



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For Release: April 29, 1994

Anne-Berry Wade 703-358-1949
Patricia W. Fisher 202-208-5634

FEDERAL AGENTS CRACK INTERNATIONAL COCKATOO EGG SMUGGLING SCHEME

Six defendants were charged in Los Angeles, California, on April 29, 1994, with conspiring to smuggle the eggs of wild cockatoos out of Australia. According to the multiple count indictment, the group allegedly smuggled into the United States a large number of cockatoo eggs taken from nesting birds in Australia. These eggs, when hatched, were sold to exotic bird collectors in this country for thousands of dollars. (The United States is the largest consumer of wild-caught birds.) Named in the multiple count indictment on charges of conspiracy, smuggling, and Lacey Act violations are William Wegner, Brian Bradley, John Barth, David Freda, and Mark Skillman all of New York State. Also named is Theodora Swanson of Memphis, Tennessee.

The indictment stems from a three-year undercover investigation, dubbed Operation Renegade, conducted by the Special Operations unit of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service. It alleges that over a ten-year period individuals were hired as carriers and travelled to Australia each fall during nesting season to remove cockatoo eggs from

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nesting sites. The group used specially designed body vests to keep the eggs warm during the long flights from Australia to the United States. Several hundred smuggled eggs, worth over \$1 million, were then incubated, hand-reared and sold to collectors.

Among the smuggled species were Rose-Breasted cockatoos, Red-Tailed Black cockatoos, Major Mitchell cockatoos and Slender-Billed cockatoos. Of the different species of Australian cockatoos allegedly smuggled, the rarest were the black cockatoos. They are highly valued by collectors because it is difficult to breed them successfully in the United States. Australian cockatoos are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES), the world's most widely accepted conservation agreement. Australia strictly prohibits the commercial exportation of eggs from native cockatoo species.

Wegner is also charged with money laundering and filing false income tax returns. The money laundering charges stem from financial transactions designed to conceal or disguise profits from the sales of the cockatoos, as well as his use of U.S. funds in Australia to promote the smuggling scheme. Money laundering carries a maximum penalty of 20 years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. Filing false tax returns carries a maximum penalty of three years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. If convicted of smuggling, the defendants each face up to five years in prison and \$250,000 in fines. Conspiracy and Lacey Act violations carry additional penalties. This case is being prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles and the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section of the Department of Justice.

Spanning several continents, Operation Renegade is a continuing investigation into the well-organized international network of profiteers involved in the illicit trade of exotic birds. The investigation is a joint effort with law enforcement officials from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States and to date has resulted in criminal convictions against 17 individuals.

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