

# **FEDERAL AGENTS TARGET ILLEGAL BIRD TRADE NEWS RELEASE**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

**May 29, 1998**

The successful break-up of an international smuggling ring dealing in protected birds and other wildlife was announced today by the U.S. Customs Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The 3-year investigation, code-named Operation Jungle Trade, spotlights this country's continuing pursuit of those who traffic in wild-caught birds—species whose plight is a major international conservation concern.

Operation Jungle Trade, which culminated yesterday with the execution of Federal arrest and search-and-seizure warrants in Colorado, Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas, produced 40 arrests and/or indictments and the seizure of more than 660 exotic birds and other animals, most of them native Mexican species that can only be exported from that country with appropriate authorizing documents. Trade in many of these species is controlled under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a global agreement that regulates the importation and exportation of hundreds of animals and plants.

The smuggling ring, which operated across the U.S.-Mexico border, extended into 9 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and 10 other countries: Australia, Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Egypt, Ghana, Honduras, New Zealand, Panama, and South Africa. Customs and Fish and Wildlife Service agents worked with law enforcement officers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Panama to document criminal activity and gather evidence, carrying out more than 40 separate but related investigations here and abroad.

"Operation Jungle Trade exemplifies the type of aggressive, across-the-board law enforcement that must be our global response to the escalating traffic in protected species," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark. "This Customs-led joint operation clearly demonstrates the United States' commitment to wildlife conservation."

"The Service's participation in Operation Jungle Trade is part of the agency's ongoing effort to stop the illegal trade in wild birds," Clark said. Service special agents helped carry out the final round of multi-state search and arrest warrants and provided investigative support and assistance throughout the course of the investigation. Customs officers also depended on the Service for guidance concerning Federal wildlife laws and proper care of the animals seized.

The illegal wildlife trade is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year global "business" that threatens

the future viability of the world's wildlife. Wild-caught birds, including parrots and macaws, are a prime target for this black market. Many species are highly prized by collectors and other people who seek exotic pets, making them highly profitable commodities for wildlife smugglers.

"We successfully targeted a portion of this trade with a major multi-year international probe earlier in the decade," Clark said. "At that time, we were seeing large numbers of African birds being smuggled out of their homelands and 'laundered' through other countries for exportation to the United States. Now traffic in Latin American species is a growing concern, with much of it coming across our southern border."

The birds seized during Operation Jungle Trade included 356 yellow-headed Amazon parrots, 110 yellow-naped Amazon parrots (a Guatemalan species), 57 Mexican red-headed parrots, 31 red-lored Amazon parrots, and smaller quantities of several other protected psittacine species. Most of these birds are listed on Appendix II under the CITES treaty and cannot legally enter into trade without export permits. Although species on this list are not currently threatened with extinction, their fate is uncertain unless trade is regulated.

The confiscated birds also included eight military macaws, a species whose imperiled status warrants a higher level of protection under CITES. As an Appendix I species, these birds cannot be imported for commercial purposes, and all other shipments require permits from both the importing and exporting countries.

"The United States is the world's largest market for wildlife and wildlife products, but this demand cannot be met at the expense of the world's animal and plant species," Clark said. "Operation Jungle Trade shows that the commercial exploitation of wild birds and other protected animals will not be tolerated."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's 94 million acres include 512 national wildlife refuges, 78 ecological services field stations, 65 national fish hatcheries, 50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

o The illegal wildlife trade is a highly lucrative black market that many believe ranks second in profits only to illegal drug traffic.

o Wild birds are a major target for wildlife profiteers. Parrots, or psittacines, are highly prized in the pet trade for their colorful plumage and exotic appeal.

o Scientists have identified some 330 psittacine species worldwide. These birds belong to the Order Psittaciformes; they include parrots, parakeets, macaws, cockatoos, rosellas, amazons, conures, and lorikeets. All possess a downward-curving upper beak; many sport brilliantly colored feathers.

o All but two parrot species are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). This global agreement, which involves some 143 member nations, regulates international trade in species listed on any of its three appendices.

o Forty-five parrot species are listed on CITES Appendix I, the Convention's highest level of protection. All commercial trade is prohibited because these birds face an immediate threat of extinction. Habitat loss and removal of birds from the wild have helped put these species at risk.

o All other psittacine birds (except the two unlisted species) appear on CITES Appendix II. These species cannot enter trade without export permits from their country of origin. Such controls help ensure that commercialization will not jeopardize the continued survival of these species in the wild.

o Most of the parrots protected under CITES Appendix I are also listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. In general, these birds cannot be imported into the United States or sold in interstate commerce unless specific permits are issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

o Because the pet trade was taking such a toll on many wild bird populations worldwide, Congress passed the Wild Bird Conservation Act in 1992 to further restrict trade in protected species. The Act prohibits the commercial importation of parrots and other CITES-listed birds unless they come from countries with approved species management and conservation programs or approved captive-breeding facilities, or belong to certain approved captive-bred species.

o Before passage of this law, the United States was a major importer of parrots and other CITES-listed birds. According to the World Wildlife Fund, some 150,000 psittacines entered the country through legal trade channels in 1990. Even with that volume of imports, smuggled birds were also believed to be meeting a significant portion of consumer demand for these pets.

o "Bird laundering" was a common practice among wildlife smugglers earlier in the decade and continues to be a problem for psittacine species today. Birds are smuggled out of countries where they are protected and into countries where fewer restrictions exist. Export documents are secured in the second country so that the "laundered" birds can then be "legally" transported to other nations.

o Today the outright smuggling of Mexican and other Latin American wildlife and plants across the U.S.-Mexico border is a significant law enforcement problem.

o Even though there are no reliable statistics on the number of birds or other wildlife that illegally enter this country each year from Mexico, a 1997 study by the World Wildlife Fund/Traffic USA concluded that the "southern border is . . . probably the most widely used route for illegal importation of parrots into the United States."

o Many smuggled birds never make it to the marketplace. Significant mortality rates are common even in the legal trade and birds in the hands of smugglers often suffer a similar fate.

o Smuggled birds also represent a significant health threat to native birds, poultry, and people. Wild-caught parrots may carry two very contagious avian diseases: psittacosis and exotic Newcastle disease, both of which can also infect humans.

o Federal regulations require that all imported wild birds spend 30 days in government-approved quarantine stations after they arrive in this country. Smuggled birds bypass this vital health screening.

**If you know someone who smuggles birds, or buys smuggled birds, it is your responsibility to report them. Call USF&W Law Enforcement at (703) 358-1949 or send an email to: [LawEnforcement@fws.gov](mailto:LawEnforcement@fws.gov) or USDA Smuggled Bird Hotline at (301) 734-8073.**