

Tracking apps might not help recover stolen devices

July 16 2012, By Lauren Davidson

If you think tracking software on your smartphone or tablet will help you recover it if it's stolen, you might be mistaken.

You may recall reading about Melissa Sharpe and fiance Nick Renzi in January. Traveling on Delta out of Atlanta's airport during the end-of-year holiday season, the couple realized Renzi's work iPad was accidentally left on their plane. The tablet's "Find my iPad" software tracked it to a house in McDonough, Ga., but the [location](#) sometimes drifted to the property next door. The couple filed a report with Atlanta police, whose jurisdiction includes the airport.

But the cops didn't swoop in on the house, arrest the bad guy and return the iPad to its lawful owner. That's because the location was inconsistent, police spokesman Carlos Campos said. The ability to obtain a search warrant revolves around probable cause, which is difficult to establish if tracking software isn't precise, he said.

"It really depends greatly on the technology," he said. "For example, you have the Find my iPhone or iPad app, that only shows a general location." But, Campos said, if your software provides a specific address or takes a picture of the suspect, obtaining a warrant is more realistic.

An Apple representative would not comment on the precision of its "Find my [iPhone](#)" or "Find my iPad" software. The company's online description certainly doesn't claim pinpoint accuracy: "Find My iPad shows you the approximate location of your iPad on a map." On the

other hand ...

In Gwinnett County, Ga., last month, a delivery driver for Joe's to Goes was robbed at gunpoint of his cellphone, GPS unit, \$30 - and chicken wings.

The driver returned to the Snellville restaurant, called Gwinnett police and pinpointed the location of his phone - a Samsung Galaxy S2 - to a Snellville residence, said Cpl. Jake Smith. Officers drove to the house and received consent from the owners to search the home.

Inside was a person who matched the driver's description of the suspect. The victim activated a security feature to make his phone ring, allowing officers to find it in the house - along with the chicken wings, and later the GPS and cash - and make an arrest.

"Within minutes after the robbery," Smith said, "we had a location pulled up on the computer, and it wasn't moving. This was a very good case to use this kind of information. It didn't even get to the level of a search warrant." But, like Campos of the APD, Smith says a warrant based on tracking software alone can be more difficult.

"It can depend on the phone itself. It can depend on the coverage the phone is getting at that particular moment, how close it is to cellphone towers or what satellites it's beeping off of."

While Sharpe's experience was frustrating, the Smyrna, Ga., resident's story eventually had a good ending. Her fiance's [iPad](#) was turned in to Delta after the couple performed a remote wipe to erase personal information. But the 29-year-old has spent months wondering why the tablet's [tracking software](#) wasn't good enough for the police in her case.

"I understand that it's fairly new, and that it's not 100 percent accurate.

You think you can get help based on what you have, but then they tell you, you can't."

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