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Tips for making your country place safer
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—In most rural areas, rates for most crimes are far lower than most urban and suburban communities. But rural crime rates have been significant or on the rise for certain types of lawbreaking, such as driving under the influence, burglary and larceny theft, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and the Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Survey. Between one third and one half of all agricultural operations experience a crime each year, typically theft of livestock, equipment, fuel, supplies, household items or timber. Hunting camps and vacation homes are easily robbed. Firearms, booze and readily sold consumer items are the preferred plunder.

Drugs and gang activity are now a presence in rural counties. Vandalism—taking batting practice against roadside mailboxes and teenagers shooting paintballs...at cows—has occurred in my mountain county of 2,500 full-time residents, one usually blinking light and two lawyers, one of whom is both my wife and our newly elected local prosecutor. (She practiced on me for 25 years and never failed to convict.) Crime victims in law-abiding rural areas are unsettled by the smallest violation. When a tractor's gas tank gets siphoned at night, it's not the money, it's the breaking of the community's cultural norm that surprises and disappoints.

Full-time country residents and second-home owners can take steps to reduce the likelihood of having their property stolen.

Use locks. Many rural residents don't lock their houses out of habit or faith in the Golden Rule. Thieves flow to opportunities of least resistance.

Close doors. While it's convenient to keep a large barn door open, closed doors discourage uninvited entry.

Reduce exposure. Don't leave valuable stuff in remote buildings or by a road. Remove guns and fishing tackle from seldom-visited camps.

Brand your stuff. Invest in a big soft-tipped marker with indelible ink, carbon pencil and electric etcher. Write your name on tools, gas cans, ATVs, firearms, TVs, and personal items.

Brand valuable livestock or implant them with a microchip ID. Non-toxic ID confetti and tabs can be mixed with stored grains and hay.

Put up signs that state you've marked your possessions. The National

Sheriffs' Association has crime-prevention materials, such as signs and decals.

Take pictures. Photograph jewelry, antiques, guns, paintings and anything else that you might have to identify in a pawn shop. Keep the photos in a safety-deposit box.

Outside lights. Many farms and second homes are armed with high-illumination security lights to deter night-loving criminals and attract exotic bugs from South America. They turn your property into a cross between an urban parking lot and a morgue. I'm willing to concede that more light probably means less crime, but a modest bulb might do the job just as well.

Inside lights. Absentee owners often use timers. I know of no criminal who's ever been fooled by a single bedroom lamp that turns on at precisely 8 p.m. behind drawn shades and turns off at precisely 10 p.m. every night that the owner's car is not in the driveway.

Dogs. Barky dogs are good to have around in that once-a-decade moment when a good stiff bark is needed. The rest of the time such dogs simply annoy their owners at 3 a.m. by narrating their nightmares. Still, criminals avoid dogs even those who bear them no ill will. Inflatable window-sitting German Shepherds are also available. Their bite is no good, but you'll sleep through their bad dreams.

Trees. A single veneer-quality walnut or cherry log is worth more than \$1,000, and sometimes a great deal more. Trophy trees can be painted with the owner's initials to deter cutting. Unfortunately, a minimally clever criminal will simply saw off the painted bark before hauling it to the buyer at the mill. His less clever peers, however, might be stumped. Well-marked boundary lines deter some thieves from entering your woodlot through a neighbor.

Repeat business. If thieves hit you once, they will put you on their hit-again list until you do something to stop them. An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of squabbling with your insurance company. Ask the sheriff about the crime history of any property you're thinking about buying.

Eyes and ears. Neighbors are the best protection for your property, and vice versa. They notice unfamiliar cars and people snooping around your place. Put the word out when you're going to be away.

Every castle no matter how high the walls or how wide the moat can be breached. But rural property owners can make it a little harder on thieves and a little easier on themselves by taking simple precautions. The more fortress-like you make your country place, the more it imprisons you and locks out the

values of trust and neighborliness that you value. Look for the balance between reasonable security and reasonable openness.

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