

THEFT PREVENTION

10 Ways to Secure Your Horses and Property

BY MELISSA CASSUTT

(Continued from previous page.)

TWELVE YEARS AGO, Debi Metcalfe was just a horse owner desperately trying to track down her family's gray mare, Idaho. The system for finding a lost horse was convoluted and confusing—if you could even call it a system. Few resources were available for tracking stolen horses.

After a long year of searching, networking, posting fliers and following leads, Idaho was found and Stolen Horse International begun.

The network officially incorporated five years later, and boasts a return rate of 51 percent. The network's success has hinged on the Idaho Alert, an equine-theft alert system similar to the Amber Alert, the nationwide child-abduction alert system. But while the network has improved the process of finding lost or stolen horses, much of Metcalfe's work is now centered on educating horse owners on how to prevent such tragedies.

Here, Metcalfe shares 10 tips to help you better secure your horses and property.

1 DON'T ASSUME "IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME."

"Complacency is the biggest cause of anything happening to horses. You just don't think it's going to happen to you. You need to know what's going on around you."

2 MARK YOUR HORSE WITH A VISIBLE AND TRACEABLE ID.

"A freeze brand or hot brand is a visible ID that's a theft deterrent. But it's not really a good way to trace a horse back to you, so we recommend a microchip as a follow up. It's not going to keep the horse from being taken, but it can identify the horse without a shadow of a doubt when it's found. And if you live in a disaster area, such as areas where there are hurricanes, microchips are a no-brainer. Disaster response teams are getting savvy about scanning horses when they find them."

3 KEEP CURRENT PHOTOS OF YOUR HORSE ON FILE.

"Pictures need to be taken of all four sides and in different seasons, when the horse is clean and dirty. Also, keep a picture on your cell phone. If you're on a trail ride and your horse runs away, you'll need photos on the spot."

Metcalfe also suggests double-checking your official paperwork, specifically checking that your vet has correctly documented your horse's markings on his Coggins certificate.

"We almost didn't bring our horse home because our vet had marked a star instead of a blaze," Metcalfe says.

4 SET UP A COMMUNITY WATCH PROGRAM AND KEEP YOUR NEIGHBORS INFORMED.

"In three recent cases, there were eyewitnesses to people removing the horses, but they didn't think anything about it. They assumed if someone was there and doing something with the horses, they were supposed to be there."

5 PLAN YOUR PASTURES.

"A lot of us don't have the opportunity to do this because our pastures are already there. But if you're putting up a new pasture, plan where your entries are. You don't want a gate that opens right to the road. If you already have one, padlock it. Will that keep thieves out? Not if they have bolt cutters. But if they don't come prepared, they'll probably go to the pasture down the road and take a horse there, instead."

6 BE AWARE OF MOVEMENT ON YOUR PROPERTY WITH MOTION-SENSITIVE LIGHTING.

"I admit I get tired of looking at the lights flipping on and off sometimes, but the people coming on your property don't know if you're looking at them every time it pops on."

7 INVEST IN A DOG, AND LISTEN WHEN THEY MAKE NOISE.

"If you have dogs, make sure you're paying attention to their bark, so if they're trying to tell you something, you go and look. When our horse was stolen, the dogs were barking, but the

person there only took a quick look and went back in."

8 INSTALL REAL (OR FAKE) SECURITY CAMERAS.

"If you can't afford the whole system, you can get the fake ones that look real."

9 DOCUMENT EVERYONE WHO STOPS BY.

"If somebody comes onto your property asking questions, make sure you take down their tag number, and don't be ashamed about it. Part of what you're doing is making sure that they know that you know who they are. If you see people stopped at your fences, do the same thing.

"We know a lot of people just stop to see the pretty horses, but what if they're marking you and figuring out how you come and go?"

10 PUT UP LOTS OF SIGNS.

"When you have a home security system, you put a sign down by the road. Do the same thing with your horses. Let people know that your property is under surveillance and your horses are ID'd. If you travel with your horses, carry those signs with you.

"Just because you're in a public place doesn't mean you're safe. It's actually easier to take a horse out of a public place because there's so much commotion going on. The number one place we see horses taken from is the pasture, second is the barn and the third is public events."

Learn more theft prevention and property protection tips at netposse.com.