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In the nation's car-theft capital, you can be gone in 60 seconds, in jail within 20 minutes, and back on the street in four months.

BY AARON ROBINSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MORGAN J. SEGAL



A half-dozen pairs of headlights are easing into a loose formation behind a late-model import sedan on a freeway outside Modesto, California, where a moonless February night has settled in with a penetrating chill. The trailing vehicles move at posted speeds, slip among the lanes gently, and try to remain camouflaged among the surrounding traffic. A few miles back, an older Honda is straining at what feels like 90 mph, zigzagging around cars in an effort to catch up. A laptop computer lights the faces of the Stanislaus County probate officer at the wheel and the semi-terrified car-magazine editor next to her.

"Are you ready? Do you know what to do? Are you **READY?**"

Officer Donna Kniess glances at me as I grip the laptop, its screen flickering with a street map of Modesto and a moving blip representing the sedan. As instructed, I key in the command "ignition off" and move the mouse pointer over the "send" button. Hours of tedium have culminated in these few seconds, the built-up tension releasing with enough amps to weld steel. I cinch my seatbelt.

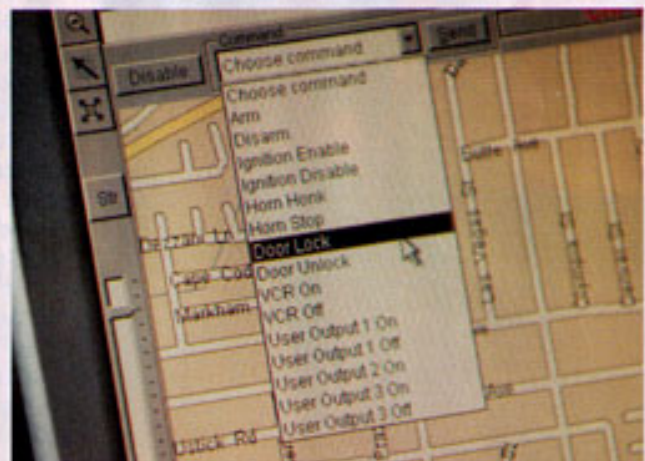
Up ahead the blackness is suddenly pierced by the red-and-blue wink of police lights. A voice crackles over the radio: "Shut it down. Shut it down **NOW!**"

Modesto is Spanish for "modest," fitting since this rusting agricultural crossroads of more than 200,000 in California's wind-swept Central Valley east of San Francisco holds few distinctions of which to boast. Besides being the hometown of *Star Wars* creator George Lucas and the setting of Lucas's 1973 breakout film *American Graffiti*, Modesto is the car-theft capital of America.

Or at least it was in 2003 and 2004, the latest years for which the rankings are available from the National Insur-



Bait cars are parked in areas ripe for thievery.



■ Modesto's car-theft unit is undercover, the winter uniform being flannel and blue jeans. The first bait car on this night was a tractor-trailer stolen 10 minutes after being deployed by the police sting operation. Laptop software keeps the bait cars from vanishing, and an in-car video system identifies the thief.

ance Crime Bureau. Modesto beat out Las Vegas, San Diego, and Seattle in car thefts per 100,000 residents, and cities in the Great Central Valley—a hot zone of car boosting—swept five of the top 10 spots. Modesto stands a good chance of three-peating when the 2005 rankings are released in August. The FBI notes that the 1692 car thefts reported last year in Modesto were a 22-percent increase over those of 2004, even as auto theft dropped 2.1 percent nationally.

Modesto's problem is speed. Or crank. Or "goey," as some call it. The farmlands ringing the town are rife with methamphetamine labs, says CHP Lt. Jeff Morris, the commander of the Stanislaus County Auto Theft Task Force (or StanCATT), a multiagency police group charged with reducing auto theft in Modesto and the surrounding areas.

The prevalence of the quick grab for a car radio or other belongings is echoed

in Modesto's stolen-vehicle recovery rate of 95 percent, says Morris. Thieves take what's in the cars and dump them, often on the same evening and within a few blocks of the crime. Although drivers here stand a better chance of getting their cars back than in the rest of the U.S., which averages a 65-percent recovery rate according to the insurance bureau, the cars are usually returned damaged and cleaned out of valuables. The insurance industry says stolen autos were worth \$7.6 billion nationwide in 2004, but not everyone was covered. "A lot of people can't afford comprehensive insurance," says Morris. "They don't have other ways to get to work, so auto theft hits the community really hard here."

And it happens without much of a penalty. Classified as a nonviolent felony (unless it's a carjacking), car theft typically earns the perpetrator just 120 to 150 days in the clink, and it isn't subject to California's three-strikes rule, meaning the sen-

tence doesn't rise with each conviction.

