



The Beneteau 57's unique profile provided fast recovery of a stolen Charleston sailboat.

Glen McIntosh probably never heard of the 1950's beat poet Allen Ginsberg, but his poem "Gone Gone Gone" about a loss of innocence surely must have expressed the feeling of the Atlanta oral surgeon when he was told last January 8 that his brand new Beneteau 57 was no longer in its Charleston, SC, slip.

Boaters just don't expect their boats to be stolen; maybe their car, but not their boat. When this innocent assumption is shattered it's as if the thieves have stolen your peace of mind, says Rick Roughen of south Florida's *Waterfront News*.

McIntosh's Beneteau 57 — the only one of its kind in the United States — disappeared on a moonlit night last January 7, from the Charleston City Marina and was found 500 miles away in the Bahamas three weeks later on January 28. Acting on a tip, the combined forces of the FBI, drug enforcement agents and the Bahamian police recovered the vessel. The thieves should have known better; when you steal a yacht, don't steal an easily identifiable limited edition.

What are the chances of an average Joe's stolen boat being recovered? Las Vegas odds makers would take 10 to 1 odds against it according to Karlton Kilby, BoatU.S. Marine Insurance executive and president of the International Association of Marine Investigators (IAMI).

Notwithstanding the fortunate fate of McIntosh's Beneteau, sailboats have the lowest boat theft rate in the U.S. Based on a 10-year study of BoatU.S. Marine Insurance claim files, sailboats have a theft rate of 2.5 in 10,000, compared to 100 in 10,000 for personal watercraft. That said, determining how many boats are stolen each year is more art than science. The FBI has a database, but keeps the information away from the public. The U.S. Coast Guard doesn't have the manpower to keep theft statistics and states that don't require titling have trouble tracking stolen vessels.

The National Insurance Crime Bureau, a not-for-profit organization representing property and casualty insurance companies, reported earlier this year that approximately 10,000 watercraft are stolen annually. IAMI and the Allstate Insurance Company agree with that figure for boats stolen while in the water. However, they put the number closer to 27,000 when trailered and stored boats are counted. A majority of the stolen boats are less than 20 feet and most of them are on trailers parked in driveways, on the street or in motel parking lots.

"The number of thefts has been fairly constant, but the number of equipment thefts appears to be increasing, and many of them show up on eBay," says Carroll Robertson, vice president of claims for BoatU.S. Marine Insurance. In fact, San

Diego police recently traced the culprits who were stealing expensive gold-anodized salt-water fishing reels by monitoring eBay.

Reports that professional thieves are getting into boat theft in a big way are disturbing. They target items that are easy to steal and dispose of. Recently, New York police broke up a gang that was stealing personal watercraft, putting them in shipping containers and sending them to the Caribbean. There has also been an increase in organized theft of small outboard motors. They, too, are a popular item to steal because they're easy to remove and transport and difficult to trace. Florida leads the nation in these thefts — nearly one in four outboard engine thefts occurs there. With its long coastline, thieves have an easy escape route to South America and the Caribbean where a ready market can bring a quick \$3,500 for a \$10,000 engine.

### The Price of Prevention

The price of preventing a theft may be the cheapest part of owning a boat. There are common sense things that can be done that cost only your time and effort. Since 95% of all stolen boats are "package thefts" where the boat, motor and trailer are stolen together, BoatU.S.'s *Seaworthy* insurance newsletter lists removing your trailer's tires and its license plate as simple steps to foil thieves. *Seaworthy* has put additional tips on



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its Web site at [boatus.com/seaworthy/trailer/default.asp](http://boatus.com/seaworthy/trailer/default.asp).

While boats in the water may be harder to steal, there are things that can be done to protect them as easily as a trailered boat. (see sidebar).

## To Catch a Thief

Stolen boats can be recovered by experts like Todd Schwede of San Diego-based Todd & Associates. As a modern day bounty hunter, he responds to requests from insurance companies to chase down the bad guys. His company maintains a database of stolen boats and uses fax machines and the Internet to publish wanted posters. His ubiquitous notices reach over 8,000 locations including state and local police. He boasts a 68% recovery rate that is music to the ears of insurance companies trying to keep claims costs from skyrocketing.

Catching a boat thief has become easier with some of today's new technologies. Such devices run the gamut from foolproof ways to identify boats to complex systems that protect a boat from virtually any catastrophe.

One of the simplest is the DataDot™ Hull Identification Number (HIN), distributed by Identification Technologies of Issaquah, WA. All that you need to do is paint the clear liquid dots all over your boat. For well under \$100, these invisible encoded dots, the size of a grain of sand, allow a boat to be identified when viewed under an ultraviolet light. They are easy to apply and can be purchased from the company online.

Mercury Marine has this product as part of their anti-theft security promotion on new Mercury (inboard and outboards) Mariner engines, Quicksilver inflatables and Savage and Bermuda boats.

Another new technology, for under \$100, was designed to track shipping containers as part of the war on terrorism. Philips Semiconductors' electronic identification strip called I-CODE is now protecting boats in Europe against theft and, according to Elisabeth Doerner, spokeswoman for the company, should be on its way to our shores as this issue of *BoatU.S.*

*Magazine* goes to press. Meanwhile, the British have also developed a silicon chip, called Bookmark, that broadcasts a unique radio frequency which can be tracked with a simple radio receiver.

These inexpensive technologies have two drawbacks—they only help find your boat after it has been stolen and the authorities must be near your boat to detect the signal.

There are also systems out there that may have a good chance of preventing a theft, or at least catch a thief in the act. That is the principle behind the SeaKey system from Volvo Penta. Using the satellite Global Positioning System, Volvo Penta's system goes way beyond theft prevention.

SeaKey tells you where your boat is at all times and monitors other vital functions as well. It provides many additional services including emergency signaling (SOS), monitoring your boat's bilge water and battery level and you can even ask it to make reservations at your next port of call. Think of SeaKey as the marine version of General

Motors' OnStar system for automobiles.

Genmar, the world's largest manufacturer of recreational boats, has included SeaKey on most of their 2004 line under its FirstMate Gold Plus program.

Many other new systems are just emerging and can be retrofitted to existing boats. The up-front costs can vary from \$1,500 to \$5,000, including installation. Instead of using sophisticated call centers, they direct an alert to your mobile

phone or computer, thereby keeping their annual costs low. They also trigger on-board sirens or recorder warnings drawing the attention of neighboring boaters. Australia's BlueRay Marine Security System is one of the new breed that monitors your boat, reporting intruders, fire and gas detection, high bilge water and engine status. Boaters may begin to see many of these emerging technologies showing up at some of the major boat shows this coming year.

Meanwhile, it's still a mystery who took the Beneteau 57 from Charleston that was found at the Running Mon Marina near Freeport in the Bahamas. Suspicions were raised when the \$600,000 Beneteau was spotted in a nearby deserted marina. If McIntosh had had one of the new anti-theft devices on board, like Bookmark or Volvo's SeaKey, the thieves might have gotten caught red-handed. ■

— By Dick Thompson



Painting a hull with invisible Data Dots IDs a boat under UV light.