

# "The Great Wildlife Heist"

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ANNOUNCER: Tonight on NOVA, bagging and smuggling exotic birds has become a huge international crime.

DR. THOMAS GOLDSMITH: We see them coming in suitcases, and ridiculous numbers of them are dead.

ANNOUNCER: NOVA goes underground with federal agents in an extraordinary sting operation as they try to expose the masterminds behind this multimillion dollar business.

TONY SILVA: It is competition, it is fierce and greed.

ANNOUNCER: Can the feds stop "The Great Wildlife Heist?"

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NARRATOR: These bird may be the most intelligent descendants of the dinosaurs, and that may be their undoing. Parrots have flourished throughout the tropics and subtropics, more than 300 species of them, in all sizes and every conceivable color. But now they are disappearing from the wild, even as they multiply as pets, an unnatural evolution of wild creatures into collectors' items and commodities.

TONY SILVA: If you have one, you have to have two. You then have to have three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. One isn't enough. And this is the obsession that bird people go through.

NARRATOR: How did so many endangered parrots from distant forests find their way into American cages when laws forbid their import? A special breed of cop, a team of wildlife investigators, has been tracking down the answer to that question. They mounted the biggest undercover operation of its kind, a sting called "Operation Renegade." The story of that investigation takes us on a journey across America to Australia, Africa and South America, yet it keeps returning to this unlikely building in Los Angeles and to a young man who knows as much as anyone alive about the victims of the story.

TONY SILVA: There's a mystery about them. They're intelligent, they're inquisitive, they can tax your wits to the limit. There's something mysterious about them, something special that you can't describe.

NARRATOR: The story begins here in the Mexican border town of Tijuana, famous for offering visitors a variety of commerce, legal and otherwise. An American bird dealer had complained to authorities that wild parrots bought here were being smuggled into the U.S., some with contagious diseases. NOVA's concealed camera reveals how easy it is to be a parrot smuggler. All around Tijuana there are wild parrots for sale, cheap.

FEDERAL INVESTIGATOR: Cuantos?

MEXICAN BIRDSPELLER: Forty-five dollars.

FEDERAL INVESTIGATOR: Forty-five dollars? I want to get them across the border to the U.S. Can you show me how you do that?

NARRATOR: Customers are given smuggling lessons at no extra charge. Simply put the birds in paper bags with some bird seed or maybe a little tequila, the vendors advise, and they'll keep quiet.

FEDERAL INVESTIGATOR: How are you going to get them across, you know? Yeah?

MEXICAN BIRDSPELLER: Put him in the trunk.

FEDERAL INVESTIGATOR: In the trunk? Make sure he's got a lot of air.

MEXICAN BIRDSPELLER: Maybe put a hole in there.

FEDERAL INVESTIGATOR: Oh, a hole. Okay. Yeah, he might live.

NARRATOR: A parrot in a paper bag in a car trunk is not apt to be discovered by border guards. Nor, in Tijuana's heat, is it likely to make the trip alive. The waste of wildlife and the risk of disease convinced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to assign several special agents to do something about the smuggling. One of the agents was Rick Leach. NOVA agreed to disguise his appearance and voice. Leach suspected he was getting into something well beyond a local border problem.

RICK LEACH: As it turned out, it involved some of the largest bird importation companies in the U.S., as well as some very complex smuggling schemes that were very difficult to detect, and the illegal activity here encompassed millions of dollars of smuggled birds.

NARRATOR: Agent Leach had 20 years' experience as an undercover investigator in narcotics before he switched to wildlife, but this case would be something new.

RICK LEACH: At the beginning of this investigation I knew almost nothing about parrots. I don't recall ever working a particular investigation that involved parrots in the past.

NARRATOR: With a bird dealer tutoring him, Leach learned that some parrots could be sold for as much as \$10,000 apiece in the United States. Why would anyone pay that kind of money for a bird? Bonnie Jay is a portrait photographer. Her models are all parrots. She owns two herself.

BONNIE JAY: I find that the birds are infinitely smarter than dogs and much more companionable. Good girl. I have never loved anything as much as I love the little one. There is

nothing on earth that I care about that I have as such a focus, and I think—I, myself think it's strange because she's a little bird. So there is a trust fund in my will, and that will provide for both of them for the balance of their lives to buy lots of toys and to go to the vet. For people who believe in reincarnation, we asked the little one, "What is your story?" and she said that she and I had been together many turns of the wheel as friends and lovers. Who knows?

