

Fake Wi-Fi connections expose users to identity theft

By CHELSEA PHUA - Sacramento Bee

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Not all potential security breaches at an airport can be captured on a cell phone and posted as a YouTube video.

One such danger lurks in the form of free wireless Internet access offered by many airports throughout the nation and in other public places.

Authorities warn travelers to beware of hackers setting up fake wireless fidelity -- or Wi-Fi -- connections to steal passwords, credit card and bank account numbers, and other personal information.

Experts say the threat of identity theft is not new, but it's not clear how prevalent it has become because tracking can be difficult.

"Ever since Wi-Fi became available, criminals have found a new way to exploit new victims," said Tom Osborne, a special agent who manages the cybercrime squad in Sacramento's FBI office.

Osborne said some airports and other public places reported Wi-Fi security issues a few years ago.

But "a lot of people don't report," said Sacramento County sheriff's Sgt. Bill Mannering of the Sacramento Valley Hi-Tech Crimes Task Force.

Victims may not even know their information has been compromised when they click onto a network or access point created by the hacker, officials said.

"All it takes is a person with a laptop two seats away from you," said Gary Almond, president of the Northeast California Better Business Bureau.

Authorities say a hacker with an iPhone or a mobile device that has the capacity to create a Wi-Fi hotspot can set up a fake connection simply named "Free Wi-Fi" or any other seemingly innocuous name.

When you click on it, "you are connected to the bad guy's computer and system as a conduit to the Internet," Osborne said. "All that traffic can be monitored via the bad guy's computer."

Basically, "don't connect to a Wi-Fi you don't know" in public places and don't have your laptop automatically connect to a wireless source, Mannering said.

Almond said a hacker might try tricking users by creating a fake connection with the same name used by the airport.

Sacramento International Airport spokeswoman Gina Swankie said that since the airport started offering free Wi-Fi in 2006, officials have yet to receive a report of suspicious networks.

"Security of our IT infrastructure is a priority," Swankie said in an e-mail. But she cautioned that users log in and surf at their own risk.

"Users should use the same precautions when downloading material as they would when surfing the Internet at home," Swankie said.

Brian Whatley, a businessman from Lodi, Calif., who flies about four days a week for work, said he has used free Wi-Fi services offered at airports. About six months ago, he bought a 3G iPhone that allows him to connect his laptop online using the phone.

"Most of the time you don't think about it," Whatley said about the dangers of using free Wi-Fi. "You just want to jump on a free Wi-Fi because you are trying to meet a deadline getting an e-mail out as soon as possible."

(Contact Sacramento Bee reporter Chelsea Phua at [cphua\(at\)sacbee.com](mailto:cphua@sacbee.com).)

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