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# Bulgarian hid for a decade in mountains

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DARRINGTON, Wash. - For more than a decade, the shroud of mystery surrounding "The Bulgarian" seemed impenetrable.

Suspected in at least 75 break-ins at empty vacation homes at two nearby housing developments, no one had ever seen him.

Homeowners say he ate their food and slept in their beds before vanishing into the woods of the North Cascades with pounds of stolen provisions, clothes and equipment.

Community meetings were held and rumors grew rife as years passed and the thefts increased.

Then professional trackers were brought in by the Snohomish County sheriff's office.

Within days, they determined The Bulgarian's favorite routes up and down nearby mountains.

Infrared sensors were installed along those trails and after two weeks, sheriff's deputies nabbed him early last Monday.

The bearded fugitive - armed with a heavy pronged stick, three knives and two handguns, and carrying a 70-pound pack of gear and stolen provisions - put up violent resistance.

A police dog named Yukon finally subdued him. He has been at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle ever since, with surgery to clean up the bites on his legs.

It seems The Bulgarian - all 6 feet and 200 pounds of him - had made his last midnight raid.

Apprehensive homeowners called him The Bulgarian because it was easier than pronouncing his name - Mincio Vasilev Donciev. But his name has been known since 1988, when Snohomish County sheriff's deputies identified him through fingerprints left at one of the burgled homes.

Authorities had another name for the man who eluded them for years in the Cascade foothills: "The Mountain Man."

Donciev, 67, has an extensive criminal history.

In 1954, he was convicted of attempted homicide in his native Bulgaria and served five years in prison, said Andy Laine of the U.S. State Department's Diplomatic Security Service.

In 1966, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He escaped in 1970 but is no longer sought in his homeland. The statute of limitations has run out.

According to the Bulgarian news agency BTA, Donciev is divorced and worked as a militiaman. The Bulgarian Embassy in Washington, D.C., has denied reports he once worked as a police officer.

He entered the United States in 1982 with a valid resident permit, Laine said. It's not clear what he did in the years after his escape, or how he got the permit.

He moved to Seattle, and King County court records show he worked as a mechanic and lived with a woman in the Lake City neighborhood, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reported.



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But a few months later, he was arrested and charged with attempted arson, accused of trying to blow up the woman's house after she asked him to leave.

Donciev pleaded guilty to a lesser charge - manufacture of an incendiary device - and was sentenced to nine months in prison. But he never served the time. A bench warrant filed in March 1986 is still pending.

Donciev then headed north, winding up in the forested hills of Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest outside Darrington.

The break-ins began about 10 years ago.

There are outstanding warrants for Donciev in Snohomish County from 1992 and 1996 for two counts of residential burglary at the Stillaguamish County Club and Chatham Acres, the developments he is suspected of targeting.

At Stillaguamish, a heavily wooded tract dotted with 60 vacation and year-round homes, there are records of 71 burglaries since 1991.

The thief only broke into unoccupied homes, say caretakers Lowell and Helen Lambert.

At first, he cut diamond-shaped holes in doors to reach the locks. Later, Lowell Lambert said, he began breaking windows and prying doors open.

“He was big and rugged and strong,” Lambert said. “And he was reasonably smart.”

The break-ins were easy to spot. Doors were left wide open, with food spilled in kitchens and clothes strewn across rooms.

“He never trashed the homes, but he was sloppy,” Lowell Lambert said.

The thief took mostly canned food, frozen juices and sodas. On one occasion, he ate some ice cream. On another, he drank half a can of beer.

He took batteries, flashlights and other equipment, but passed up cash. He would trade dirty clothes for clean, warm ones. At times, he slept in the invaded homes.

Retired U.S. Border Patrol agent Joel Hardin, a renowned local tracker, was enlisted to help find Donciev in October.

By then, homeowners in the two developments feared the petty thefts might escalate into something more dangerous. And they were tired of the repeated break-ins.

“He did damage to so many cabins,” said Maxine Border whose house, one of 11 at Chatham Acres, was broken into twice.

Some folks at the developments could not enjoy their property “because they were afraid of running into him,” said Stillaguamish homeowner Earl Stuart.

Hardin spent a month working with the sheriff's office and another tracker, Phil Vining, to establish a profile of Donciev.

They determined their quarry had a slow, methodical gait and was in good physical condition - able to carry packs weighing as much as 75 pounds up and down steep slopes. They figure he had one main shelter and probably several smaller ones to shelter him from the elements - winter temperatures here drop into the 20s.

Hardin, Vining and tracker Cathy Wilhelm then spent three days combing a 20-square-mile area for footprints, bent grass blades, broken twigs and mashed leaves - anything that would reveal Donciev's preferred routes.

“He was going up and down that mountain range like he was a billy goat,” said Hardin, whose Everson-based company, Universal Tracking Service, trains police, search-and-rescue teams and military units.

“The man wasn't surviving in the woods. He lived there,” Hardin said.

“He was very comfortable in his environment. He was very confident, competent. He certainly had no fear.”

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