KATHLEEN HARRING: Hey baby. Hi baby. Alright, come here. How's my pretty boy? Where's mama? No? I bought my first bird in 1980, and I had no children, and I walked into a pet store one day and saw a little blue and gold macaw hand-feeding, and my motherly instinct took over, and they showed me how to hand-feed this little bird, and I brought it home. It was my greatest pet. This bird? I would say it's probably around five weeks old. Scarlet macaw.

NARRATOR: Kathleen Harring has a collection of rare and exotic parrots that's famous in southern Florida. It's also a large breeding operation with about 800 pairs of birds. Although it's a business, sales are secondary.

KATHLEEN HARRING: They're just the sweetest little birds. They talk. They don't—They'll get about a third size, this size bigger. It's amazing. Once you have a wonderful pet like that, and everyone talks about how nice this bird is and the temperament, how you have to have that one. And then you have to have this one. Well, that's what happened, and thirteen years later, here we are with all these birds amongst me. It really is an addicting business.

NARRATOR: As Fish and Wildlife investigators learned, parrots have a very devoted following.

PARROT FANCIER: Paco sing. Paco. Jesus loves me, this I know.

NARRATOR: Several hundred of the faithful attended this conference on the subject in Toronto, Canada.

TONY SILVA: If we run out of time, I'll be here till tomorrow.

NARRATOR: Many came to hear this man, a self-taught prodigy on parrots, Tony Silva.

TONY SILVA: Rather than get into the speech immediately, what I decided to do is I would whet your appetite with some interesting parrots.

NARRATOR: Tony Silva began studying and collecting birds when he was 9. At age 16, he was writing articles about them, and had published his first book before he was 20.

TONY SILVA: My grandmother, who's 87 years old, is a very strong typical Spanish matriarch, and she always said, "You come to earth to contribute something to society. You better watch what you do, you better contribute. You better do something." These are true blue-fronts. They're not the yellow-wing. I wanted to collect. There was this competition in me. I wanted to have them, not so much for the species, but because there was very little known about their breeding. I can make an inroad, I can find something that no one else had found.

NARRATOR: So Silva went off to the jungles of South America to study exotic parrots in the wild. He wrote articles urging bird dealers to avoid buying smuggled parrots, describing cruel methods used to trap and ship them. He discovered new methods of breeding endangered birds.

Still in his 20s, Silva was chosen to be the bird curator of a famous animal preserve in the Canary Islands. He became the idol of parrot collectors and breeders all over the world. And yet he recognizes a flaw in bird lovers like himself.

TONY SILVA: It's like when you're a baby and you first try a candy. You need more. People that have to have one pair of everything and they're not satisfied with that, they have to continue and continue and continue. And then once you become a full- fledged breeder then you don't care if they're wild- caught, or if they're aviary- bred, or if they're parent- reared or hand- reared. At that point it doesn't matter. You just have to have more. I've know cases where people have mortgaged their house to buy birds. Where marriages have fallen apart because of the birds, because the birds came first.

NARRATOR: Many of the most coveted birds are parrots known as cockatoos which come from Australia. It has been 40 years since Australia allowed any of its wild birds to be exported. And yet, American breeders and collectors seem to have plenty of them, even endangered species. To find out how this was happening, American wildlife agents went to Australia. In the Australian state of Queensland, mostly unpopulated countryside larger than Texas and California combined, there are only two officers assigned to protect the wildlife. In the even larger state of Western Australia, where many species of endangered cockatoos are making their last stand, the situation is much the same. Farms here have gradually swallowed the bush, leaving only small patches of old trees for the birds. Then the smugglers come, like looters after a disaster.

KINGSLEY MILLER: Given the experience I've got now, knowing when to go and where to go and how to do things, it would be quite easy to get upwards of 15 or 20 of these. Oh, you're a beauty. A little red- tail. He's only a couple of weeks old, if that. Come here, mate. This particular species overseas would command very, very high prices. It's one of the most sought after species. The mother only, generally only lays one egg and only rears the one bird. She'll still sit on him at night.

NARRATOR: Kingsley Miller has spent more than 20 years trying to save endangered birds like this cockatoo.

KINGSLEY MILLER: Next time I come up here you'll want to bite me, won't you? All right.

NARRATOR: Miller is a wildlife officer in Western Australia and has learned to think like the smugglers, to know what they're looking for, and get there ahead of them.

KINGSLEY MILLER: Oh yeah. Still quite young, an empty crop too, so mama hasn't fed him for a while. To get into them, they've actually chopped the hole in, so I can just reach in and pick up the birds inside. Little bits of eggshell indicates that birds have nested in here not long ago. Nothing in here this year.

NARRATOR: In robbing the cockatoo nests, the poachers not only steal a generation of birds, but spoil the nesting places for future generations.

