



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FEDERAL AGENTS UNCOVER ILLEGAL TRADE IN RARE PARROTS

Wildlife law enforcement officers of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have concluded a 2-year investigation that documented extensive illegal trade in protected parrots, Interior Secretary Don Hodel announced today.

Thirty-six people in six states -- Indiana, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Texas, and California -- will be prosecuted for felony violations of U.S. smuggling statutes and the Lacey Act, a Federal law aimed at preventing illegal trade in protected wildlife. One defendant, already prosecuted, is serving 18 months in jail.

Hodel said, "Operation Psittacine documented large-scale trade in smuggled parrots from Mexico and Central and South America into the United States. Information gathered during the investigation indicates as many as 26,000 birds a year are smuggled across the Mexican border near Brownsville, Texas, alone."

Smuggled parrots valued at an estimated \$468,000 along with aircraft and vehicles valued at \$93,000 were seized during the investigation. Species seized include thick-billed parrots, scarlet macaws, black palm cockatoos, double yellow-head Amazon parrots, yellow-nape parrots, red-lored parrots, and Mexican red-head parrots. The birds are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The thick-billed parrot is listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle said, "agents ran a 'sting' operation in Dayton, Ohio, with the cooperation of the owners of a local chain of pet stores. The owners permitted the agents to represent themselves as bird buyers for the pet stores in order to document the activities of illegal dealers in parrots."

Dunkle noted that the existence of illegal trade in parrots has been known for years. "Special agents nationwide have received complaints regarding people dealing in illegal parrots for a number of years," Dunkle said. "The problem has been that violators claimed the illegal birds were bred in captivity in the United States and therefore not subject to laws protecting wild parrots."

"The illegal dealers commonly believed that once they got the smuggled birds away from the border they would not be caught. Operation Psittacine is the first major covert effort by the Fish and Wildlife Service to target illegal parrot dealers operating away from the borders."

The smuggling of parrots not only threatens wild parrot populations but also is a threat to agriculture in the United States. Smuggled parrots are not put through normal quarantine procedures and can carry the highly contagious Newcastle's disease. This viral disease can infect poultry and other bird species.

Agents from six districts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Division and U.S. Customs Service worked on the investigation. U.S. Attorneys in 10 judicial districts and the Lands and Natural Resources Division of the Justice Department are prosecuting the cases.