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## ID thefts target Arco stations

**Devices used around the region recorded PINs and debit card numbers to steal at least \$110,000.**

**By Christina Jewett and Art Campos -- Bee Staff Writers**

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Credit card information linked to more than 1,000 debit cards swiped at Arco ampm gas stations from Sacramento to Redding was captured by a "skimming" operation used to withdraw at least \$110,000 in cash from ATMs in Northern California casinos, a detective said Monday.

Investigators are still looking for cardholders whose information might have been stolen at ampm stations in Linda, Rocklin, Roseville, Redding, Oroville, Yuba City, Willows and Sacramento.

Alleged ring leader Claudiu Hotea, 32, of Riverside was arrested Jan. 24 .

"This is the most sophisticated case I've done," said Placer County Sheriff's Detective Jim Hudson. "These guys invested money in the equipment to make them the most effective and give them the least exposure."

Placer County Sheriff's Lt. George Malim said the thieves used a skimming device by attaching a discreet, black plastic faceplate to the debit card readers at the gas stations.

The device does not interfere with a customer buying gas, but it records the debit card number. The facade also has a one-way mirror that hides a camera trained to capture fingers punching in PINs, Malim said.

"They leave it there a few hours, come back, take the devices and upload the information into the computer," Malim said.

With the debit card and PINs, suspects then coded magnetic strips of other plastic cards and used them to withdraw cash.

Phil Cochrane, a spokesman for the Arco stations, said staff are monitoring card readers more frequently.

An affidavit for Hotea's arrest filed by the Secret Service with a federal judge Friday details how investigators unraveled the scheme.

On Jan. 23, Yuba County sheriff's detectives told the Secret Service they were receiving similar reports from victims of identity theft. The victims all used a debit card at a gas station in Linda, and their debit cards had been fraudulently used at an automated teller machine at Thunder Valley Casino in Lincoln, according to the affidavit.

Reviewing surveillance tapes at the casino and bank information, officials saw Hotea withdrawing cash at the times that victims' cards were used.

On Tuesday night, officials arrested Hotea at the casino and found five Starbucks gift cards with victims'

debit cards numbers encoded in the plastic strip, the affidavit says.

Detectives also arrested Emanuel Moldoveanu, 34, who was with Hotea, on suspicion of the same charges: burglary, conspiracy and possession of forged access cards, Malim said. Moldoveanu posted \$200,000 bail Saturday.

Officials said they expect to make more arrests.

Secret Service agent Brian Korbs wrote in the affidavit that Hotea admitted Wednesday to withdrawing \$6,000 and carrying 20 cards at one time.

Members of the scheme also withdrew and spent money at Cache Creek, Feather Falls, the Jackson Rancheria and Thunder Valley casinos, officials said.

Hotea was released Friday on bond but was arrested again and held without bail in Sacramento's main jail after officials realized he had an earlier conviction for a similar offense, said Hudson, the Placer County detective.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas McConville said he prosecuted a 2001 case in which Hotea was convicted of attempted use of a counterfeit device in another skimming operation.

McConville said a waiter who worked at an Orange County restaurant was accused of lifting credit card numbers from customers cards' and transferring them to other plastic cards. He said Hotea and others used the fraudulent cards to charge about \$180,000.

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## MORE ON SKIMMING

Placer County sheriff's officials said debit cards were corrupted at Arco ampm stations in the following cities:

Linda, Rocklin, Roseville, Redding, Oroville, Yuba City, Willows and Sacramento.

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