KINGSLEY MILLER: We apprehended two Americans. They were actually in the motion of cutting into one of the red- tail black cockatoo hollows and they were in possession of 34 eggs which consisted of red- tail black cockatoos, long- billed carellas and also gallahs. And there

could have been some major eggs in there, but we're not certain. But 34 eggs out of one area, and the damage that they're actually doing to that red- tail nest when we caught them was pretty severe, because that particular tree, no bird is ever going back to that tree.

NARRATOR: This is likely to be the next adventure for a stolen baby cockatoo. Hidden somewhere in the 100 million pieces of luggage that go in and out of Australian airports in a year. Customs officers watching the people, looking for smugglers, rely on tips, instinct and luck. Tony Hanrahan and Mark Bush specialize in catching wildlife smugglers.

MARK BUSH: This is a suitcase that we seized a couple years back now, and it was used to transport live birds. I think, overall, there's about 35 birds inside. Those are PVC pipes you could get at any hardware shop, and what they've done is cut slots in it to allow some ventilation, and they've stuck a carpet piece around it so it doesn't rattle.

TONY HANRAHAN: The mortality rate was quite high, because, as you can see, the bird inside there, there's not much room for them to move around. Normally what they will do is put a stocking around the bird or some sort of tape that confines it, restricts any movement, and eventually the heart rate will just drop, and that's the end of the bird.

NARRATOR: The suitcase full of endangered birds discovered by Australian customs that day belong to this man, Tony Somerville, a highly regarded guide for wildlife photographers. It cost him two years in prison.

TONY SOMERVILLE: By the time they'd got through with me, I'd lost \$500,000. I lost my house, I lost a business, the marriage break- up. They virtually crippled me.

NARRATOR: Somerville says that what he was trying to do by smuggling birds out of Australia was save them.

TONY SOMERVILLE: Well, there were a hell of a lot of birds that are endangered, and we're not going to see the results of what's happening now for another 20 or 50 years.

NARRATOR: Like other bird dealers around the world, Somerville claims some species can no longer exist in the wild, and the only way to preserve them is to somehow get them to breeders in other countries, and he says that's what he was doing.

TONY SOMERVILLE: If I thought that I could save certain species by doing it again, I'll have them in a suitcase, send them out tomorrow. I feel that strongly about it.

NARRATOR: Australian investigators, who found a secret room beneath Somerville's home full of smuggling paraphernalia, contend he was not helping birds at all. He was making a lot of money. But wildlife officers like Kingsley Miller admit there's an irony involved in imprisoning people for selling cockatoos and other Australian parrots.

KINGSLEY MILLER: Hello mate. Yes, you're a little beauty, aren't you.

NARRATOR: Although Australian law forbids the export of its birds, Australian farmers are allowed to kill many of them as pests, even some endangered kinds.

KINGSLEY MILLER: What we have here is a young white- tail black cockatoo. These are the

birds that are on the endangered list within WA. Just unfortunate, these are also the ones that cause a fair bit of damage.

NARRATOR: Some of the most highly prized birds thrive on farm crops, so Australia has a love-hate relationship with its parrots, and either way, the bird loses.

KINGSLEY MILLER: It may seem ridiculous that these birds are in such numbers, they're being destroyed, it's open season for these birds to be taken. But the law at the moment is that these birds cannot leave Australia. Now, until that law changes, we have to take action against people.

NARRATOR: There are too many travelers with too much luggage to search them all. Most smuggled birds get through and, dead or alive, make their way to airports and pet markets half a world away.

RICK LEACH: We had intelligence information indicating that a lot of birds that were entering the U.S. were probably smuggled.

NARRATOR: Now wildlife agent Rick Leach understood how the birds were getting out of Australia, but he realized it would take more than catching a few individuals with parrots in their suitcases to make a real dent in the illegal bird trade. Leach and his colleagues had something more ambitious in mind. Their plan, Operation Renegade, took them into a warehouse section of south Los Angeles.

RICK LEACH: Well, it's not the best of neighborhoods, and it is in gang territory.

NARRATOR: The federal agents were less interested in catching individual smugglers, the couriers, than in flushing out the people who hired them, the dealers. To do that, they would become part of the smuggling operation. But how? They found the answer to that in one of the small warehouses. It was a quarantine station. Every bird brought into America must spend 30 days in a sealed building like this while it's tested for contagious diseases. The Department of Agriculture regulates the quarantine stations, but private bird dealers actually own many of them. This one happened to be for sale.

RICK LEACH: We purchased a quarantine station from one of the largest bird dealers on the West Coast, a man named Richard Furzer.

