



Puppy Scams: How Fake Online Pet Sellers Steal from Unsuspecting Pet Buyers

A BBB Study

BBB International Investigations Initiative

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Introduction and Summary continued

websites to advertise the animals, the thieves similarly will develop bogus websites that appear to be legitimate transport companies.

Those who pay for pet shipping often are asked to buy or rent a special crate for the pet and, if they are successful in obtaining payment for that, they may follow up with requests for special insurance or shots for the animals. At times, the thieves may claim the pet is stuck at an airport in transit and additional money is needed for food and water. The requests for money on one pretext or another will continue as long as the victim continues to send money.

Eventually, most victims realize that something is wrong, and begin researching the internet for stories and alerts on pet frauds before ultimately realizing they have been duped.

At this point the thief usually claims the pet is at the airport, and threatens the potential buyer with criminal charges for “animal abandonment” unless still more money is forthcoming.

Reports show there are thousands of people around the country, and the world, who have become victims of pet scams.

John Goodwin, Senior Director with the Humane Society of the United States, says, that while there actually is a criminal charge for animal abandonment, it would never be enforced in this situation, especially since no animal ever was shipped.

Potential victims can easily become so emotionally invested in preparing for their new puppy that they are devastated on finally learning the animal does not exist.

BBB urges the public to be on guard against online pet scams; inspect an animal in person before paying money, and pay by credit card if you do make an online purchase.

Also, potential buyers often can detect fraud by conducting an internet search of the picture of the pet. If the same picture appears on other sites you may be dealing with a fraud.

This report attempts to examine the scope of this problem, who is behind it, the efforts of law enforcement to address the issue, and some tips for avoiding this fraud.

Real Stories

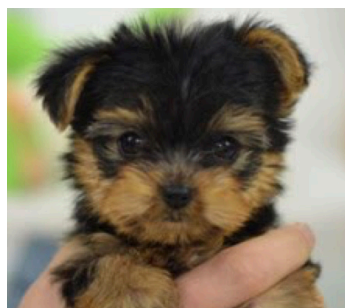
Yahong Zhang of Omaha, Neb., recently lost \$1,200 in a puppy scam. Zhang said he had arranged to ship two puppies to his six-year-old son after the boy made good on a promise to practice his piano lessons regularly. After ordering the Husky puppies through the site, www.huskieshaven.com, he realized he had been duped. When Yahong finally stopped sending money he was told the puppies would die. He says “NEVER pay by money wiring, and NEVER pay for a puppy unless you’ve seen it IN PERSON.”

Kanetria Hutcherson said that after her 10-year-old daughter’s cat disappeared, she began searching the internet for a small dog to live in the family’s **Oakland, Calif.**, apartment. On the site <https://usa.global-free-classified-ads.com/>,

Global-free-classified-ads.com
United States Free Classifieds

Hutcherson found a notice from what purported to be a family in Baltimore claiming they traveled often and needed a home for their two puppies. The ad included a photograph of a cute teacup Yorkie.

(An internet search for this picture found the same picture advertised as a puppy for sale in Florida, Texas, the U.K., New York, and Hungary)



“NEVER pay by money wiring, and NEVER pay for a puppy unless you’ve seen it IN PERSON.”

*Yahong Zhang
of Omaha, Nebraska*

Hutcherson called the number on the ad and the owner asked for a \$195 shipping fee to transport the animal. Soon after wiring the \$195 fee through MoneyGram, Hutcherson received an email appearing to be from Delta Air Cargo,

and claiming the animal needed a special crate before it could be put on the plane. She wired an additional \$240 after she was told the payment was refundable.

The next day Hutcherson received an email saying that the dog had been transported as far as Oklahoma City, and she was instructed to purchase health insurance for the dog at an additional cost of \$980. She asked why the payment had not been disclosed earlier, and began suspecting she was being defrauded. At that point, the “seller” threatened to call the FBI and have her charged with animal abandonment. An email that appeared to be from Delta Airlines instructed her to send another \$200 through MoneyGram to Cameroon, which she did.

A day later, scammers told her the dog was in New



Mexico and instructed her to pay another \$150 for food and water for the animal. She ultimately paid another \$83 through MoneyGram, after saying she could not pay the full amount. She was contacted yet again the next day, and told the puppy was ill and needed to be quarantined. The new charge: \$1900.

