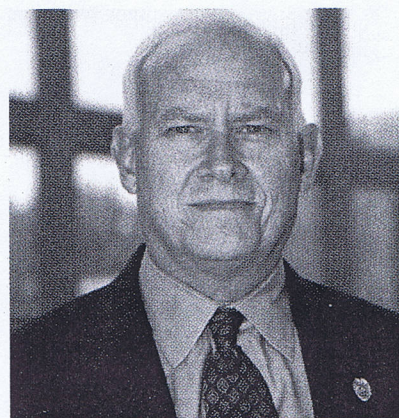


An Inside Look at Vacation Home Security

Meet Home Security Expert Bo Mitchell



Bo Mitchell knows all about vacation home security. He served as police commissioner of Wilton, Connecticut for 16 years before founding 911 Consulting LLC, a business that assesses the emergency preparedness of organizations and workplaces. Clients include manufacturers, service businesses, schools and property management companies.

A recognized authority on emergency preparedness, Mitchell has been featured in several magazine and newspaper articles on the subject. He is a certified protection professional as recognized by ASIS International, an organization of security management professionals, and he takes part in continuing education programs through various law enforcement organizations.

LHDI: When purchasing a security system for a vacation home or cabin, what are some important factors customers should consider? What can they expect to pay for a security system?

Mitchell: For the majority of houses, a basic system is all that's necessary.

All electronic alarm systems should include a master control panel, one or more keypads for arming and disarming the system, perimeter sensors for doors and windows, motion detectors for areas inside the house, a siren or strobe lights, a yard sign and window decals. The keypad may include panic buttons for police, fire or medical assistance. Systems can be hard-wired or wireless.

To make a basic system better, add

exterior dusk and motion detector lights. Position them around your property perimeter so anyone approaching your home is flooded in light. Position sensor lights to flood entrances and vulnerable windows that are visible from the street and to neighbors.

For another level of security, consider a monitored security system. Whether you are in residence or away, your house is monitored 24 hours a day. When trouble strikes, the authorities are notified. However, if your vacation

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home is in a remote location, it could take up to 60 minutes — or longer — for private security or police to respond. In that time, your home can be emptied.

You can install a basic security system yourself for around \$500. Of course, costs are related to the size of your home and the number of components you need. If you hire a monitoring service, the monthly fee starts at around \$30.

Ask around to get recommenda-

tions for security systems and contact two to three installation companies. Ask those companies for competitive bids and references. Call their references. Ask if you can see installations in homes in your area.

LHDI: Since people are often away from their vacation homes for long periods of time, what are some security measures they can take, outside of installing a security system, to prevent break-ins?

Mitchell: Never leave a key hidden in a secret place. Use deadbolt locks. Make sure all exterior doors are solid wood or metal.

Talk with the police department in your vacation home jurisdiction. These are the professionals who will respond if something ugly happens. Get to know them before you need them by asking for their advice.

Contact your local police chief or sheriff. Tell them when you'll be in residence and ask for an appointment, preferably at your vacation house. If that isn't possible, go to the station.

When you meet, ask how your neighborhood is patrolled. Don't assume that you know; you don't. Explain how you currently protect your house. Then ask how they protect vacation houses in general, all houses in your neighborhood, and your house specifically.

Ask what more you should be doing. Ask about the crime rate in your neighborhood, if they have procedures

that permit you to call them when you're not in residence, and what their response time is to your home. Ask if they will periodically drive by.

Install small cameras that let you monitor your property in real time via the Internet. While you probably won't monitor your property around-the-clock, you can periodically check the condition of your retreat from any computer in the world.

Some homeowners post a bogus security system sign, giving the illusion they have a system. Given enough time, your cover will be blown. Word will leak out from a neighbor, property manager, housekeeper or repair person, especially in small communities.

LHDI: What things can you do to make a vacation home look occupied?

Mitchell: First, lights. Interior and exterior lights that turn on and off at random times thwart intruders. It's easier to hit another house that's cloaked in darkness.

Next, sound. Have a TV and radio go on and off at random times in different rooms of the house. Make sure the volume is set so you can hear them from any exterior door. Synchronize the TV and radio to lights turning on and off in the same rooms, with a few seconds delay between light and sound.

Third, hire someone to keep your yard in good condition. Nothing says "Vacant!" like a shaggy, weed-choked lawn or an unplowed driveway.

Of course, cancel any newspaper deliveries. Leave window coverings in a normal position. Keep your phone answering machine or voice mail engaged and check for messages.

LHDI: Is it a good idea to have a resident house-sitter? When choosing one, what should you look for?

Mitchell: A house sitter makes a house look occupied and protects you from intruders. A sitter can also limit damage from a burst water heater, frozen pipes or other system failures.

Yet, there are downsides. A house sitter might neglect your house or even trash it. Your vacation home could become an open party house, a shelter



One of the best ways to deter burglars is to make your vacation home look occupied. You can do so by raking up the leaves and keeping the lawn mowed. Installing a security system that flicks on some lights or the TV at night isn't a bad idea either. A monitored system can also alert emergency units if the place catches fire or there's a gas leak.

for homeless cats or an unofficial bed and breakfast. A sitter may not deploy your security system or be discrete about the system's workings.

If you're leaning toward hiring a sitter, talk with a local real estate attorney first. Ask about any laws applying to house sitting. For instance, if you occupy your home for a brief period once a year, your house sitter might be viewed as a legal tenant, with all of the rights that go with that status.

The best tool for hiring someone is to know the person as well as you can. Our motto: Assume nothing, trust no one.

Ask potential sitters for references, then talk with them. Ask the references about the candidate's strengths and weaknesses, including living habits, dependability and willingness to vacate

when you want to use your house. Even when all references are glowing, conduct a background check on potential sitters. Check credit rating, criminal activity and any moving violations while driving.

After you've chosen a sitter, agree on ground rules and policies in writing. Be accommodating to your sitter's requests as much as is reasonable. You want this to be a mutually beneficial relationship.

Inform the local police department of your arrangement, ideally in person. Give them a file folder including the sitter's vital statistics (height, weight, hair and eye color, date of birth, driver license number), a description of your sitter's vehicle and the license plate number. If possible, include a photo of

your sitter. Finally, include the address of your vacation house, a photo of your house from the street or driveway, and all of your contact information. When you take this seriously, so will the sitter and the police.

LHDI: A lot of people have their neighbors keep an eye on the place while they're gone. What are some things you should tell them before you leave?

Mitchell: Make sure your neighbors are familiar with your house. They should understand your security system. They should know what your security alarm sounds like and what your smoke detectors sound like. They should know what to do if any alarms are triggered.

They should know how to shut off the water, electricity and gas. They should have your contact information, including a back-up contact if you cannot be reached. They should also have the names and phone numbers of any workers so they can call your plumber, electrician or roofer if needed in an emergency.

All instructions, systems and contact information should be in writing and presented in a file folder.

LHDI: What are some security or safety issues people often don't think about with regard to vacation homes?

Mitchell: Envious vacationers and curious strangers. Unless your property is fenced and gated, anyone can stroll into your yard, tread your walkways and inspect your house's exterior.

They'll try to look inside through your windows. Then they'll go back to their hotel or neighborhood and blab about their "find," motivating others to inspect your property. 🏠

RESOURCES:

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