NARRATOR: Richard Furzer owns a huge aviary in the hills near Santa Barbara, California. He grew up in Africa, trained himself in the wild to be a naturalist. He became fascinated with birds, and after he moved to America, began to import and sell them.

RICHARD FURZER: The breeding aspect is very hard work, and it's seven days a week and long hours, but I love it, and I think the people that do it love it, and it's not big money.

NARRATOR: In the two years before he met Agent Leach, Furzer had imported more than 280,000 wild birds, mostly finches and canaries, but thousands of costly parrots as well. He specialized in African gray parrots, considered the best talkers of all. His business was perfectly legal as far as anyone knew, legal and, he still insists, beneficial.

RICHARD FURZER: I have a big disagreement with conservationists who think that everything

should be left alone in the wild, because I've lived in Africa for 25 years, and the habitat is going a lot faster than the wildlife. I think people don't know how big Africa is, and they don't know what the bird populations are. Any harm I think caused is exaggerated, and also, no one ever counts the pleasure that people have derived from these birds that have been caught in the wild.

NARRATOR: It wasn't pleasure that Furzer had in mind when he talked to Rick Leach a few months after selling him the quarantine station. It was money. Furzer invited Leach to go in with him on a shipment of birds from Africa. Leach recorded the conversation.

RICHARD FURZER: You've got to pay them at the—Because we have to bribe them at the airport in Zaire.

RICK LEACH: You've got to bribe them at the airport in Zaire?

RICHARD FURZER: And in Senegal. And I did it when I was over there when I went to the Ivory Coast. You've got to pay them. They're not allowed to ship them out.

RICK LEACH: Out of Zaire?

RICHARD FURZER: Right. Or into Senegal.

RICK LEACH: Okay. So you pay at the airport. We both had to put up relatively large sums of money to get the shipment in, and as we put together the money, he told me of the smuggling scheme in Africa.

NARRATOR: What Leach had been invited into was a major bird laundering operation. It involved a great number of parrots, parrots smuggled out of African countries that forbid their export and into other African countries that allow it. And from those countries the birds are shipped on to America, everything apparently legal. So even the parrots with official papers were smuggled birds. To help them prove this, the American investigators turned to the bird expert of the Bronx Zoo, Dr. Donald Bruning.

DONALD BRUNING: Senegal has been a major exporter of African grays, even though the species doesn't occur in Senegal. But this is the laundering problem where they're smuggled from one country to another, and then exported as though they came from that country, when they don't even occur in that country.

NARRATOR: By day, Leach and his colleagues tended the hundreds of birds passing through the quarantine station. By night, using a home video camera to document it, they were weighing and measuring the birds to prove by their size their actual country of origin.

RICK LEACH: In effect, we're looking to prove that the birds were smuggled. In this shipment we had approximately 500 African parrots which had been smuggled from the Congo and Zaire into the Ivory Coast prior to shipment into the United States.

JOHN WALSH: Mr. Furzer had gross proceeds of something in the vicinity of \$500,000 to \$800,000 over a couple of years.

NARRATOR: Assistant U.S. Attorney John Walsh, in Los Angeles, was working closely with agent Leach.

JOHN WALSH: There was shipment, after shipment, after shipment, 400, 500 African gray parrots at a time. All of those birds, or virtually all of those, were brought illegally, originally, out of Zaire.

RICHARD FURZER: I was aware that the birds did not come from the Ivory Coast or Guinea, and to my mind, it didn't make any difference. They don't have border laws in west Africa like we do here, and they don't care where the birds came from, and I really didn't think that it was a crime. I realized that I was lying to the government, telling them the birds came from one country instead of another, but morally, it was fine by me.

JOHN WALSH: It turns out that the volume is gigantic and ongoing. The people are making a lot of money. And, moreover, when you take a country like Zaire or any of the other less developed countries in Africa, we're in a position in the United States of really destroying that wildlife resource.

NARRATOR: The shipments of birds continued to arrive at Leach's quarantine station, headquarters of the sting, and he kept taking pictures.

RICK LEACH: In this particular shipment there were approximately 40 boxes containing several hundred birds. You would have 30 to 40 birds per shipping crate. I would always see a number of dead birds in shipments that came in. Dead birds was an inherent part of the wild bird trade. There's no way around it.

KATHLEEN HARRING: I don't think it's wrong to take them out of the wild because at least here in our facilities, and other people's facilities all over the United States, the birds are alive. Out in the wild there is no more forest left. There is no more place for them to nest. This is what it's all about, working with the rarest of the birds and breed them successfully.

NARRATOR: Kathleen Harring resents the idea that bird dealers like herself are the enemies of wild parrots. Just the opposite, she says.

KATHLEEN HARRING: We're doing better things for the birds than what the natives or the people in those countries are doing. At least they're alive and they're producing.

NARRATOR: But not everyone agrees with her. The Fish and Wildlife Service claims that some endangered parrots are making a comeback in the wild, thanks to new efforts to protect them, and collectors and breeders of wild birds undermine those efforts.

KATHLEEN HARRING: I'd say it's about 10 days old, it's a little hyacinth macaw. You can see the beak already forming.

NARRATOR: Harring argues that, although breeders begin with birds taken from the wild, in the long run, this spares wild birds by supplying the pet trade with parrots born to be pets.

KATHLEEN HARRING: So it's like having lots of grandchildren that you can get rid of them if you don't like them, by selling them. But I like them all, but you have to sell them to maintain and support the habit.

BONNIE JAY: I'm so glad you're here today because I have questions to ask you about things

that I thought I had under control, that aren't so under control as I thought.

NARRATOR: Bonnie Jay's white cockatoo has been sneaking out of its cage and eating her photographs. Bonnie has brought in Chris Davis to help her with the problem.

BONNIE JAY: So far she's eaten a full page of transparencies, two felt- tip pens, and the other day she ate my rubber stamp.

CHRIS DAVIS: Right, okay.

NARRATOR: Chris Davis is a parrot shrink. She makes her living advising people how to co-exist with their birds.

CHRIS DAVIS: Because this is a bird who needs to be mentally challenged constantly.

BONNIE JAY: She does. She knows lots of tricks.

CHRIS DAVIS: One of the problems is that Mattie has taken over your apartment, and to her, your whole apartment is her territory. You happen to live with her. Lucky you.

NARRATOR: Davis has a house full of parrots of her own and is convinced they are something more than birds or pets.

CHRIS DAVIS: They'll get the bird, assuming that he's a pet. He's not a pet, he's another individual who shares your home with you, but he has strong ideas of how life should run. Unfortunately, people expect them to be like dogs, or like human children, when in actuality they're more like some sort of melding, as I said, between an alien being and a human child. And as you get into the larger birds you discover they have the intelligence and the emotions of a child, and all of a sudden you're in a real relationship where you have a responsibility to another living creature. Your life is changed by seeing something that appears so alien to us, those of us who are use to fur and hair and things like this, all of a sudden have a creature with a beak and feathers and claws who is more human than some human beings we know.

NAN CRANDALL: Come on, do pretty. Pretty. Yeah, very pretty. Good boy. Okay, now do hi. Hi. That's a good boy.

NARRATOR: Another person who finds parrots irresistible is Nan Crandall. She filled her tiny Los Angeles apartment with them.

NAN CRANDALL: He learned to sing I left my heart in San Francisco, and then he changed the words. African grays do this a lot. He sings, "I lost my boss." And he started to sing, "I lost my boss in San Francisco," and I started laughing, and then he laughed, so now he sings, "I lost my boss, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." But they're really entertaining and they're a lot of company, you know. And I could make a big joke and say it's better than having a boyfriend around because you don't have to pick up their socks, and if you want them to shut up you just cover them up. This one is Tootie.

NARRATOR: She had the perfect job for a bird lover. It was with the Agriculture Department, tending people's pet birds from other countries as they waited in quarantine for 30 days.

NAN CRANDALL: This is the kind of bird that's a pest in Australia.

NARRATOR: She played music and danced for the caged birds, bought medicine for them with her own money, and sometimes around Christmas, let the pet birds out of quarantine early.

RICK LEACH: This is where Nan Crandall worked. This gate would open up.

NARRATOR: The quarantine station Crandall ran for the government was just a few blocks from the one Rick Leach had bought. They became friends. She knew him as Richard Britton, bird importer.

NAN CRANDALL: Yeah, he was really a nice person. I heard nothing but good things about him. You know, his facility was always clean, his birds were all cared for. You know, he was very pleasant to me, very businesslike.

RICK LEACH: So those quarantine facilities were in this blue building here. There's still a U.S. government sign there. They since closed these down because of the problems that had occurred.

NAN CRANDALL: Come on, Rose. I'm sorry, sweetheart. Poor girl. This has been really hard on my animals. I haven't been able to spend the time with them. See her, she's all dirty.

NARRATOR: Somehow it all went wrong, the job, the obsession with animals, her friendship with Leach.

NAN CRANDALL: I've had her since she was seven months old. Hello?

RICK LEACH: Hello, Nan?

NAN CRANDALL: Yeah?

RICK LEACH: This is Richard.

NAN CRANDALL: Hi, Richard.

RICK LEACH: How are you?

NAN CRANDALL: I'm Okay.

