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Kelly Godwin soothes Belle, a 10-year-old pregnant mare that had been missing for four days until she was found Sunday night, dehydrated and skinnier. Belle is supposed to give birth in a day or two.

SHAWN ROCCO, Staff photo by Shawn Rocco

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Missing horse back home

A dispute remains over whether the mare was stolen or wandered away

BY JENNIFER KLAHRE, Staff Writer

Belle, a pregnant brown-and-white horse missing for five days and feared stolen from her Johnston County pasture, was found dehydrated and thinner Sunday night in a vacant construction lot more than two miles away.

But whether she was stolen or escaped from her fenced-in home was in dispute Monday.

Owner April Lowry, in addition to the woman who leases Belle and keeps her in a pasture near Zebulon, think the mare, known as a "paint," was stolen.

Tammy Amaon, a spokeswoman for the Johnston County Sheriff's Office, said Deputy Robbie Raetz, after examining the scene late last week, initially thought the 1,000-pound horse wandered away.

However, a detective has been asked to review the disappearance, Amaon said Monday.

Belle's condition made it unlikely the horse wandered more than two miles from home, said Lowry, owner of The Creekside Farm in the Robeson County town of Lumber Bridge.



"She's pregnant, so she's definitely not going to get out and walk several miles from home," Lowry said. "It would be like a pregnant woman in labor getting up and walking 10 miles. It's just not going to happen."

Kelly Godwin, who is leasing the mare from Lowry, realized Belle was missing at 7:30 a.m. Wednesday after her son heard a banging noise during the night.

"My first reaction was basically crying," Godwin said. "It was devastating."

Belle is kept behind Godwin's house and barn in a two-acre pasture enclosed by three strands of electric wire.

"It would be nearly impossible for her to get out of that fence," Lowry said. "The wire would stretch and the insulators would bust off the poles, and there were no signs of that."

Even more disturbing to Lowry and Goodwin was what they perceived to be a lack of interest from Raetz.

"I wanted to file a larceny report, but the sheriff refused," Lowry said. "It's ridiculous that they thought it was no big deal."

According to Amaon, Raetz thought the mare had escaped on her own, reporting a loose wire in one part of the enclosure and scuff marks where the horse exited the pasture.

But Lowry and Godwin said Belle had never gotten loose before and they found no tracks or manure from the mare leading away from the scene.

Lowry and Godwin conducted a search in an eight-mile radius from Belle's pasture. When nothing was found, they decided to print fliers, post notice of the missing mare on Craigslist and contact Stolen Horse International, a nonprofit organization that helps in the search for missing and stolen horses.

Stolen Horse's president, Debi Metcalfe, said her group sent out Idaho Alerts for the horse. The alerts are similar to Amber Alerts for missing children.

"I've done this a long time and we've seen horses, that the law enforcement were very quick to assume they got out, show up later after our alerts go out," Metcalfe said. "Sometimes these same horses that police didn't think were stolen show up with their manes cut and shoes changed."

According to Metcalfe, across the United States, a lot of pregnant mares are stolen near the end of their pregnancy.

"If you find a pregnant mare, you get two for one, and there's no traceability on the second one," Metcalfe said.



She also thinks that crime in the horse industry has increased in last two years because of the recession.

"A horse is like any other thing you can steal and get money off of, but it's really easier because people don't expect people to steal horses so they can hide them in plain sight," Metcalfe said.

Lowry agrees.

"I think it was somebody that was down on their luck and needed some extra cash and thought 'let's try this horse,' " she said. "I think it's the way the economy is right now. Everything is going haywire."

jklahre@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4633

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