Her tragic odyssey finally ended when she contacted Delta Air Cargo, and learned she had been scammed. She filed complaints with the FBI and BBB.

By the time she discovered the ruse, she had spent \$968 for what

had been described as a “free” puppy, and she had no dog. Even after she complained to the FBI, the persistent thieves continued to contact her, asking for additional payments. She reports that throughout the ordeal, her daughter often cried herself to sleep. Hutcherson, herself, says she still can’t sleep because of the stress. She said she borrowed part of the money she sent, and is having trouble paying her bills.

Mike Wilborn, a barber in **Plainfield, Ill.**, barely escaped becoming a victim in a pet scam. He had agreed to pay

\$650 to buy and ship an English Bull Dog puppy for his daughter through the website **darleyenglishbulldogs.com**. Tipped by what they thought was a suspiciously low price, his daughter did an internet image search on the animal she was planning to adopt. She discovered the identical photo of the dog had been posted on an internet site eight years before. At that point, Wilborn contacted BBB to inform it of the fraud.

Olicia Bryant of **Dallas, Tex.**, was retired from the Postal Service and looking for a puppy. She does not use the internet all that

often, but went online and found a puppy at **www.premium-rottweiler.com**. After some texting and emailing she sent \$702 through MoneyGram to the “breeder” in Worthington, Ohio for the dog, shipping and a crate. The next day she received a call from a “second company” saying that she had bought the wrong crate, and would need to pay another \$1000 for a new one, but that this money would be refundable. She then told the fraudsters that she knew it was a scam and was going to report it. She then filed complaints with MoneyGram and BBB.

How big is the problem?

Complaint numbers only hint at the size of the scheme. This BBB study suggests the actual numbers of pet fraud may be much higher than reported, because many victims either choose not to file complaints or do not know where to turn for help. **BBB ScamTracker contains 907 reports on this type of fraud, which is 12.5% of all their complaints involving online purchase fraud.**

An internal report the Federal Trade Commission prepared in 2015 found some **37,000 complaints that refer to issues involving pets**, and the vast majority of those are believed to be pet sales scams.

FTC national studies have determined that less than 10 percent of victims of any type of fraud ever complain to the FTC or a BBB. Complaints made exclusively to police agencies are not included in the national National Consumer Sentinel Database.

The U.S. is far from alone in seeing complaints about this problem. In just the first six months of 2017, the Australian Competition Commission received 337 pet complaints, 10 from overseas. And the Canadian Antifraud Centre had an all-time high number of complaints in 2016 involving animals, with 377 complaints and losses totaling \$222,000.

The Humane Society reports that it also noticed an increased number of complaints, and the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon, where many of these frauds originate, says on its web site that it has noted a “dramatic increase” in fraud from that country in recent years.

Who are the victims of this fraud?

Anyone looking for a pet is a potential victim. **The FTC concluded that the vast majority of victims are in their 20s and 30s.** These age groups grew up with the Internet, and thus may be more likely to look for a pet online instead of going to a local breeder or searching in other ways.

What is the average loss to victims?

The FTC and BBB have found most victims lose between \$100 and \$1000.

But some have lost considerably more. In one case, a victim lost \$5,000.

BBB ScamTracker

Scam Type
Counterfeit Product Scam

Business Name Used
Pet Limousine

Date Reported
Jun 28, 2017

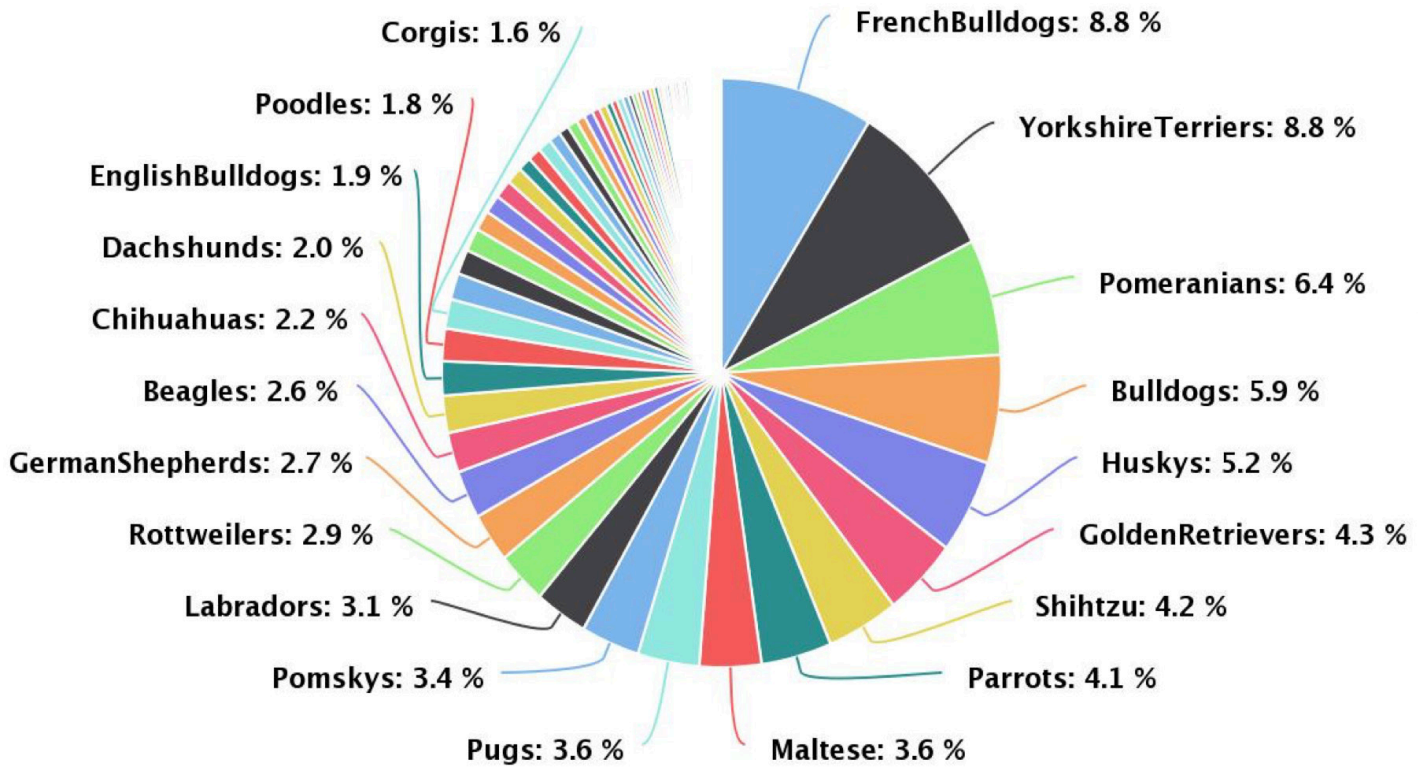
Victim Postal Code
80205

Total Dollars Lost
\$1,000.00

Scam Description
I have been looking for a rescue puppy to adopt. I rec'd an E-Mail from a woman that claimed she was ill and needed to give up her puppy. She sent incredible pictures. She didn't ask for money but attempted to have the puppy delivered to me thru a company called Pet Limousine. They kept calling for money to keep the puppy headed my direction. Things like it was too hot to fly which was true but they would need vaccinations to continue his journey. I didn't connect the thread that the woman that was supposedly the sick owner of the puppy was in on it until this morning. They are very smart and tug at your heart strings for the poor little puppy and the sick woman. She of course says she is in the hospital and can't communicate now. I asked them for a picture of the building that the dog was quarantined at but they won't send one. They were quick to send a sad picture of the puppy in a cage. I'm sure they have an entire library of pictures. I did call the Joplin airport and there was no puppy in quarantine.



Pie Chart by Breed



What kinds of pets are most often offered?

Because the scammers do not need to have actual pets available for sale, it is a simple matter to advertise breeds that are most popular – and often those hardest to obtain. Today, many of the complaints involve Yorkshire Terriers (Yorkies) and French Bulldogs.

Petscams.com has provided a breakdown of the pet websites they have flagged as fraudulent for a six-week period between May 29, 2017 and July 12, 2017. The largest number of bogus websites they identified were selling Yorkshire terriers (108), French Bulldogs (105), Pomeranians (77), Bulldogs (73), and Huskies (63).



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- KITTENS ▾

Our Mission

Petscams.com was created with the purpose of cataloguing the latest websites built by scammers. We aim to cause as much disruption to their activities as possible.

Petscams.com deal only with "paid for" domains like ".com", ".net", etc etc. Scammers can spend a considerable time and effort to create and publicize these websites. We find that many people do not know how or who to complain to in order to shut them down.

For this reason, we do not deal with Facebook pages or Craigslist adverts as there are already well documented methods of shutting down these pages.



Evolution of the scam

Like many frauds, this one has adapted and evolved over the years. The early versions typically involved scammers posting a simple classified ad offering a free pet, with the owner explaining that he or she was being relocated to another country, or could no longer keep the animal for some other reason. But while there was no charge for the animal itself, the scammers insisted the potential buyer pay for transportation and other costs associated with getting the pets to their new owners.

More recently, these frauds involve the sale of animals at low prices – usually well below the charges of actual breeders. Similarly, later requests ask for additional money for shipping costs and other expenses that supposedly go to third parties.

The FTC report found that the average loss was usually around \$300.

Where are victims located?

BBB and FTC found victims across the U.S. Not surprisingly, the most populous states had the most complaints, led by **California, Texas, Florida, New York** and **Pennsylvania**.

Bogus websites used for selling or shipping the pet

Any serious effort to disrupt this fraud needs to address the online avenues employed to defraud victims.

There are only a few components needed to run an online pet scheme. The thieves need a domain name for a site, which can be easily purchased online. They also need a hosting company with servers to contain the site itself, which they can also buy online. They need site content, which they can create or steal from the actual site of a pet breeder or shipping company. They need a phone number, which they can obtain from a voice over internet protocol phone or a cheap cell phone, and email addresses to communicate. Finally, some thieves may pay for internet advertising such as sponsored links to get more people to their web sites.

Those who are drawn to a pet thief will find a variety of web pages set up as part of the schemes. One set of web sites advertises the pets for sale. A separate site, also bogus and set up by the frauds, will

provide information on how to ship the pet.

This BBB study found that thieves copied the web site of one Florida breeder and used it to defraud people looking for French Bulldogs.

Jordan Mills is a lifelong animal lover who got her love of animals from her mother. She is especially fond of French Bulldogs, and about nine years ago began breeding them, sometimes showing them at events, and selling puppies from time to time.

After Mills moved to the Miami area, a friend helped her build the site <http://www.jemfrenchbulldogs.com>, which includes information about her family, information on her love of dogs and notifies potential customers when she occasionally has puppies for sale. The site also includes contact information, describing how to contact her and possibly obtain a French Bulldog.

About six months ago Mills heard from a friend that an unrelated web site, **Frenchiefriendly.com**, had appeared that was virtually identical to her site. She began receiving strange emails from people who wanted information about puppy shipments. Mills eventually talked to several people who had been victimized in puppy scams.

While the market price for a French Bulldog is about \$3000, she noted that phony sellers were advertising them for less than \$1,000. She looked at the bogus web site, and though it copied hers, the actual pictures of the puppies supposedly available for sale were not hers; they had been copied from another location.

Mills got in touch with **Artists Against 419, an international volunteer fraud-fighting group which can be found at AA419.org**. (419 is the section dealing with fraud in the Nigerian Criminal code). Mills wanted the

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INFO PUPPIES RAVES BLOG CONTACT VIDEOS & PHOTOS



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bogus web site shut down, and didn't know how to do that. So AA419 went to bat for her. The domain name of Friendlyfrenchies was issued by a U.S.-based company, but the company gave AA419 the runaround and refused to cancel the domain, even though this was operating in clear violation of the domain company's own policies.

The fraudulent web site is now down. It is not known whether that is due to the efforts of AA419, or if the thieves just decided that this one was too risky. **AA419 has a blog detailing the efforts they made to shut down this bogus site.** AA419 reports that many of these bogus web sites will result in at least ten sales before being closed down.

There are many other fraudulent domain names used in pet fraud. AA419 recently found 765 web site domain names that were obtained from the email address **melaneeter@gmail.com**. Most of these domain names contain the names of animal breeds, such as **besthuskyfamily.net**, or a bogus pet travel company like **cargodelivery.us**. The organization tracked the email setting up these domain names to Cameroon.

Another volunteer group that focuses on pet frauds is **Petscams.com**, which regularly assists in shutting down fraudulent pet websites. When Petscams.com receives word of a questionable website it checks to see where the domain name is registered, checks the website for the owner of the domain; checks to see if the site is plagiarized from that of a legitimate breeder or shipping company, and checks to see if the prices offered are suspiciously low. The organization also look to see if the Internet Protocol (IP) address used for the site has also been used for other bogus sites. If these steps show that the web site is bogus they contact the

company that issued the domain name and ask that it be removed. Some domain name registrars are more helpful than others, but in most cases after this process bogus web sites are removed. Of course if the scammer has spent money advertising the web site, this effectively makes their other advertising of that site worthless. On the other hand, as shown, it is fairly easy to just obtain new domain name.



Pet shipments often part of the scam

The thieves almost always ask the victims to pay to ship the pet by air, and they will send victims to bogus web sites of pet transportation companies set up to support the fraud. Pet buyers rarely realize that the transportation sites are often a part of the fraud.

After the death of **Collinsville, Ill.**, resident **Danny Shelton's** Weimaraner, he began looking for another dog of that breed, and found **jilaweimaranerpuppies.com**. He sent \$700 by MoneyGram to Atlanta to pay for the puppy and later offered to drive to Atlanta to get the puppy in person. But the "seller" insisted that the animal be shipped by air. When thieves instructed Shelton they needed an additional \$1400 for insurance for the animal, he smelled a scam. He'd shipped pets by air before, when he was in the military, and knew that this was not necessary. He sent a text to the thieves, saying he knew he was being scammed, and included a photo of his five year old daughter crying. The seller's response: "f*** you!"

Several legitimate companies are in the business



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of shipping pets. **The International Pet and Animal Transportation Association (IPATA)** is a trade group for the industry of companies that perform this service for the public. It has 400 members in 80 countries around the world. **IPATA Executive Director Cherie Derouin** says they get calls from pet scam victims every day. In just the three months, from April to June of this year, they were contacted by 500 victims. And she believes this problem is getting worse. **IPATA**, itself, does not ship pets, but rather represents members that do that work.



Rules for shipping pets are established by the **International Air Transport Association**. Derouin said travelers can sometimes take small dogs or pets on a plane if the animals will fit beneath their seat, although rules differ from airline to airline. Other pets be in a crate and transported in cargo. Also, no one can simply drop a pet off at an airport to be transported the following day. To transport pets within the U.S. the sender has to provide a veterinarian check and the pet must have health papers. Even more regulations apply for International shipments.

Some scammers require a consumer to buy a fan for the animal if it is going to a hot-weather destination. Derouin said airlines will not allow transportation of a pet if the weather is dangerously hot.

The IPATA routinely sends lists of bogus web sites and email addresses to **scamwarners.com** and **Petscams.com**, which make efforts to track and remove bogus web sites. **It has an extensive discussion of pet frauds on its web site.**

The FTC report also notes that many of the frauds impersonate the legitimate business **uShip** for the pet transportation. uShip is a company that matches shipping businesses with customers needing to hire a shipper. **uShip does not have its own trucks or airplanes; it is a marketplace to help match people up. UShip has also posted warnings about pet frauds.**

How do the thieves get their money?

Most victims send money through Western Union or MoneyGram. Other methods of payment include the use of stored value cards or gift cards. Thieves almost never take money from credit cards or by personal checks.

Where the sale of a good or product is made through use of telephone in the U.S., it is illegal to request or receive money through Western Union, MoneyGram or through a stored value card.

Using Western Union or MoneyGram are functionally the same as sending cash. In most cases victims go to the outlet in person, with cash, and send payment to the address specified by the "seller." But, even though the wire form may ask that payment be sent to a specific address, rules allow the payment to be picked up anywhere in the designated state. Once the money is received on the other end, the sender is out the funds -- and it can be virtually impossible to get it back.

Western Union and MoneyGram will now tell fraud

victims the location where their money was actually picked up. Armed with that information victims that move fast and work with the police may be able to see if the outlet has surveillance video of the person that picked it up.

Like many frauds popular with scammers, payment also can involve a variety of options. One is the use of stored

BBB Scam TrackerSM

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Search using any or all of the fields below.

Keyword
pet

Scam Type
All Scam Types

Country
United States

State
All States

Date Reported
Feb 13, 2015 to
Aug 18, 2017

Search

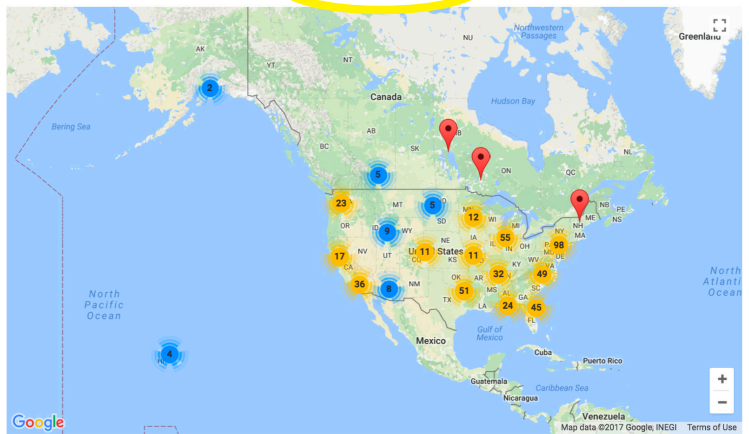


Total Dollars Lost
\$1,200.00

Scam Description

I was on the hunt for an english bulldog and I came upon the website. It looked for real and trustworthy, but in reality it was just a scam. I send money to them and than they kept asking for more and they never give you the dog. He wants to take as much money from you as you can until you realize their was never a pet it happened to me it happened to many other.

500 Scams Found



value cards such as Green Dot. (Others, such as Vanilla cards, operate the same way). Thieves ask victims to buy a "MoneyPak" that can be purchased (for cash) at most Wal-Mart and most drug stores. These are nothing other than pieces of cardboard with a scratch off number on them. At the time of purchase, a consumer pays the amount to be loaded onto the card and a store employee enters the funds into the computer system of Green Dot. When the victim reads the card's identification number to the would-be thief, the scammer simply enters that code into their online account and the money is then credited to their stored value card. Actual Green Dot cards have a magnetic strip and can be used just like any other ATM card.

In the last year or two thieves have turned to asking for payment with iTunes or other gift cards. By giving the number code to another person, the recipient can activate the gift card. There is a large market for gift cards, and even fraudsters overseas can access their cash value.



Who is operating this fraud?

As noted earlier, most puppy scams appear to be operated out of Cameroon, a country in West Africa that shares a border with Nigeria. The FTC report notes that a large number of the complaints about pet frauds involve victims instructed to send money through Western Union to Cameroon. AA419 also confirms that the source for this fraud is Cameroon.

Many of the bogus web sites also are set up in Cameroon, and victims who think they are dealing with a breeder in the U.S. often are actually talking to someone in Cameroon. Money transfers often are picked up in the U.S., and most of that money is sent on to Cameroon.

Several recent criminal cases demonstrate that people originally from Cameroon are operating in the U.S. picking up money from Western Union and MoneyGram locations and sending at least part of it on to Cameroon.

Paul Brady with **petscams.com** confirms that most of this fraud traces back to Cameroon, though he doesn't know why it developed in that country. He also notes that he saw a big increase in this fraud late in the fall of 2016.

Fraud has become such a large industry in Cameroon that an academic study written in that country found that 91% of the students surveyed were familiar with internet scamming. The study expresses raises concern that many of the country's brightest students are turning to crime rather than helping develop the country with legitimate business enterprises.

What is law enforcement doing?

Law enforcement has certainly noticed the huge volume of pet fraud operations. Over the last year or more many have issued warning to the public about this fraud. These include **Kensington, New Brunswick; Canton, Michigan; Albert Lea, Minnesota; Butler County, Pennsylvania, Huntsville, Alabama; Oro Valley, Arizona; Dover, Delaware; Waukesha, Wisconsin; Yellowknife Saskatchewan; Fostoria, Ohio; Coeur D'elane, Idaho; Kentwood, Michigan; and Bismarck, North Dakota**

Although this is a difficult issue for law enforcement, several pet scam thieves have been arrested recently in the U.S.

In May 2017 three Cameroonian students at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania were criminally charged with operating a pet fraud. Boxer puppies were advertised on Craigslist around the country, and news

<http://www.wsocvtv.com/news/local/charlotte-man-was-money-mule-in-fake-puppy-scam-affidavit-says/473343091>.

Charlotte man was 'money mule' in fake puppy scam, affidavit says

by: **Blake Hanson** Updated: Dec 5, 2016 - 6:30 PM



reports indicate that the Defendants collected tens of thousands of dollars from victims. Two people are in custody, and a third has not yet been apprehended.

A man from Cameroon was arrested and charged in December 2016 in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is alleged to have picked up more than half a million dollars, keeping part of it and sending the rest to Cameroon.

In May 2016 a woman from Cameroon was arrested in Lehi, Utah. She was picking up money from pet fraud victims at a Western Union branch, and reportedly had 15 different fraudulent driver's licenses.

In addition, two Cameroonians were recently indicted in the District of Kansas and charged with wire fraud and taking part in an international conspiracy which included pet fraud. Their role was picking up money sent by fraud victims at Western Union and MoneyGram outlets. Rodriech Nyugab Nkarawki is alleged to have used six different aliases in his efforts, and Gladys Nkome had 23. Some of their advertising is alleged to have taken place on YouTube. In addition to obtaining money for Yorkies and bulldogs, the two are alleged to have also offered to sell illegal identification documents such as passports, and also medications, prescription drugs, automobiles and chemicals.

How can you avoid pet scams?

The simple truth is that the best way to avoid a fraud is to inspect the pet yourself by arranging to meet with the prospective seller in person. Most legitimate breeders will welcome the visit. There is no good way to be sure you are not dealing with a fraud if you have no direct in person



contact with the seller.

But if that is impossible, there is a trick that may help to avoid a fraud. Pet marketing usually begins with photos. An internet search of these photos will reveal whether they are exclusive to that site, or have been used on other sites.

How do you do this? On Google Chrome, simply place a cursor over the photo and right click. It will provide an option to do an internet search of the photo. A website called tineye.com will also search pictures, and Google

has an image search function at Google images. Note that an image search is also useful for avoiding other frauds, such as romance frauds or sales of nonexistent cars and trucks.

In addition to searching photo images, someone investigating possible fraud can copy text from an ad or website and search it online. Testimonials, for example, are often copied from the sites of real breeders. So if the same language shows up in several places you can be sure you are dealing with a fraud.

What if I've been a victim of this fraud?

- File a report with [BBB's Scam Tracker](#)
- Complain at Petscams.com
- Complain to the [Federal Trade Commission](#). Call **1-877-FTC-HELP**
- [Homeland Security Investigations](#) at the [Department of Homeland Security](#) also handles international fraud. Call **866-DHS-2-ICE (866-347-2423)** (from U.S. and Canada)
- In Canada, call the [Canadian Antifraud Centre](#): Toll Free **1-888-495-8501**

If you sent money through Western Union, MoneyGram or a Green Dot MoneyPak, you should contact those companies directly. They can offer information about the transactions, and download their complaints into the FTC's Consumer Sentinel database, which is used by police

around the country.

Green Dot 800-795-7597

Western Union 1-800-448-1492

MoneyGram 1-800-926-9400

How to find a pet and avoid the fraud

- The Humane Society of the United States has local shelters with pets in need of good homes. Contact your local humane society. They also provide tips for finding a reputable breeder.
- Those looking for a pet should avoid puppy mills. A BBB study warned about the problems people have when they deal with those businesses.

Reminders

- Avoid buying a pet without seeing it in person.
- Never send cash via money order or Western Union to a stranger.

- Always use a credit card in case you need to dispute the charges.
- Do research to get a sense of what a fair price is for the breed you are interested in adopting. Think twice if someone is advertising a purebred dog for free or at a deeply discounted price ... it could be a fraudulent offer.
- Report and learn about fraud in your area at [BBB Scam Tracker](#).

Recommendations

- Law enforcement agencies should coordinate its investigations through improved collaborative efforts.
- BBBs, law enforcement, consumer groups and the media need to increase efforts to educate the public about online pet scams.
- Consumers should conduct research about the seller before making a purchase; inspect a pet in person before purchasing and only pay by credit card.