RICK LEACH: What was your good idea, Nan? I'm curious.

NAN CRANDALL: Well, I'll tell you, I don't know how to say it. What if—Let's just...

RICK LEACH: Just tell me.

NAN CRANDALL: Okay. How can we get that black cockatoo out of New Zealand without anybody knowing about it here?

RICK LEACH: Those conversations pertain to a yellow- tail black cockatoo which is a species of cockatoo that's extremely rare outside of Australia. We believe there are probably fewer than 10 such birds in the United States. I mean, are you proposing picking it up and quarantining it or just...

NAN CRANDALL: No, no, no. What I'll do is I'll get it, I'll meet you at the airport, and you'll just take it.

RICK LEACH: So Nan...

NAN CRANDALL: It isn't really legal, but I've done it a lot of times.

RICK LEACH: Oh, it's no problem.

JOHN WALSH: The indictment alleges that Ms. Crandall, in essence, served as the conduit for a lot of the smuggling.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do anything wrong?

NAN CRANDALL: I did things shades of gray. My attorney pointed out—I told him early on that these were things that everyone in my department did, and let's see if I can think of a "for-example." Taking birds as a gift, we'll say.

RICK LEACH: These rainbow lorikeets were seized from Nan Crandall. They were, in fact, gratuities given to her by both U.S. and foreign bird dealers.

NAN CRANDALL: They were just a gift.

NARRATOR: Nan Crandall had befriended smugglers, and the government accused her of helping them. The smugglers gave her some pet birds, but there's no evidence she ever made any money out of it.

NAN CRANDALL: I let that one bird bypass quarantine, but it was not a smuggled bird. I broke a quarantine regulation which was done frequently in the office. I could be fired, I was fired, I got what I had coming to me for what I did. And for what I've gone through for the last year I feel I've certainly paid my dues to society, and I don't feel that it was anything to send me to prison for.

JOHN WALSH: Nan Crandall was a public official. She was employed by the government of the United States. One of the primary facts set forth in the indictment is that she had a public duty. She was not a private person who could simply enjoy a hobby on her own.

NARRATOR: Her hobby, according to the government's charges, had made Nan Crandall part of an international smuggling operation which amounted to a parrot migration gone berserk, parrots laundered or smuggled from Africa, South America and Australia to the United States. The Australian smugglers then returned home with some of the African and South American birds, the parrots becoming more exotic and increasing in value at every stop, or dying along the way.

JOHN WALSH: The result of all this, really, was a lot of money flowing back and forth, and very large profits. We're talking really hundreds of thousands of dollars on each end, and that's really only the amount that the investigation directly uncovered. There's always a possibility there was much larger amounts.

NARRATOR: September 1991, nesting time for cockatoos in Australia. Several American smugglers were known to be there at the time. Australian officers who were now part of

Operation Renegade knew every move the smugglers made. Officers Bush and Hanrahan were watching them when they arrived at Sydney airport for the return trip.

TONY HANRAHAN: We picked those particular gentlemen up, and they were taken to an interview room where the clothing was removed.

NARRATOR: The smugglers were becoming more sophisticated, investigators learned. Rather than live birds, they were smuggling eggs.

TONY HANRAHAN: Many reasons for that, lot less mortality rate, the goods are concealed on the body and, therefore, make it more difficult to detect.

NARRATOR: Each man had between 30 and 40 cockatoo eggs hidden in pouches under his shirt. Had they been able to smuggle the birds into America and hatch them, each bird might have sold for several thousand dollars. The American investigators, meanwhile, held off arresting individual smugglers, waiting for bigger game. Their undercover operation had spread east to Florida. They were eager to learn what this man knew. He's a Florida veterinarian named Thomas Goldsmith.

THOMAS GOLDSMITH: There's a tradition in this area, people don't like to be told what to do, and if there's a law saying you can't have it, well, people are going to go out and get it anyway.

NARRATOR: Most bird collectors in the area have been Goldsmith's clients at one time or another.

THOMAS GOLDSMITH: Vitamin A deficiency. Adult female in season. We see them coming in in suitcases here in Miami, or in the holes of boats, and ridiculous numbers of them are dead, suffocated. Baby girl. Just a baby. Everything looks great. Goodnight. If you are caught smuggling drugs, you do hard time. If you are caught smuggling animals, in most cases, they slap you on the wrist, they take away the animals. The worst cases that I've seen, six months, and it's worth the risk. And their profits are substantial. So there's a great impetus.

NARRATOR: But it was one particular case of Goldsmith's that most interested the investigators. It involved some South American parrots named hyacinth macaws, the largest and most spectacular parrot of all, and one of the rarest and most protected.

