

## Boat Thieves Busy In Florida



Pinellas County Sheriff's Capt. Michael Platt's 27-foot Contender sports fishing boat was stolen in July.

By [CARLOS MONCADA](#) | The Tampa Tribune

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CLEARWATER - Michael Platt figures he's seen the last of his \$140,000 fishing boat, stolen from a dry dock in July.

Pricey vessels such as his are being targeted in greater numbers throughout Florida, dismantled and sold for parts or kept intact and used for maritime smuggling operations by organized crime rings.

"Usually if they don't find them within a couple of weeks, you're done," said Platt, a Seminole resident and 33-year veteran of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office.

He is among several dozen boat theft victims in the Bay area, where vessel theft is up nearly 15 percent, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

So far this year, 183 vessels have been taken from residences and marinas in Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco counties compared to 156 during all of last year, statistics show.

Overall, boat thefts in Florida are up 30 percent this year, with more than 1,200 reported stolen, mostly in South Florida. Along with that increase is a spike in the theft of big boats with big engines, so-called "go-fast" boats, and fishing vessels in the 26- to 39-foot range.

"The bigger boats are being targeted with greater frequency than in previous years," said Lt. John Humphreys, of the conservation commission's investigations section.

Thefts are up, in part, because there are more boats in Florida as its population increases, Humphreys said. The Sunshine State has more than 1 million registered vessels.

Increasingly, though, go-fast boats and fishing vessels are being stolen for their high dollar value and for maritime smuggling activities, Humphreys said. According to some reports, human smuggling operations are bringing thousands of undocumented Cuban migrants to the United States on high-powered speedboats, primarily by way of remote beaches in the Florida Keys or Mexico, at a price of up to \$10,000 a head.

Fast, seaworthy boats such as Platt's Contender sport fishing boat, with its two 250-horsepower Yamaha engines and top speed of 60 mph, are the vessels of choice among traffickers, authorities said.

"It's made for speed and range and visibility," Platt said. "They're highly desired by people who do immigrant smuggling and drug smuggling."

Even the chairman of the wildlife commission, Rodney Barreto, is a victim. Barreto had his 36-foot Contender stolen from his Key Largo home last month. It was recovered at a state park a few miles from his home.

Onboard were two 50-gallon drums of fuel, bags of food and water. Such a boat can hold about 30 people and could net smugglers up to \$300,000 per trip.

"The assumption was the vessel was going to be used to be able to travel somewhere [far] to bring people back, and that's why there was fuel and food onboard." Humphreys said.

Platt thinks a similar fate may have befallen his boat, taken from a dry dock at Madeira Beach Municipal Marina in July while he was out of town. He said the boat, which was on a trailer, was locked down but not covered.

Thieves cut the locks off the gate and towed the boat away on its trailer. Surveillance video has yielded no clues.

"It just disappeared," Platt said. "My belief is someone out of the area wanted it because it's not a boat you can just ride around here. I truly believe somebody took it, went to South Florida and either warehoused it or took it down to the islands."

Part of the problem is that boats can be broken down and sold quickly, said Pinellas sheriff's Sgt. Charles Degenhardt, who handles boat thefts in south Pinellas County.

"Most everything in the boating world is designed to be modular," he said. "They can break it down and sell it very quickly for parts, much easier than they can even for a car."

Humphreys said boat theft often is a crime of opportunity.

If people used the same precautions with boats as they do their cars, there would be fewer boats stolen, he said.

"There are all kinds of anti-theft devices and car alarms, but when it comes to boats, they don't install the same alarm," he said. "And they leave their keys aboard or leave them accessible."

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