



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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EAGLES ARE BEING KILLED FOR PROFIT

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Agents Uncover Illegal Market

Special agents from the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today carried out Federal search and arrest warrants in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado, ending a 2-year undercover investigation into the killing and selling of bald and golden eagles, and other migratory birds. In all, approximately 35 individuals and businesses are expected to be charged with selling protected migratory bird parts in a highly profitable illegal market.

Posing as traders of Indian artifacts, undercover agents were able to infiltrate a commercial trapping ring. They were told that in one pueblo during last year's winter migration, more than 60 eagles were intentionally killed either by being shot or caught in leg-hold traps baited with fresh meat. The agents located trap lines and were sold dead eagles with trap marks on their legs and feet. The Service decided to end this investigation, dubbed "Operation 4-Corners Feather Sales," prematurely to prevent more eagles from being killed. Some of those eagles were offered for sale from \$850-\$1,000 each.

"As the agency responsible for protecting this Nation's wildlife, we must put an end to the commercial killing of eagles and other migratory birds. We decided to move now to stop this slaughter to protect vulnerable eagle populations in the Southwest. By taking this action, we protect birds that are sacred to many Native American cultures", said John Rogers, acting director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Undercover agents discovered an illegal market for migratory bird parts in which whole eagle skins, wings, tails, and wing bones; whole hawks, wings, and tails; and owl wings were sold throughout New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Utah. The investigation revealed that the illegal feathers were being sold to make popular Native American-style items such as fans, Kachina dolls, and bustles. Many of these items were sold to trading posts, collectors, tourists, and individuals participating in pow-wows. Items being offered for sale were made with feathers from at least 25 different species, including eagles, hawks,

kestrels, magpies, flickers, scissor-tailed flycatchers, and anhingas. These birds are all protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Most are native to the Southwest (the anhinga is a waterbird found in Florida and Louisiana).

Eagles are also protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the bald eagle is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Killing for profit in New Mexico makes the eagle population vulnerable as these birds migrate south.

Illegal commerce in eagle feathers and migratory bird feathers is enormously profitable. In recent years, the increased popularity and demand for feathers has resulted in soaring prices. Compared to a similar case from 1988, the price of an intact golden eagle tail, which has 12 feathers, has quadrupled from approximately \$100 to \$400. During this investigation, special agents learned that in today's market, a single golden eagle feather could sell for about \$100; a red-tailed hawk peyote fan, \$150; and an anhinga feather fan, \$300.

The popularity of Native American items made with migratory bird feathers has resulted in alarmingly high numbers of birds being killed for profit. For example, to make an eagle fan it takes the entire tail from one eagle. To make a single scissor-tailed flycatcher fan, it can take 25 birds.

This case is being prosecuted by the Department of Justice, United States Attorney's Offices in Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Phoenix, Arizona. John J. Kelly, the United States Attorney for the District of New Mexico, congratulated the agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service on their superb investigative work. "The United States government has a strong interest in the preservation of these magnificent animals," Kelly said. "This kind of large-scale commercial trapping must end before the resource is depleted entirely."

The evidence in this case will be forwarded to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Eagle Repository near Denver, Colorado. Eagles are available to Native Americans by permit through the Repository. The Service receives nearly 2,000 requests per year to distribute eagle carcasses, parts, and feathers to Native Americans for recognized religious, cultural, and ceremonial purposes.

Congress has enacted three separate Federal laws that protect the eagle: the Bald Eagle Protection Act, amended to include the golden eagle in 1962; the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, amended to protect eagles in 1972; and the Endangered Species Act. These statutes make it illegal for anyone to take, possess, transport, sell, or purchase any eagles or eagle parts, including feathers,

unless permitted to do so. The maximum penalty under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act is one year imprisonment and a \$100,000 fine, and under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act 2 years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. Additional charges will be sought under the Lacey Act which carries a maximum penalty of 5 years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine.