

Halton Police keep busy nabbing shoplifters at Toronto Premium Outlets

By Julie Slack
Metroland Media Group

It's just past 11 a.m. at the Toronto Premium Outlets on a busy shopping day and already the parking lot is almost full.

The Halton Hills mall features some 80 stores, including "high-end, designer stores," such as Burberry, Kate Spade, Hugo Boss and Michael Kors.

You'd think the presence of a team of Halton Regional Police (HRP) officers would spark some interest. But not these guys— and women too. They're in street clothes, texting and shopping— just like everyone else. They fit in like a woman on a shopping spree.

Targeting shoplifters, this blitz is part of the HRP's Project HOLIDAY 2.0, focused on organized retail crime. A team of detective constables spent days walking the outdoor plaza at the outlet's location in Halton Hills on Steeles Ave. W. at Trafalgar Rd.

Before the watchful eyes of team members, an entire row of high-end, designer purses was scooped off the

shelf, literally disappearing as quickly as a white rabbit out of a magician's hat. And never to be spotted again, in this case. Despite what undercover officers thought was a lead, they ran into a dead end.

But it doesn't always end this way. On Tuesday (Dec. 22), they arrested and charged a Toronto man after trailing him for hours. They allege to have located almost \$5,000 worth of stolen goods from a day at the mall, right in the trunk of his car.

Gideon Atta, 32, of Toronto, was charged with six counts of possession of stolen property and two counts of theft under \$5,000.

"It was a very productive day," said Det. Const Barry Malciw, noting there's also Loss Prevention Officers (LPO) who work directly for the mall itself or specific stores, in addition to uniformed security personnel visibly walking around the mall's stores.

"We've learned a lot from them," he said, adding one clothing outlet's LPO lead is "the superstar of loss prevention."

Malciw said the offenders are

known to take clothing and purses and put them into bags they've carried into stores with them, backpacks, over-sized purses, strollers— even luggage on wheels.



HRP detectives watch for unusual behavior, people wearing baggy clothing or who appear to be shopping aimlessly— and that doesn't include the husbands looking for a Christmas gift for their wife.

Since the mall is a destination for many tour buses, seeing people pulling luggage is common.

Detectives working the mall have a "long eye," meaning they see a lot that people wouldn't realize and "boosters" are their favourite subject— the latter referring to those who boost stuff off the shelves without paying for it.

Many of these shoplifters are professionals, selling the items as quickly

as they lift it, he added. They're accustomed to being able to remove the wiring that sounds many store's alarms, with ease, noted Det. Const. Mark Brewster, who's the lead on the property crime unit's initiative.

"Shoppers know what they're after— they go into a store, head for an item, pay and leave," Malciw said. "These guys (or women) go in, look around, walking around two or three times, perhaps picking up items they're interested in."

If they get spooked, the items are quickly dropped and the person heads for the door. Sometimes they've been known to spend upwards of 30 minutes in one store, as opposed to shoppers or browsers who are in and out in five or 10 minutes.

Saturday night (Dec. 19), HRP say they brought in another big haul of alleged stolen property located in a man's car at the Toronto Premium Outlets.

In that case, Jose Aguirre-Morales, 55, of Mississauga was charged with 15 counts of possession of stolen property and one count of theft under \$5,000.

Along with the outlet mall, HRP

has been working locally at places like Walmart and the Super Centre, where thefts are also common.

Malciw said some shoplifters are blatant. One person loaded up a grocery cart with six X-box stations and walked right out of the store. Other shoplifters stash things like meat or baby formula into strollers, or in baggy clothing.

Police plan to continue their initiative in the days following Christmas when they expect many locations to be busy with Boxing Day specials.

Other aspects in Project Holiday 2.0, based on the acronym, HOLIDAY - are: High Enforcement on repeat offenders; Organized retail and property crime; Links to service and Mental Health; Impaired driving; Domestic incidents; Alcohol related issues/traffic safety and Youth wellness/quality of life.

It's an initiative designed to address the increased number of service calls police receive over the holiday season.

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