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 just two of the many 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 seems to be 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 Deborah Robinson began a two-month investigation to discover the fate of the animals.

The result was an in-depth, five-part series investigating the problem of pet theft and the brutality stolen animals endure on the road to research. Working with Fayetteville Animal Shelter Director Lib Horn, Ms. Robinson discovered a pattern of dog theft that was disturbingly similar to outbreaks in parts of Missouri. The Missouri Humane Society estimates that, in Missouri alone, 25,000 dogs are stolen annually.

MANY GO TO RESEARCH LABS

Pets are stolen for resale into several different outlets—laboratory research, the guard-dog trade, or puppy-mill production. Dogfighters have been known to steal dogs for resale into a dog-theft ring. It is suspected that some of the stolen dogs in this area are purebred females, it is suspected that the dogs are being stolen for the puppy-mill trade. 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 bunched.

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 250 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 $5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone stealing dogs. With media attention, the thefts dropped off. They resumed for a short period during the summer, when lost-dog reports for hunting dogs, coon hounds, walkers, and beagles jumped to forty or more in a month.

The brutal road to research

When pets are stolen, they are not necessarily resold immediately. The roads they take can be used for training fighting dogs. In some communities, it is suspected that dogs being stolen, slaughtered, and sold for food to certain ethnic groups that eat dog meat.

Local humane groups suspect that most of the dogs stolen are sold to research, because the research market is the steadiest and often pays the highest going rate for dogs. Not all laboratories will knowingly buy a stolen pet, but some will. Research laboratories are dependent on the use of random-source animals 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 do not fill that order 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 pets, such a pattern will eventually become evident. For example, in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the figure of 25 missing dogs per month doubled to 50 — for a total of 300 in six months—from June to December of 1988.

In one week, in another community, 8 dogs of the same size and age 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 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 of the same breed, so bunchers go to great lengths to mask their "camera" in neighborhood in advance and know exactly where the thieves are at work. They will also determine which home-owners 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 $50 or more (as documented by U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] license applications listing dealer incomes from sales) for healthy, obedient dogs of a specific type or breed, so bunchers go to great lengths to supply them with pet-like animals.

THEFTS ARE WIDESPREAD

An ongoing investigation in a Mid-Atlantic community has revealed evidence of a tri-county dog-theft ring. It is suspected that some of the bunchers involved are drug users who are stealing dogs for resale to a middleman to support their habit. Because almost all of the stolen dogs in this area are purebred females, it is suspected that the dogs are being stolen for the puppy-mill trade. 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.

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travel to research are as varied as the animals themselves. While some dogs and cats can find themselves undergoing experimentation in a matter of days, others endure severe deprivation during a journey that may take weeks or months. A tattooed dog was reunited with its owner after being stolen two years before. When the dog was finally 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. Where the dog had been and what it had endured during those two years are unknown.

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 and pet stores. The USDA is charged with inspecting dealers’ premises and records and 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, has prevented a crackdown on animal dealers and illegal activities. Dealers are required to provide adequate housing, handling, sanitation, medical 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 problems and enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act, the USDA has created a new division to work exclusively on problems that are sold to other dealers. The USDA has found that the new division to work exclusively on problems that are sold to other dealers.

Always keep a good current photograph of your pet, preferably a color photo. If your pet does become lost, you will be able to spend that amount of time on the animal’s behavior and provide information to help the animal return home. Always keep a good current photograph of your pet, preferably a color photo. If your pet does become lost, you will be able to spend that amount of time on the animal’s behavior and provide information to help the animal return home.

The Humane Society of the United States is a group that keeps tabs on buncher activity in the United States. They have introduced legislation that would prohibit the sale of dogs and cats for research purposes. Bunches buy and sell dogs at auctions or trade days. They sell animals to other dealers.

If your pet is stolen, the thief will probably dump the animal as soon as the tattoo is found. If you have a pet that you cannot keep, you may be upset to place it in a “good home” and ad. Dishonest bunchers prey on such ads, promising to provide a good home in the future. If you must give up an animal, have low introduction that would prohibit pounds. Legislation has been introduced in Missouri that would ban Class B dealers (see sidebar) from operating in the state. Write to your representatives and let them know how you feel about animal protection issues. The HSUS can assist you with information about your state. Spread the word about responsible pet ownership. Urge friends and neighbors to have their pets spayed or neutered and to leave their pets unattended or allow them to roam the neighborhood at will.

Definitions

Class A Dealer—USDA-licensed dealer who breeds and raises every animal he/she sells.

Class B Dealer—USDA-licensed dealers who buy and/or sell warm-blooded animals for other purposes.

Buncher—Licensed or unlicensed dealers who buy and sell animals strictly for research purposes. Bunchers buy and sell animals at auctions or trade days. They sell animals to other dealers.

To good home ads and will take giveaway animals. They have been known to respond to “free to good home” ads and will take giveaway animals. They have been known to respond to “free to good home” ads and will take giveaway animals.

It is not uncommon for them to clear out a neighborhood before moving on. It is not uncommon for them to clear out a neighborhood before moving on.

Pound Seizure—The practice of taking animals from an animal shelter for use in biomedical research.

Barbara A. Cassidy is director of animal sheltering and control for The HSUS.