THOMAS GOLDSMITH: I was working back in the middle '80s for an animal importer.

NARRATOR: Goldsmith says he remembers his client receiving about 35 hyacinth macaws from a supplier based in Chicago.

THOMAS GOLDSMITH: And they all arrived sickly and started to die in droves. Anyone who had that many valuable birds, and these birds are worth a minimum of \$8,000 apiece total on the valid market, \$8,000 and up, I've seen them go for \$13,000, \$14,000 apiece, would never be treating them that carelessly. Everything indicated that they were smuggled birds.

NARRATOR: NOVA found Dr. Goldsmith's client in Atlanta federal prison. He is a narcotics smuggler serving a 100- year term. His name is Mario Tabraue, and he says he did, indeed, buy 35 sick parrots.

MARIO TABRAUE: It's very unusual to see more than two or three hyacinth macaws in a shipment. As a matter of fact, it was impossible back in '87 to receive any hyacinth macaws legally.

NARRATOR: Tabraue's drug smuggling financed his collection of rare birds and animals. He readily admits that most of them were probably smuggled, and says those 35 hyacinth macaws were for sure.

MARIO TABRAUE: They were in real bad shape. They had their tails cut off, they had stress feathers showing on them, they were real bony, skinny. The tails were cut off because that's the way to make them more compact for the purpose of travelling in a smuggled way, or a hidden way. They're put in PVC pipes, supposedly, with little holes for them to breath, and keep them in the dark and keep them quiet. They came from Chicago. Tony sent them to me.

NARRATOR: Tony, from Chicago. Tony Silva, the expert's expert. The protector of endangered parrots. Tony Silva a smuggler? The investigators assigned to Operation Renegade had heard the stories about Silva and began to build a case against him. They drew up an affidavit saying they had still another witness, a secret informant who had tape recorded Silva asking him to help smuggle endangered birds from Brazil to the United States. The birds would be placed in plastic tubing inside the door panels of automobiles for the trip across the border at Tijuana, Mexico. According to the affidavit, Silva had said his mother was involved too. Veterinarian Goldsmith says Tony Silva asked him to be his personal vet.

THOMAS GOLDSMITH: He boasted to me that we could bring in any birds that I wanted. He was good friends with the president of Paraguay's—Strossner's daughter. She was involved. She would fly up in her Learjet and bring him these loads of things. At one point I was talking to him I said I had seen a television show about a new kind of monkey that they had discovered in the mountains of northern Peru, and he proudly informed me that he had one.

DONALD BRUNING: I know he has made efforts to buy illegal birds in the Caribbean as long ago as 1980. He approached officials trying to buy illegal birds at the time. There's no reason for the officials to lie about it. Tony insists it wasn't true, but, you know, we have officials from two different countries that he approached and offered to buy them.

NARRATOR: Silva's attorney advised him not to respond to accusations against him, but he did talk about the atmosphere in his esoteric field.

TONY SILVA: It is competition, it is fierce, gossip, and greed. When you reach the top everybody is constantly attacking, and your friends turn on you because you finally made it and they're trying to get up there. How do I feel? I think I've contributed a lot to agriculture. I could sit here and I could list things, one after the other, but, you know, let someone judge me a hundred years from now and see what I've really contributed.

NARRATOR: As Fish and Wildlife agents continued to investigate Tony Silva, they were nearing the end of the undercover operation against other bird dealers. They had watched \$6 million worth of wild parrots arrive in America under suspicious circumstances. Finally, on January 16, 1992, officials on both sides of the Pacific sprang the trap.

1st TV CORRESPONDENT: Bird smuggling, it's a multi- million- dollar business.

2nd TV CORRESPONDENT: Officials in Australia, New Zealand and the United States have smashed a major bird- smuggling ring.

3rd TV CORRESPONDENT: The raids follow a three- year investigation involving authorities from three countries.

4th TV CORRESPONDENT: Around 4:00 A.M. the word was through. Within two hours they were charging down bush treks in Lake Rotorua.

JOHN WALSH: This is clearly the largest case the U.S. has engaged in.

4th TV CORRESPONDENT: American agents from the Wildlife Service had that very morning raided 30 premises across the U.S. and had seized more than 300 birds.

NARRATOR: In California they raided Richard Furzer's aviary. They raided the home of Nan Crandall. They raided Tony Silva's home in Chicago and the home of his mother. They raided three of Miami's biggest bird dealerships. One of them was Kathleen Harring's aviary, Love Them Birds. They seized some of her rarest prized birds. Two of those birds would die. Hundreds of birds taken that day were held as evidence in a secret warehouse. Many would stay there for almost two years.

