

Crime follows boaters to lakes

Water Patrol officers this year have investigated 176 thefts at Table Rock Lake alone.

By Mark R. Fletcher
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Thieves prowled area lakes this summer looking for opportunities.

They found plenty. Table Rock Lake's theft rate was the highest in Missouri, Missouri Water Patrol officials said.

Victims often simply "left things sitting out in the open in the boat," said Capt. Gary Haupt.

Water Patrol officers have investigated 176 thefts at Table Rock Lake this year.

Most involved fishing tackle, marine electronics or other boating equipment and were typically crimes of opportunity, Haupt said.

While most thefts involved unattended and unsecured boats and lockers, Haupt said thieves are beginning to show more ingenuity.

"We're also seeing a little bit more sophistication about knowing how to break into a secured area," he said.

Many vacationers have a false sense of security about locked areas on boats, which are actually "quite easy to pry open," Haupt said.

People who never leave their car doors unlocked or valuables in plain sight sometimes abandon their usual alertness at a lake, Haupt said.

"Treat it as if you were parking at the Battlefield Mall," Haupt said. "Would you leave that stuff out in an unlocked car with the windows down?"

Some property was recovered following arrests this summer, Haupt said, but most has been disposed of by thieves.

Water Patrol officers have made some progress in solving thefts.

This summer they solved 36 thefts and arrested several adults and juveniles.

Seven adults face 19 counts of felony stealing and two counts of felony receiving. Charges are pending against two more.

Juvenile arrests totaled 16, and 32 counts were filed with juvenile authorities.

The seven adults were arrested as the result of different investigations and don't appear to be part of a ring, Haupt said.

The problem kids are a combination of locals and tourists, but most are local residents, Haupt said.

"We have a major juvenile problem," Haupt said.

"I see a big problem with juveniles that maybe aren't being properly supervised."

Mary Swanson, who co-owns Port of Kimberling Marina, agrees juveniles are a problem and wishes law enforcement could be more aggressive.

"They are juveniles: it's too bad they can't even slap their hands," she said.

Despite the arrests, theft remains an ongoing problem — especially on Table Rock Lake.

Table Rock Lake seems more susceptible to thefts than other lakes, the patrol said, because of its large number of docks.

Swanson attributes the high rates to the area's rapid development.

"I think a lot of it's because of the

growth and the amount of people around," she said. "We need the growth and want it. But with the good, you get the bad, too."

Haupt emphasized preventive measures could remedy most of the problems.

"Remove the temptation," he said. "Put them in a secure area as opposed to what is only a relatively secure area. Make it tougher on them, basically."