

Slate

SHOPPING

Avoiding the Bicycle Thief

The best locks to protect your wheels.

By Scott Elder

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I put up with the hassle of owning a car in traffic-jammed Washington, D.C., for a few years. But when I lost my free parking space, I sold the car and made a bike my primary means of transportation. Now that I cycle most every day, I rely on a lock to keep my bike mine. Given the genuine threat of bike theft in the city, I always feel a twinge of fear when I leave my bike on the street, worried that upon my return, I'll find nothing more than a busted U-lock.

I don't have anything against the U-lock. If Kryptonite hadn't introduced it in the early '70s, the pinnacle of bicycle security might still be a cheap length of chain and a padlock. And it's evolved some since then—in the fall of 2004, bicyclists discovered that many round-key U-locks could be picked with the plastic barrel of a [Bic pen](#). Kryptonite, which caught the most flak from the scandal, exchanged more than 380,000 locks for pen-proof, flat-key models free of charge, and lock competitor OnGuard, which had already phased out round keys, got a big sales boost. Today, flat keys are the norm.

Key style aside, most bikes are stolen because they're not locked at all ("I'll just be in Starbucks for a minute ..."), or because the locks are used [incorrectly](#). But plenty of properly locked bikes still get nabbed. To find out which locks work best, I pitted nine locks against each other from Kryptonite, OnGuard, and Master Lock: five U-locks, two woven steel cable locks, and two heavy-duty chain locks.

Next, I assembled my bike-jacking arsenal: an 18-inch crowbar, 30-inch bolt cutters, a hacksaw, three special blades, and my trusty claw hammer. I used only hand tools because 1) if a criminal crew with the proper power tools and a van wants a bike, it's as good as gone, and 2) I probably would have hurt myself. I was very eager to find out how the various locks compared. And to break stuff.

METHODOLOGY

1) Security (20 possible points): To see how the locks would hold up in street conditions, I locked them around the frame of a very obsolete bike and around a steel handrail outside my apartment. I attempted to break through each lock with each of the tools, and did my best not to damage the bike. Busted locks received a maximum security score of 10.

2) Portability/Ease of Use (10 possible points): Even if a lock is unbreakable, is it practical? Cyclists usually transport U-locks with mounting brackets attached to the bike frame, in bags, or, if the locks are small enough, in their pockets. Locking chains are carried in bags or worn around the waist or over the shoulder. I took each lock for a ride and evaluated how difficult it was to carry and lock up.

3) Value (based on this formula): If a less-expensive lock can do the job, it deserves some recognition. To calculate value, I used the following formula: Add up the previous two scores, multiply by 10, and then divide by cost. I added one extra-credit point for every thousand dollars of free anti-theft coverage the company provides for a year after purchase. (Be sure to read the fine print and register with the proper documents; if you don't, you aren't covered.)

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RANKINGS (worst to first)

[Akita](#) and [Kryptonite Gorgon](#), both \$39.99

Pertinent Thickness: Both 20 mm Woven Steel Cables

Weight: 2.6 and 2.4 pounds, respectively

Free Anti-Theft Warranty: Both \$0

Despite their tough looks, I slayed the Gorgon and the Akita with both the hacksaw and the bolt cutters. Note that these locks have zero theft protection, which shows how little faith their makers have in them. Although they represent some of the thickest cable locks on the market, they didn't stand a chance. "Cable locks are a surefire way to get your bike stolen in the city," the manager of my neighborhood bike shop, [City Bikes](#), told me. Spend your \$40 on something else.

OnGuard Akita

Security: 2

Portability/Ease of Use: 5

Value: 1.8

Total: 8.8

Kryptonite Gorgon

Security: 3

Portability/Ease of Use: 5

Value: 2

Total: 10

[Master Lock Force 3 STD U-lock](#), \$29.99

Pertinent Thickness: 13 mm

Weight: 2.2 pounds

Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$1,000 for one year

The Force 3 got a perfect 10 for portability because the included mounting bracket works great and is built to last—it's much, much sturdier than those supplied with the other brands' U-locks. (Note to Kryptonite and OnGuard: Please go back to this old-school design! It works!) But security-wise, it can't be depended upon: Of the three \$30 U-locks, the Force 3 performed the worst. The metal in the shackle (the "U") is of low quality and the locking mechanism in the crossbar broke off quickly and easily. All U-locks are not created equal.

Security: 5

Portability/Ease of Use: 10

Value: 6

Total: 21

[Kryptonite KryptoLok STD U-lock](#), \$29.99

Pertinent Thickness: 13 mm

Weight: 2 pounds

Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$0

The Kryptonite KryptoLok showed some heart, but with the right tool even Lois Lane could bust it. It took me less than a minute to break through, since the steel in the shackle is so soft and vulnerable. The included mounting bracket is flimsy plastic junk: One of the "EZ Mount Brackets" broke when I was putting it on, resulting in a two-point portability deduction.

