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HORSE THEFT AWARENESS

AND PREVENTION

Steps to minimizing theft of horses and equipment

Pete Gibbs*

Almost any victim of horse theft can attest to the emotional and economic effect of such a crime. Over the past several years, both large- and small-scale owners in Texas have suffered thefts of horses, trucks, trailers, saddles and other tack.

Horses and equipment are stolen from barns, farms, pastures, boarding and training facilities, competitive events—even from backyards. Tracking stolen horses can be difficult because theft reports are often delayed and stolen horses can change hands frequently and at remote locations.

To help prevent thefts, the Texas Legislature has supported a statewide educational initiative for horse owners. The legislation also empowered the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association with specific brand inspection

authority at locations in Texas. This significantly improves chances for recovery of stolen horses.

Even so, individual horse owners can take steps in the management and care of horses, facilities and equipment to minimize the risk of theft. Here are 15 steps to curbing horse theft. At least some of them should be applicable for every horse owner.

1 Permanently mark horses using one or more methods.

Texas legislation encourages horse owners to permanently identify horses. Thieves are less likely to steal horses that are per-

manently marked, and those that are stolen are easier to track and recover. Remember: The state is full of solid sorrels and bays all fitting a similar description.

Horse owners establishing a new brand should check with the county clerk's office to avoid duplicating an existing brand.

Horses can be marked permanently by:

- Freeze brand (using customized, number or letter iron and by alpha angle code methods);
- Hot iron brand;
- Microchip (implant); and/or
- Lip tattoo.

For detailed information on methods of identification, see Extension publications L-5084, "Freeze Branding Horses," and L-5211, "Permanent Identification of Horses."

2 Photograph horses and keep photos current.

- Photograph both sides of the horse as close as possible, being sure to get the entire horse in the frame. Although saddles, blankets, leg wraps and people may look good in a photo, they often impair the photo's usefulness for identification.
- Photograph the front of the horse, being sure to get a clear



There are several different methods of permanent marking or identification available to horse owners.

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Well-built perimeter fences help secure horses and deter theft.

picture of the head. If possible, also take a rear view.

- Take close-up pictures of any unique, identifying characteristics such as a brand, permanent scar or white markings.

3 Establish an organized, easy-to-find proof-of-ownership file.

To save valuable time and frustration in proving ownership should a theft occur, keep on file:

- Registration papers (if horse is registered with a breed association);
- Dated bill of sale and/or breed association transfer-of-ownership paperwork;
- Photographs; and
- Description of mark or brand and written description of all unique characteristics.

4 Record the permanent brand or mark with the county clerk's office in the county where the horse lives.

The Texas Legislature encourages registering brands or marks, which can keep others from using your brand. Registration also helps

law enforcement officers and brand inspectors to communicate and determine ownership, and can speed the process of filing theft reports.

5 Secure barns, corrals or pens from the road with a good perimeter fence and well-built gates that can be locked.

Slowing a potential horse thief and/or making access to horses more difficult can deter theft significantly.



Lock gates to pastures that can be entered from the road.

6 If you plan to build a barn or corral, locate it away from the road.

Place facilities beyond your house if at all possible. They are less likely targets if they are more difficult to access and require thieves to pass a house.

7 Manage pastured horses to make theft more difficult.

- For safety as well as theft deterrence, never leave halters on pastured horses.
 - Do not feed horses close to the pasture gate or near the road. Although convenient for owners, this practice actually helps potential thieves. Hungry horses will congregate around the usual feeding area, making them easy to catch.
 - Keep pasture gates locked.
 - Check on pastured horses regularly and vary the time of your trips to the pasture.
- Absentee owners sometimes don't realize for several days that their horses have been stolen from pastures.



Avoid the temptation to leave halters on pastured horses.

8 Do not hang halters and lead ropes on stall fronts, corral gate posts or anywhere in the open.

Secure halters in a locked tack room or feed room.

9 Permanently identify and lock up expensive tack.

Consider having your driver's license number engraved on the underside of saddles, expensive headstalls and other valuable items. While it will not prevent theft, locking the tack room does deter it by increasing the time a thief must be on your property.

10 Make horse and livestock trailers inaccessible, hide them from view and be able to prove ownership.

- Use commercially available locks to secure the hitch on a bumper-pull trailer. Many gooseneck trailers can be padlocked.
- Park trailers in a barn or somewhere hidden from traf-

fic to make it harder for thieves to determine what is available and when or if horse owners are home.

- On commercially manufactured trailers, know where the VIN or serial number is located (frame, tongue, etc.) and have that number on file.
- Know and record your trailer's license plate number.
- Take and file photographs of your trailer.

11 Use signs and warning posters where appropriate.

To signal to potential thieves that the owner is informed, active and aware, post such notices as:

- No trespassing signs;
- Security system signs; and
- Farm or livestock association membership signs.

12 Install motion-sensor lights.

Motion-sensor lights turn on when they detect activity in strategic areas.

Note: If horses are on a lighting program (i.e., 16 hours of daylight, 8 hours of darkness), be careful about where motion-sensor lights are located. Something as simple as the family dog can trigger the light to come on and could interrupt efforts to maintain the photoperiod effect for brood mares and show horses.

13 Talk to local law enforcement authorities about the value of dogs and other animals in deterring theft.

Thieves dislike dealing with dogs. However, consider that dogs also require management.



Deter theft by locking up halters and lead ropes.



Park trailers where they are hidden from view.

14 Keep the activity level up around horses.

Horses isolated from well-traveled areas and often left alone are easy targets. To deter theft:

- Vary your routine to make it difficult for potential thieves to know when you will be away.
- Avoid advertising when you are leaving town.

15 Establish a horse and facilities watch program with other horse owners in your area.

- Take turns checking on each other's horses.
- Check on group members' horses regularly when they are out of town.

Although horses and equipment will never be entirely safe from theft, many are stolen simply because it was made easy for thieves. Taking these steps to prevent theft will help you keep your horses and equipment safe.

Resources

For more information or more specific guidelines for individual situations, contact law enforcement (police, sheriff departments) authorities in your town, city or county. Many communities have crime prevention guidelines, suggestions or programs, and sometimes even resource people who will speak to equine groups and associations.

Publications available from Texas Cooperative Extension include:

- L-5244, "What to do if Your Horse is Stolen"; and

- L-5211, "Horse Theft Awareness and Prevention: Permanent Identification of Horses."

Publications available from Veterinary Practice Publishing Company, P.O. Box 4457, Santa Barbara, California 93140-4457, include:

- *The Equine Recovery Handbook*, by Amelita F. Donald;
- *The Equine Identification Handbook*; and
- *The Equine Identification Card*.

Contacts

- Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association—Fort Worth (817) 332-7064;
- Sheriffs' Association of Texas—Austin (512) 445-5888; and
- Extension Horse Specialists—Equine Science Section, Texas A&M University (979) 845-1562.

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