RICHARD FURZER: This sting operation wasn't necessary. If they knew that I was lying about the country of origin all they had to do was prosecute me or tell me, "Don't do it any more," and I would have been prosecuted on one count, or if they had told me not to do it I wouldn't have done it any more. But to spend three years and I don't know how much money, it just seems there's something wrong with the government. I think there's something wrong with the agency, the power they have.

RICK LEACH: This particular investigation, along with other actions that are ongoing, have had a major impact on the take of birds from the wild.

JOHN WALSH: In fact, I think that the big advantage of the undercover operation is not simply to catch the courier who might actually be carrying a particular egg, but the guy who sent the courier, who paid the money, who's making the money on the depletion of the wildlife resource.

RICK LEACH: We anticipate prosecuting 30 to 40 people before we're done.

NARRATOR: Two years after the investigators closed their bogus quarantine station, ending the sting, the case is far from complete. Twenty- nine people in three countries have been convicted of crimes. Several others are under federal indictment in the United States. Tony Silva has still not been charged with any crime. He remains under investigation. The two largest bird importers in Miami also are still under investigation with no indictments yet. No charges have been brought against Kathleen Harring's business, Love Them Birds. She is still furious about the raid and the accusations that she was somehow involved in smuggling.

KATHLEEN HARRING: And you felt like you were raped. Until my dying day, I will fight the government for what they have done to me, if it takes very penny I own.

NARRATOR: Richard Furzer, the California bird dealer who introduced Agent Leach to bird-laundering, plead guilty to smuggling and income tax evasion and has begun serving an 18-month term in prison. Nan Crandall was convicted of smuggling. She was also sentenced to 18 months in prison. She is now appealing that conviction.

DONALD BRUNING: Some of the ones that are more innocent than others may have gotten caught in the sting. It is entirely possible. But hopefully the message gets across that this is not allowed and, hopefully, if there's enough prosecution of these kind of cases that maybe the avicultural community will raise up in arms and say we're not going to deal with anyone who's involved with that, and we're going to try and stop it.

AUCTIONEER: Let's get started here now, and good luck, and remember that a lot of these birds won't be available in the future so get them now and hopefully you can breed them.

NARRATOR: Sometime after Operation Renegade ended, at an auction dock near San Diego, we meet some of the victims, parrots confiscated by the government.

AUCTIONEER: Item number 31 is another African gray. Who will give me \$350? Do I hear \$350? Three- fifty, who will give me \$360?

NARRATOR: Not all of these parrots were the result of the sting. Some had been seized when ordinary people tried to smuggle them into the country.

LEIGH ROTH: Baby, come here. I'm a criminal. I live in Mexico, and one of these birds I really loved, so I brought it back with another bird, and got busted at the airport. So I'm here to reclaim it. All these are caught birds.

AUCTIONEER: One- seventy- five, do I hear \$180, \$170, \$180, do I hear a \$185, \$180, do I hear \$185, \$180 once, \$180 twice, sold for \$180 to bidder number 56.

LEIGH ROTH: Yeah, do you remember me? You had a rough time. You look really bad, but you're going home now. Hi, yeah. You're going home. You're going home, yeah.

NARRATOR: But where is home? Are cages the only future for the wild parrot? Some believe the parrots' long lives disguise the full extent of the damage already done them. The poaching of eggs and young birds for the pet trade may have left some species with mainly old parrots that no longer reproduce. Their flocks may be, in effect, only illusions of species already extinct.

DONALD BRUNING: We're getting the warning sign from the rest of the world that the birds are disappearing. And if we don't do something about it, they'll be gone. We won't be able to see them, none of us will be able to have them, and we will have all lost a very great part of our world heritage with these birds. And it's only a sample, because if the birds go, it probably means the reptiles are going, it means a lot of other things are going too.

NARRATOR: After two years in a government warehouse, the birds of Operation Renegade were now ready for the next phase of their lives.

AUCTIONEER: Sold for \$420 to bidder number 10.

NARRATOR: From contraband, to evidence, to commodity.

AUCTIONEER: But again, I want to remind you, all birds are sold as is, where is, so keep that in mind when you bid on this bird.

NARRATOR: For 30 million years these strange creatures have lived free and graced the world with their beauty, only to find themselves now at our mercy, caught between our greed, our obsession, and our good intentions.

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Next time on NOVA. For a stranger in a foreign land, language can be an imposing barrier, but there are surprising similarities among the languages of the world. Could it be that at one time long ago, we all spoke the same language?

It's very nice to think about the days before Babel when everybody spoke exactly the same way.

In Search of the First Language, next time on NOVA.