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Dognapped!

Pint-size pups are more popular than ever — with owners and with thieves

By Colleen Mastony
Tribune staff reporter

May 8, 2007

Thieves ransacked and robbed the Deatricks family's Bolingbrook home in March, taking the phones, the computer and Great-Grandma's cameo brooch. But the family's biggest shock came when 11-year-old Steven Deatricks went looking for Pixie, their beloved 12-pound pug. Pixie's bowl was gone. Her steel cage was missing. Then the awful realization struck: Pixie had been dognapped.

With starlets such as Paris Hilton cradling Chihuahuas on the pages of celebrity magazines, petite pooches have become a big craze. But soaring popularity and increasing prices -- often starting at \$1,500 -- have bred a strange trend: Across Chicago and the nation, pet stores and dog owners are reporting thefts of pint-size pups.

In April, two men sprinted from a pet store in Lombard after stealing a 2.5-pound silky terrier worth \$1,000. The clerk chased the thieves through the parking lot, grabbed one man by the belt, and pulled off his jacket before the man turned and punched her in the face. It was the second robbery in a month for the shop. In the other incident, a man tucked a silky terrier under his jacket and bolted out the door. When the clerk confronted the man, he sprayed her with mace.

"My eyes swelled shut. I sat down on the ground and told someone to call 911," recalled Erika Bowlds, 21, the store manager. "I thought, 'Who would steal a dog?'"

Though no one tracks the numbers, experts say dognapping is on the rise, with a smattering of cases reported from New York to California. A 2-pound teacup Yorkshire terrier was snatched from a doggie day care in Manhattan in mid-April. In November, a 12-pound Norwich terrier was swiped from her owner's car parked near the Newberry Library in Chicago. Perhaps the most brazen puppy heist occurred in Los Angeles in February when two men held a family at gunpoint and chased a litter of scampering Yorkshire terriers around the room before stuffing the dogs into a black trash bag.

Boosted pooches have created a brisk business for pet detectives, according to Karin Goin, 50, of Tulsa-based Pet Detectives Inc., who said she has handled about 10 cases in as many months. And the thefts have left a wake of teary pet-lovers across the region. "I was in such shock. I almost passed out," said Lee Kouski, 27, of Grayslake, recalling the moment she realized her two Tibetan terriers had been stolen at a dog show in Lake County last

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year. "They were like my children."

The trend has spurred rewards as high as \$5,000, and prompted some pet shops to install security systems the likes of which seem better suited to Ft. Knox than to the Puppy Barn.

In response to the dog snatchings, 47th Ward Ald. Gene Schulner in April included an alert in his monthly newsletter. The notice offered tips for owners, urged people not to leave dogs unattended and warned ominously, "It can happen to your pet."

"Dognapping is not unusual. And that is only because the values have gone up so high," said Louis Auslander, 82, president of International Kennel Club of Chicago. Prices have more than doubled in 10 years, and experts believe thieves resell the stolen dogs. "These days, in this marketplace, it pays to steal a dog. Thieves can pick up a toy dog — it is not as heavy as a TV. You can slip it under your jacket. And a dog can't point a finger at who stole them."

The toy dog group of the American Kennel Club comprises 21 dogs, including the Yorkshire terrier, the silky terrier, the pug and the Chihuahua. All are bred for their small size, and sometimes — in the case of the teacup Yorkie — weigh just 2 to 3 pounds. The popularity of toy dogs has risen steadily since the 1970s, and earlier this year the Yorkshire terrier overtook the golden retriever to become second-most popular purebred in America.

Demand outpaces supply

But demand for pee-wee puppies has outpaced supply. Toy dogs have small litters — often just two pups, compared with about eight for other breeds. Experts say the low birthrates have spurred high prices, long waiting lists and now theft.

Lane Boron, 38, of Chicago, had to fly to Florida to find a pair of miniature pinchers three years ago. The shortage inspired him to open "Pocket Puppies Boutique" in Lincoln Park last year. Though Boron charges up to \$2,800 per mini-mutt, he hadn't worried much about security until this spring, when he heard about the Yorkies in Los Angeles that had been stolen at gunpoint.

"My first thought was, 'Could it happen here?' " Boron said. A week later, he had a \$3,000 security system installed in his shop, with night vision cameras and panic buttons.

Now, when customers want to hold a dog, they must go behind a locked gate. Boron's uncle, a sergeant for the Chicago Police Department, stands guard on weekends. And shop employees warn customers about the dangers of dognapping. "I explain, 'These small ones do get stolen because they are little and worth a lot of money,' " said Samantha Kaplan, 26, a shop manager, who on a recent day stood amid the shelves of crystal-studded dog collars, dog nail polish (in six colors) and dog T-shirts that said, "I ♥ bitches."

Serious crime

Though crimes are still isolated, the police are taking the reports seriously. After her dog was stolen out of her car in November, a woman named Mary offered a \$2,500 reward and soon got a call from someone who claimed to have her dog, a 12-pound Norwich terrier named Lola. Mary — who did not want her last name printed because she said she had received threats — arranged a hand-off at a Burger King on South Michigan Avenue.

Plainclothes police officers watched as a man approached the restaurant. In his arms, he carried Lola, who was wagging her tail. "He gave me the dog, and I gave him \$1,500," recalled Mary, in an account later confirmed by Chicago Police. Then the cops swept in. "Two squad cars were on him and police with guns drawn. They pulled him out of the car and took him to the station. I was just happy to get my dog back."

Likewise, the Bolingbrook police recovered Pixie, the pug stolen from the Deatricks family in March. A reward for the dog had reached \$4,500, signs were plastered all over the town and a local radio station had hired a pet psychic. Police wouldn't say how they found Pixie, except to note that it took "great detective work," according to Lt. Chris Prochut.

On a recent day, Pixie seemed happy to be home. She chased the family cat, stood on her hind legs to beg for a treat and ran a lap around the back yard. Cradled in Dorene Deatricks arms, Pixie dozed off and began to snore. "You have so many bad things happening in this world," said Deatricks, 44, smiling down at her dog. "It's nice to have a happy ending."

cmastony@tribune.com

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