher activity in midwestern states and attends auctions frequented by bunchers. In the interview, Ms. Genteman said, “Another reason bunchers travel long distances is because the animals they are selling are stolen.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are several ways you can prevent your pet from being stolen. The most important is to tattoo your pet.*

The HSUS has a Publication with several ways you can prevent your pet from being stolen. The most important is to tattoo your pet.*

Interview the potential owner and visit the new home to be sure your animal is going to be properly cared for. Ask for identification, such as a driver’s license, and check the vehicle registration number of anyone coming to your home. If you are unable to spend that amount of time on the animal’s adoption, you should take the animal to a responsible animal shelter where the animal will find a good home or be euthanatized.

Check the classified section of your newspaper for “free to good home” ads. Contact the individuals listed and explain that they may be setting their pets up to thieves.

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