"It's 'let's make a deal' in the courthouse, and a few months later they're out," says Morris. "Almost all the guys we arrest have prior histories." He likens jail time to going away to school, since thieves use the opportunity to catch up on the latest techniques from their colleagues.

In 2004, imitating a program developed in Minnesota, the CHP decided to go fishing for thieves with bait cars. Nondescript vehicles are wired with hidden cameras and a VCR, along with a GPS transponder and a remote control that uses the cell-phone network to communicate with a master laptop computer. When a door, trunk, or hood of the car is opened, the laptop is alerted and sounds a sort of bugle call. StanCATT carries the laptop around in one of its undercover patrol cars—mostly, civilian-looking pickups and SUVs—using it to track the bait car's location and speed. Meanwhile, the onboard camera films a grainy black-



■ An in-car camera catches a suspect making what looks very much like his *American Idol* demo tape (above) shortly before the ignition is cut and the cops close in. The tension, the chase, the heady execution of justice: Our technical editor, riding shotgun (below), gets addicted.



and-white image of the interior that will be used in court to identify the thief.

When enough units are in position, including at least one marked police car under ideal circumstances, the bait car is ordered to shut down, lock its doors, and, if necessary, honk its horn. After that, the chase sometimes goes to foot power with the preferred takedown weapon being a TASER, a nonlethal gun that reduces victims, hit by its 50,000-volt zap, to twitching blubber.

For obvious reasons, Morris doesn't want us to be specific about the bait cars (figure popular brands and models, so no Citroëns), or how many the CHP has, or how often they are deployed. It's not every day, as the bait cars are shared among regions. When the cars come to Modesto, up to a dozen officers gear up for the rush. In one 23-day period last November, StanCATT made 76 arrests.

The action typically doesn't start until sundown. While thieves sleep off the previous night's speed binge, the bait cars are placed in strategic spots around town—parking lots, on active car-theft streets—

unlocked and with the keys in the ignition and various inducements on the seats such as phones, purses, and open bags of chips. Sometimes they are left idling. "We want thieves to take our cars," says Morris, adding that bait cars are not considered entrapment because the thieves do not have to take them.

Meanwhile, the StanCATTers circle the weedy neighborhoods of clapboard and stucco bungalows, finding dumped vehicles, running suspicious plates, and searching for the grand prize. A "rollin' stolen" is a stolen car actually being driven by a perp. Those are rare, but Derrick Brackett, 37, a 12-year CHP veteran of uniformed road patrol who now gets to dress like a Hells Angel as part of his undercover gig, has a talent for spotting them. As he drives, Brackett pours over the two-page, single-spaced list of the most recent stolen cars.

"We want them to think we never sleep," he says. Considering that StanCATTers work 12-hour shifts and often go past 1 a.m. during bait-car pushes, it's not far from the truth.

The unit breaks for a dinner of tacos

## Top Five Tools of Car Thieves



1

1. Ground or shanked keys. Carefully filed, they become master keys to open doors and turn ignitions in older cars. **Where to get:** junkyards, locksmiths, your dresser drawer. **Cost:** practically free.



2

2. Slide hammers. They remove the ignition lock with one quick blow. **Where to get:** hardware stores. **Cost:** \$15 to \$40.



3

3. Slim Jims and other professional lockout tool kits. **Where to get:** tow-truck supply catalogs. **Cost:** \$20 to \$80.



4

4. Code grabbers. These black boxes record remote codes and play them back to unlock doors. **Where to get:** shady online retailers. **Cost:** \$150.



5

5. Replacement ECUs and pirate software. This is the tool of the elite thief chasing high-end luxury cars. **Where to get:** pro hackers in trench coats. **Cost:** up to \$15,000.

and burritos. The laptop, which is carried into the restaurant, remains politely quiet for the next hour or so.

Then all hell breaks loose.

The first to go down is a gangly 21-year-old, nabbed quickly and quietly on a residential street after filling the bait car's back seat with his tagging spray cans.

"Is this a setup?" he asks, eyes blinking in the flashlight glare.

"What do you think?" says one of the five armed cops surrounding him.

Next is a slightly older dude, maybe late 20s, who makes it eight miles up the freeway before the arresting units can be positioned. Called into volunteer service by a shortage of hands in the Honda, I successfully hit the "send" button, and the bait car stalls. The man is pulled out, whimpering. Later, the videotape will show him grooving with Shania Twain in blissful ignorance right up until the police lights come on. You almost feel sorry for the dope. Almost.

