

Leave the Driving to Us? Thief Thinks Otherwise

By N. R. KLEINFELD, Published: February 18, 2010

A question that doesn't come up all the time but does come up every now and then is: What do you do once you've stolen a bus? It's not like with cars, which people who disrespect the law are always stealing. You can't just change the plates or repaint it and drive it around as your vehicle. It's very hard to park. And even in New York, where pretty much anything goes, people will notice that you've got a bus.

The question comes to mind in light of the fact that someone stole a Greyhound bus in Manhattan the other day. Exactly when it was stolen is unclear. The bus was last accounted for very early Sunday morning at the Greyhound maintenance garage at West 30th Street and 12th Avenue.

According to the police, a driver from another bus company spied the empty bus about 2:15 Wednesday morning parked on the street in Astoria, Queens, and called a Greyhound dispatcher. This alerted Greyhound that it was short a bus. Greyhound workers went out to the bus, but could not start it and had to return to the depot. When they came back with a mechanic at 3:45 a.m., they got lost and could not find the bus. The police were not notified until 9 a.m. and located it about 12:30 in the afternoon still parked where it had been.

Since the thief remains unidentified and at large, it's not possible to determine his motive. Was he fond of your larger vehicles? Did he have a big family? Was he tired of waiting for the bus? The caper, however, did suggest a call to Timothy Stokes, a spokesman for [FirstGroup America](#), which owns Greyhound. Just how often does Greyhound lose a bus?

"It's not a common occurrence," he said, though he had no hard statistics. More bus-theft knowledge might be forthcoming over at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, where big buses chug in and out all day. A few Greyhound drivers were relaxing in the drivers' lounge but said they were not allowed to talk. They said they did not know much about stolen buses, only that you couldn't just put one in your garage.

Down on the platforms, a Greyhound driver on the Atlantic City route said he did not know anything either, but had an annoying problem of somewhat less magnitude to deal with. Someone had stolen his hat. Karl Besancon, 56, drives for Martz Trailways, going

between New York and Wilkes-Barre, Pa. “In 21 years, I’ve only heard about four stolen in the New York area,” he said.

Why would someone take a bus? He thought hard before coming up with the only answer that made sense to him: “For giggles.” The tricky thing is holding on to a stolen bus, Mr. Besancon agreed. A few years ago, however, he said, a bus stolen in Bayonne, N.J., was missing for three weeks. It had about 4,000 miles run up on it, but not a scratch. “The company that owned it said, ‘Hire the guy,’ ” Mr. Besancon recalled. “But they didn’t catch him far as I know.”

On Dec. 19, 2009, a [New Jersey Transit bus was snatched](#) from the parking lot of the Livingston Mall in New Jersey. The driver had gone to the bathroom. A half-hour later, it was found abandoned in West Orange. In January 2007, the tour bus of the country singer Crystal Gayle was [swiped in Nashville](#) by a convict who had escaped in South Carolina. He was not caught until he got near the Daytona International Speedway in Florida. Before helping himself to the bus, he had stolen other vehicles to make his way on the cheap. One of them was a Wal-Mart truck.

One thing to do with a stolen bus is try to make a few bucks for bail money. That’s what a 15-year-old boy did in October 2006 in Orlando, Fla. After [taking a bus](#) from the Central Florida Fairgrounds, he drove it along a conventional bus route, picking up passengers and collecting fares. One of the more keenly observant passengers, though pleased enough with the ride, thought the boy looked youthful for a bus driver and dialed the police.

Peter Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association, the trade group for the private bus industry, said: “I remember a few years ago someone stole a bus out west, and the people operated it in charter service for a couple of weeks. So sometimes it’s a business model.”

Back at the Port Authority, some New Jersey Transit drivers were talking about how it’s one thing to steal a bus. Then you have to drive it. “If you’ve only driven cars, you could drive it,” said Sergio Gomez, 46. “But you’d be wrecking everything, hitting poles and cars and curbs and people. You’d be sticking out like a sore thumb, swerving all over the place.” Jose Valle, 53, was loading up his bus to head to New Jersey. Given the recent bus theft, the culprit still on the lam, was he keeping a closer eye on his bus so no one took it? He gave a weird look. “No,” he said. “I don’t think anybody will take my bus. It’s really big. Nah, nobody’s going to take my bus.”