Security: 8

Portability/Ease of Use: 8

Value: 5.3
Total: 21.3

[OnGuard Bulldog STD U-lock](#), \$29.99

Pertinent Thickness: 13 mm Shackle
Weight: 2.4 pounds
Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$1,251 for one year

I neutered the Bulldog with relative ease, but its failure may have been a fluke. The manager at City Bikes tried the same breaking technique on two other Bulldogs, and both took the punishment without busting. And while my hopes were high for the sturdy-looking OnGuard mounting bracket, the City Bikes staff assured me it would eventually snap off. In fact, just as they said this, a customer entered with a broken OnGuard mount asking for a replacement—1.5 points off portability. (All warrantied OnGuard locks also lost one bonus point for value because bikes stolen in New York state, and bikes jacked with power tools, aren't covered by their warranty, nor are bikes swiped from bike messengers or deliverymen.)

Security: 10
Portability/Ease of Use: 8.5
Value: 6.4
Total: 24.9

[OnGuard Beast 3-foot 7-inch Chain](#), \$89.99

Pertinent Thickness: 12 mm Links
Weight: 9.5 pounds
Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$3,501 for one year

The Beast lives up to its name—it weighs almost 10 pounds and can take a serious beating. Unlike less hefty locks, the hacksaw and the bolt cutters barely ruined the finish on the chain. However, I did wound the Beast with the hammer. My battering dented the padlock and made it impossible to open without a screwdriver.

Apart from stowing it in a bag, my only options for transporting the Beast were to wear it as a belt or shoulder it bandolier-style, both of which were uncomfortable due to the weight. The padlock's small shackle comes completely free when you turn the key, and to lock it up you need to keep your hands on the lock, both ends of the chain, and the shackle, which I kept dropping. The design may make for a stronger lock, but the Beast was hard to control.

Security: 17
Portability/Ease of Use: 3.5
Value: 4.8
Total: 25.3

[Kryptonite New York Chain With EV Disc Lock 3-foot 3-inch Chain](#), \$79.95

Pertinent Thicknesses: 10 mm Links, 13 mm shackle on mini U-lock
Weight: 6.1 pounds
Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$3,000 for one year

The New York Chain lock is much easier to use than the Beast. The two ends of the chain are held together by a tiny U-lock, which, unlike the Beast's padlock, doesn't separate into two pieces. It's tough, too: I didn't think this little lock could handle a full-fledged beat-down, but it shook it off and continued to work like new. I appreciated the added flexibility that comes with a chain lock—they can fit around wide things like lampposts—but I was a little disappointed with its portability. While it's definitely lighter than the Beast, it's still a load to carry. Take this for a test ride before you buy.

Security: 17
Portability/Ease of Use: 4
Value: 5.6
Total: 26.6

[OnGuard Brute STD U-lock](#), \$69.95

Pertinent Thickness: 16 mm Shackle
Weight: 4.5 pounds
Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$3,001 for one year

The Brute is the toughest-looking lock in the bunch and one of the toughest-acting. I gave it everything I had (almost kneecapped myself with the hammer), but I only did cosmetic damage. Sawing on the 16 mm shackle for five minutes only got me about 3 mm deep. At that rate, it would have taken me more than 35 minutes to cut through. It falls short, however, in proper mounting hardware: It comes with the same bracket as the 2.4-pound Bulldog, which doesn't hold up since this monster weighs 4.5 pounds. While the Brute is mean enough to scare off real bike thieves, portability—or lack thereof—weighs it down.

Security: 18
Portability/Ease of Use: 5
Value: 5.3
Total: 28.3

[Kryptonite New York Fahgettaboudit U-lock](#), \$89.95

Pertinent Thickness: 18 mm Shackle
Weight: 4.6 pounds
Free Anti-Theft Warranty: \$4,500 for one year

If I were a pro bicycle thief, I'd skip any bike protected by a poison-frog-yellow New York [Fahgettaboudit](#) U-lock (or the NYFU). It took its beating with the poise of a journeyman NHL defenseman. At my hacksawing rate, it would have taken 42 minutes to cut through the 18 mm shackle. (It didn't get a perfect 20 score for security because my assault managed to jar a spring loose inside the crossbar, but that wouldn't affect lockup strength.)

I wasn't too surprised: The NYFU is made with so much hardened steel that it could moonlight as a dumbbell. But weight aside, its small size makes it easy to carry. The only drawback of "mini" U-locks like the NYFU is that the small stature means you can only lock the bike frame to an object—there's no room for also locking wheels. Kryptonite has enough confidence in their new flagship lock to back it up with a \$4,500 anti-theft warranty. (Not that I've ever seen, much less owned, a bike worth anywhere near that much.) It's pricey, but the NY Fahgettaboudit is worth the dough.

Security: 19
Portability/Ease of Use: 7
Value: 7.4
Total: 33.4

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