

Tree vandals strike West Slope

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

El Dorado County residents and sheriff's investigators are trying to track down vandals who have laid waste to thousands of dollars' worth of trees on private property.

Detective John Robertson said he has five active cases, all involving cedars that have been felled in recent months.

Three of the incidents occurred on the same property along Lotus Road.

"We're looking at it as vandalism," Robertson said. "I've never seen anything like it."

The incidents have occurred in the Lotus, Coloma and Shingle Springs areas, north and west of Placerville. Robertson estimated that the financial losses to property owners are in the thousands of dollars.

Wendy Deitz, whose property has been hit three times, said the first incident occurred just before Christmas. Her husband, Robert, had hung holiday lights on the cedars planted as a buffer between their house and Lotus Road.

In the early morning hours, someone removed the lights and chopped down 20 trees in varying sizes.

The Deitzes initially thought someone had cut them down and stolen them for Christmas trees, but then they discovered that the trees had been dumped in their pond.

They planted more cedars, including some donated by El Dorado Nursery, but someone came along and pulled them up, Wendy Deitz said. The couple replanted once again, and this time her

husband installed game cameras.

When their trees were targeted a third time, the cameras captured the image of a man cutting a tree with a hand saw. Although he is seen from the back, "he is obviously left-handed," Wendy Deitz said.

She and her husband also found a soda can that they turned over to the Sheriff's Office for possible fingerprint or DNA analysis.

Wendy Deitz said they had heard from three other residents on Lotus Road that trees on their property had been cut down as well.

"I guess it's just someone who doesn't like cedars," she said, adding that the trees are cut so low they won't grow back.

Brendan Wilce, a nurseryman at El Dorado Nursery in Shingle Springs, said the trees targeted have been incense cedars, which are native to El Dorado County.

"They grow naturally in this area," he said. "They're the trees on the (Highway) 50 corridor that you see as you go up here."

Wilce said he couldn't think of any practical reason someone would want to destroy them.

"They're not an invasive plant," he said, "They're a great local native tree."

Although they produce pollen this time of year, he said, they tend to be less of a problem for allergy sufferers than oaks.

Wilce said it was difficult to estimate the value of the mature cedars that have been felled.

He said the replacement trees the nursery has supplied to some of the victimized property owners are 24-inch box trees, which

retail for \$250 each.

Detective Robertson said most of the targeted trees have been fairly close to roadways. He urged people who see any suspicious activity to call him at (530) 642.4722.