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Thursday, July 1, 2010

U.S. Dog-Fighting Rings Stealing Pets for "Bait"

Maryann Mott
for National Geographic News
February 18, 2004

For years the Pima County Sheriff's Department found the chewed-up bodies of dead dogs in the Arizona desert. But it wasn't until four years ago that the truth behind the killings emerged: Stolen family pets were being used in bloody training exercises by dog fighting rings.

The problem is not confined to Arizona. Animal-welfare groups and law-enforcement officers say pets throughout the country are frequently nabbed for "bait"—animals used to test another dog's fighting instinct. The "bait" is mauled or killed in the process.

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Like all good detectives, Mike Duffey of the Pima County Sheriff's Department pieced together the clues. Four years ago he was assigned to investigate animal crimes full-time.

Duffey knew the dead dogs found in the county's rural areas weren't strays, because the pads of their feet and their nails had not been worn down from a life on the streets. So Duffey checked the lost-and-stolen-animal reports kept by the local humane society.

"We found that a lot of the dogs found in these desert dumping areas were in fact, at one time, [reported] stolen," said Duffey, co-chair of the Animal Cruelty Taskforce of Southern Arizona, an organization made up of law-enforcement, criminal-justice, and animal-protection professionals. "So we began looking for a connection."

That connection was made when the veteran detective found a copy of the *American Patriot*. The journal, he said, was filled with pictures of fighting pit bulls kept in the very same areas where officers were finding the remains of mauled dogs.

Duffey says a large number of animals are reported lost in Pima County. Within the last six months, 3,396 animals have been reported missing. Of that amount, Duffey estimates 50 percent may have been stolen.

"Animal control has enough people out on patrol, so if [an animal] was truly a stray, they'd encounter it," Duffey said. "But they never turn up as strays; they just turn up as missing. Then somewhere down the line, we find one in the desert that matches the description of four or five that were reported stolen."

In January the sheriff's department began to tally local pets stolen by dog-fighting operations. Officers match the descriptions of animals found dumped in the desert to those reported missing.

National statistics on how many pets are taken each year and used as bait by dog-fighting rings are not available.

"I think every state has a problem with it, whether they know it or not," said Patricia Wagner, head of the National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force for the Humane Society of the United States.



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Wagner said news reports about stolen pets in the U.S. have appeared in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas, among other states.

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