

# FOILING OFF-SEASON THEFT

So you think your boat is all buttoned up for the winter, tucked safely away in your backyard or driveway?

Think again.

In Naples, FL, thieves robbed four boats in just five days, stealing electronics, fishing equipment and other items. Even more disturbing, all of the boats were kept right behind the owners' homes.

Boat owners are a trusting lot and while one would not think of leaving the house with all the doors and windows open, boats are often left wide open and unsecured, equipped with all sorts of small and valuable accessories that can easily end up on eBay.

Boats are also so easily transportable, they're particularly susceptible to theft. Each year, insurance claims for theft losses cost the industry and consumers millions. While some boat thefts are the work of sophisticated rings that target a specific type of boat, others are isolated crimes of opportunity by petty thieves taking small, but valuable, equipment.

Not surprisingly, Florida is the number one state for boat theft with 1,478 boats reported stolen in 2005 and 1,233 stolen in 2006, through Sept. 30, according to the National Insurance Crime Bureau, a non-for-profit organization of insurance companies that compiles reports of stolen boats, cars and other items.

According to NICB, 6,849 boats were stolen nationwide through Sept. 30, and a total of 8,795 boats were stolen in 2005.

Most of the top 10 states for stolen boats are year-round boating states such as Florida, Texas, California and other southern states, where there are more boats available to thieves as well as more homes, marinas and storage facilities that thieves can target (see chart).

On a positive note, investigators and prosecutors are taking boat theft seriously and making headway in arresting organized rings of criminals who often move boats across state lines for resale.

In Jacksonville, FL, five suspects face federal charges relating to the theft of

expensive, high-performance boats on their trailers. The boats were transported from southern Georgia and part of Florida to the Miami area for resale or even the thieves own personal use. Police recovered 38 expensive boats with a value of \$4 million. Federal charges are triggered when stolen goods cross state lines. Among the models stolen were a \$130,000 Cigarette boat, a \$115,000 Contender, a \$170,000 Donzi and a \$180,000 Hydra-Sports. The suspects face up to 10 years in prison and hundreds of thousands in fines.

In Georgia, federal prosecutors also busted a ring that was stealing boats in Florida and transporting them to Georgia, including a 2004 27-foot Baja on a trailer. In both cases, task forces of city and county police, FBI agents and the U.S. Coast Guard cooperated in the investigation.

To help stem the tide of boat thefts, marine police in Florida have offered their own set of tips. Not all will apply in every

auxiliary locks.

- Attach inverted, strong hasps and padlocks to all hatches and secure lockers with non-removable hasps and hinges and lock with strong padlocks.

- Remove all portable valuables from your vessel, thereby eliminating possible targets of the thief. Don't leave radios, binoculars, cameras or laptops on board.

- Maintain an inventory list ashore that includes all boat gear with the name, model, serial number, manufacturer, and description of each item. Digital images or photos of your gear could also go into this file.

- Never leave keys aboard a boat, even in a "hidden place." Any seasoned burglar knows all the spots to look.

- Don't leave ownership papers on board the boat.

## At the Marina:

- Locked gates and other barriers to both pedestrian and vehicle traffic should be installed at every dock entrance.

- Signs that clearly state marina regulations and access limits should be posted.

- Access to boats should be limited only to owners and other authorized persons.

- Good lighting should be focused on access points and boat docks; security cameras are even better.

- Boat owners should get acquainted with their dockside neighbors and report suspicious "visitors" and activities.

- Consider developing a "Marina Watch" patterned after "Neighborhood Watch."

## On a Trailer:

- Remove the tires. As an added precaution against theft, be sure to remove the hub nuts and store them with the tires.

- Out of sight is less tempting. If the boat has to stay in the driveway, don't park it facing the street. Thieves may carry coupler devices that can be quickly attached to your trailer.

- Outboards should be taken off and stored in the garage. Ditto seats, battery, dodgers and canvas; they'll hold up better

## Top 10 States for Boat Theft

	Thefts through 9/30/06	Total Thefts 2000-05
Florida	1,233	10,275
California	807	6,974
Texas	499	4,891
Washington	291	2,294
Michigan	327	2,251
Georgia	215	1,886
North Carolina	201	1,575
Minnesota	191	1,500
Tennessee	198	1,496
Arizona	160	1,466

situation or for every boat type, but any obstacle a burglar faces trying to steal your boat or break into it could stave off a painful loss.

## On the Boat:

- Engrave all valuables including electronic equipment, outboard engines, radios, loose gear, etc. with the owner's name, home port, state driver's license or identification number, and the boat's hull identification number.

- Install dead bolt locks on all doors and secure ports and windows with inside

# What's Wrong With This Picture?



## Get a Free Decal

BoatU.S. members can display a free BoatU.S. Theft Reward decal on their boat. The free service provides a \$2500 cash reward for providing information resulting in the arrest and conviction of anyone stealing or vandalizing a boat or its equipment registered with BoatU.S. A Reward sticker for the boat is included in every new and renewing BoatU.S. member's welcome aboard package.

when stored indoors as well.

- Lock your wheels to the trailer. A length of heavy chain, or cable, run through each wheel and around the axle or trailer frame is a great deterrent to theft of the trailer or your wheels. Also, lock your spare tire.
- Remove the trailer's license plate and, if possible, the tail lights. If practical, chain the trailer to a tree.

## Long-term Storage:

- Always tie up a boat to something secure with a chain or cable that cannot be lifted over or torn loose from the piling or mooring. Run the chain or cable around a thwart or stanchion.
- Use one-way bolts, lock nuts, and

backup plates on eye bolts.

- Consider leaving a boat's engine out of commission when unattended — remove a spark plug, propeller, or the rotor, drain the fuel, or install a hidden cut-off switch.
- Secure outboard motors with special transom bolts or clamping screw locks.

If you're shopping for a boat, be cautious of super "deals" — someone could be trying to sell you a stolen boat. There are a few red flags that should warn you of a potential scam. If the asking price is unusually low for that make and model of boat or the seller is in a rush to sell it to you, watch out; "too good to be true" usually is. Reference Internet boat listing sites such as BoatUS.com/classifieds to get an idea of the

normal range of used boat prices for that model.

Buyers should make sure the boat has a valid Hull Identification Number (HIN) and that the one on the boat matches exactly to the HIN on any paperwork such as title and registration.

The boat's registration numbers should not appear altered, either on paper or on the hull, and both should match. If the seller says discrepancies in identification are because the boat was sunk, burned or rebuilt, be wary. If the seller has only photocopied versions of ownership documents, or title and registration are from out of state, watch out. Likewise, if the seller has no title or other proof of ownership, walk away from the "deal." ■

— By Elaine Dickinson