Finally, in the wee hours, just as Morris is about to fold the operation for the night, Brackett hits the jackpot. It's a *rollin'* stolen, a purple Chevy Suburban that Brackett has been hunting for weeks. The three occupants turn out to be two teenage girls and a scowling 20-something male. They're pulled out and quickly handcuffed, and the Suburban's back doors are flung open. It's loaded to the gunwales with stereo equipment, VCRs, cell phones, toolboxes, stacks of personal mail, credit cards, and drivers' licenses, plus a few trips' worth of crystal meth. Wiring spills out of the Chevy's dash as though someone has been redesigning it with an ice pick.

If it were your Chevy, you'd want someone's head on an ice pick. And that's what motivates the StanCATTers, who sometimes feel like the Dutch boy with his TASER in the dike. Modesto's car-theft rates continue to rise, but more deserving individuals have been packed off to jail since the bait cars arrived. It may not be for long in many cases, but it feels good all the same, says Officer Knies.

"When people become police officers, this is what they imagine it'll be like." ■

## It's the Age of Electronic Thievery

Modest Modesto represents the bottom of the car-thief social order. Plutocratic Orange County south of Los Angeles is tops. There, thieves chase BMWs and Lexuses for their value overseas or as parts. They also face the newest and toughest anti-theft measures. Gary Smith, Toyota national service technology manager, cites his company's special vertical-milled keys that bear transponder pellets with nonrepeating access codes as one important security layer.

"The 'work-arounds' are getting increasingly difficult, more time-consuming to defeat, as well as more expensive to

defeat," he says.

Still, a professional two-man crew working a new Lexus can be "gone in 60 seconds," says Forrest E. Folck, a San Diego vehicle forensics investigator and consultant to law enforcement and insurance companies. How? The low-tech thieves break in, tap into the car's wiring harness, and plug in their own electronic control unit with the transponder feature deactivated (the sand-buggy industry sells such computers for custom engine adaptations) or matched to the thieves' own transponder key.

The high-tech way, says Folck, is to access the car's ECU through its on-

board diagnostic port and then load pirate software, which deactivates its security measures and even changes the car's stored VIN, completely erasing its past. Recently, says Folck, a thief was arrested near Los Angeles bearing "the ultimate James Bond briefcase" with equipment to steal just about anything. A hacker class of engineers who view factory anti-theft systems as a challenge creates the software. "Morality takes a back seat," says Folck.

The next step: thumbprint recognition. But one thing everyone agrees on is that "anything can be stolen," Folck says. "There's no stopping these guys." —AR

## Top Five Ways to Avoid Car Theft

1. **Remove the keys.** StanCATT's Jeff Morris says 10 percent of Modesto's cars are stolen with the keys in the ignition.
2. **Use an anti-theft device that is visible to the thief.** Steering-wheel clubs and pedal locks are enough to cause most casual thieves to move on. One such device cited repeatedly by police and insurance consultants is the Ravelco ([www.nohotwire.com](http://www.nohotwire.com)), a steel-encased engine disabler activated by removing a small dash key (at right).
3. **Park in your garage or, while away from home, in high-visibility areas where thieves can't operate in private.**
4. **Have the vehicle identification number (VIN) etched on the glass and other parts of the car.** This discourages chop shops.
5. **Use tracking services such as Lo-Jack.** This may help get the car back, if you want it back.



■ A purple Suburban, ransacked by thieves, proves to be stuffed with crystal-meth bags and household goods, including mail, drivers' licenses, and Social Security cards. Identity theft is becoming a more compelling reason to steal cars.



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## BAUBLES AND BOLT-ONS

**ANTI-THEFT KEY:** When we busted car thieves in Modesto [*C/D*, July 2006], the Ravelco anti-theft device ([www.ravelco.com](http://www.ravelco.com)) was cited by name by the cops, so we decided to fit one to our precious Eclipse. The big appeal over wake-you-up-at-4 a.m. car alarms is that the Ravelco is simple, with no power required. A wiring shunt is soldered into the car's starting and ignition circuits, the connections hidden amid the miles of cables in the bowels of the engine compartment. The shunt is itself disguised within a knot of wires that run in a steel-sheathed conduit to

a 16-pin connector on the lower dash. The car will start and run only if the matching Ravelco key is inserted into the connector to complete the circuit (Ravelco claims 100,000 different pin combinations, and there is no master key). A Ravelco installer fits it for you in about two hours. Price: \$400. How's it work? So far, no one's boosted the car. —Aaron Robinson

**iPOD DOCK:** According to Apple, it has sold more than 88 million iPods since the unit's release on October 23, 2001. It is no surprise that a couple examples of the digital music player

