

The calendar has just changed from October to November, but you have probably already seen the change of seasons taking place in our local retail stores and online shopping outlets as these businesses gear up for the holiday shopping season. Unfortunately, there are criminals out there looking to be a real life Grinch in your holiday shopping. Hopefully, these tips will keep the Grinch away as you prepare for your holiday celebrations.

At your favorite retail outlet be aware of your surroundings and work to remove opportunities for thieves. It can be tempting to leave a bag, coat, or purse unattended in your shopping cart while you take just a moment to look at that perfect gift on the shelf a few feet away. Your momentary distraction may be all a thief needs to make off with your valuables. In the aisles, be alert for people who appear to be standing around with no purpose or taking time to study other people's carts. They could be watching for their opportunity to make a quick get away with someone else's purse, phone, or wallet. Keep your valuables well-guarded, especially in crowded areas.

So you've got your route planned and are going to hit several stores to get all, or at least a good deal, of your holiday shopping completed. Take a moment to plan out what you will be doing with the merchandise you have purchased at the previous store while you are making your next stop. Thieves patrol parking lots looking for vehicles that have merchandise they can easily take. Always lock your vehicle. Better yet, keep merchandise and valuables out of sight in a trunk or under a cargo cover. Parking in a well-lit area of the lot is another good strategy. Taking these small steps will keep the Grinch moving on to another target.

So you may be thinking, I'll just avoid the hustle and bustle (and the thieves) and do my holiday shopping on-line. While on-line shopping can certainly be more convenient, it does not eliminate the possibility of thieves ruining your gift-giving. The rise of on-line market places has given birth to identity thieves and porch pirates. The internet is full of people trying to gain illicit access to your banking information. When making purchases online, make sure that the website you are on is using encryption when you are entering your financial information. Look for the "https" in the address bar to ensure the connection is secure. Shopping at established websites with good reputations will protect you from being the victim of a scam. If you do shop at lesser-known or specialty sites, do a bit of research into their reputation to make sure they are a legitimate seller. Porch pirates are thieves who steal packages left at people's homes. Some of these criminals patrol neighborhoods looking for packages on door steps. Others will follow delivery trucks around watching for an opportunity to swoop in and steal a package. To keep porch pirates at bay, take steps to ensure someone can physically take delivery of your package. Most delivery services offer the option to schedule a delivery time so that you can ensure someone is home at your residence to meet the driver. If that isn't an option, have packages delivered to a neighbor or a business that has someone there to receive it. If you must have a package delivered to your empty home you should consider providing instructions for the delivery service to secure the package in an out-of-sight location. Finally, if you happen to see a suspicious person or vehicle in your neighborhood or one that appears to be following a delivery vehicle, contact your local law enforcement agency right away and report what you are seeing. We would love to have an opportunity to scuttle a porch pirate's raid.

For more crime prevention and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.