

Cover

Pink and Grey Galahs do well to peer cautiously from their perch. Although a familiar species, the picture of the fledgling (right) emphasises the value and vulnerability of even our common wildlife.

Cover Photo: Jiri Lochman

Landscape

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Selling

by Liana Christensen

Thousands of kilometres of isolated coastline, numerous deserted airstrips, lack of radar surveillance: the same factors which make W.A.'s Northwest a drug importer's haven also facilitate the less sensationalised crimes of poaching and smuggling wildlife.

Trafficking in native fauna is an extremely attractive criminal proposition. It is as lucrative as drugs — some estimate an annual turnover in excess of \$40 million — and it is far less risky. Large operations, including the Mafia, are believed to be involved in both activities. Having established a safe route, they set up a 'conveyor belt' moving drugs into the country and sending wildlife out. In a telephone interview reported in *The Bulletin*, ex-Mafia boss Vincent Teresa claimed that bird smuggling was 'a racket that is just getting bigger and bigger'.

Smuggling is one of the major problems facing our State's 32 wildlife officers. In the Northwest, some wildlife officers are responsible for districts covering hundreds of thousands of square kilometres. They work in close connection with the local police, as well as federal police and customs officers. Typically, a wildlife officer will make ten-day patrols — which often stretch into two weeks because of problems with terrain or weather — checking known or likely trouble spots.

A Dangerous Job

A wildlife officer's work is often difficult, and sometimes

Australia's Heritage



dangerous. 'When you stop a vehicle you don't know who you're running into,' commented Special Investigations Officer, Mike Mahoney. 'Some of these types are armed.' Great caution must be shown by wildlife officers, particularly when they are working alone. Every wildlife officer must develop the ability to assess a situation quickly and take appropriate action. Poaching continues to be a major problem, and with offenders anxious to protect their profits, the potential for violence remains high.

The Cruelty of Smuggling

Wildlife traffickers aren't particularly concerned about the survival rate of their victims because profits are enormous. With overseas buyers prepared to pay tens of thousands of dollars for a breeding pair of exotic parrots, or an endangered reptile, even if only one or two of any consignment of animals survives the smuggler will be adequately recompensed for his or her efforts. Greed and wanton cruelty are the hallmarks of the trade.

Cruelty begins with the trapping. Mist nets, which are illegal, are strung between trees. Many birds of all species are left to struggle and die before the returning poacher collects those of the desired species which have survived. Other favoured methods include nylon loops strung up in trees, and substances which literally stick the birds to their feeding grounds. Death from shock and starvation is common.

A new method came to light recently when two Americans were caught near Geraldton with some half-incubated eggs which they had intended to smuggle back to the U.S.A. These could have been hatched out in an incubator. Eggs are a lot easier to smuggle than live

birds, which struggle. Smugglers sometimes administer indiscriminate amounts of tranquilisers such as Valium in order to subdue terrified birds and prevent them making any noise.

Simply due to their metabolism, smuggled reptiles have a far greater chance of survival. Disturbed reptiles often go into hibernation, which makes them an easy proposition. If kept cool, they do not need food or water and will not struggle or make a noise. Many species will fit into extremely small spaces.

Packing the Goods

Once the animals have been collected they are packed in any one of a bizarre range of places: padded post-bags, cigarette cartons, false-bottomed suitcases, crates and packages, camera cases and articles of clothing, to name a few. Fauna is smuggled through the postal service, commercial flights, private light aircraft and shipping. Sometimes they are transported first to the eastern States, and then out through airports and ports. The reverse also happens, with the Northwest being used as a clearing house for eastern States' species. According to Supervising Wildlife Officer Kevin Morrison, 'wildlife officers have found desolate airstrips in the middle of nowhere with fresh tyre marks'. Local enquiries sometimes reveal legitimate use, but when there is no explanation forthcoming, undercover activities such as smuggling and drug-running are suspected.

Smuggled Australian fauna is channeled through various Asian countries, notably Indonesia and Singapore, where it is easy to pick up false papers certifying breeding histories and export licences. The people who eventually buy the animals include private collectors and, shamefully, even some zoos who don't mind acquiring their

stock on a 'no questions asked' basis. One of two Western Swamp Tortoises stolen from the Perth Zoo in 1969 was eventually found in the Cologne Zoo.

Fatal Fashions

It is obvious that smugglers are motivated by straightforward greed; the motivations of those who end up owning the animals are more diverse, indeed one might say perverse. A passion for collecting seems intrinsic to human nature, and apparently some people draw no distinctions between stamps and coins, and live creatures. Collections of rare parrots or reptiles attract the same status and investment advantages as art collections, but with no appreciation of the true value of the 'objects' so collected.

Predictably, wildlife collections are subject to whims of fashion. 'About twenty years ago venomous snakes were most in demand,' observed Jiri Lochman of the Perth Zoo, 'Nowadays the trendiest among all the snakes of the world are boas and pythons, which, of course, has an adverse impact on populations of Australian pythons. One American buyer, for example, offered \$U.S.20,000 for a pair of Oenpelli pythons'.

Buy a Snake by the Centimetre

Oenpelli pythons are a Northern Territory species, but our Northwest has many species avidly sought by collectors: Olive Pythons, extremely placid and appealing snakes which do not object to being handled; Carpet Pythons; and Black-headed Pythons. Among the venomous Australian snakes most in demand are large species such as the Western Brown Snake, and the smaller Desert Death Adder. Hatchling venomous snakes have a particular appeal: the smuggler finds them less dangerous, easier to handle and conceal; and the 'animal lovers' who buy

them in overseas markets can observe their snake's growth to maturity. Generally, snakes are literally more expensive with every centimetre.

Of all Australian lizards, a few species of rather sluggish skinks are the most in demand in the United States. Members of the genus *Tiliqua*, these lizards are popular because they are colourful, slow-moving, omnivorous and not difficult to look after. But undoubtedly the main attraction is their means of defence — exposing their coloured tongue — a feature which gives the whole group its common name of Blue-tongue. The Central Blue-tongue is favoured for the regular transverse bands over its back, whereas the Northern Blue-tongue is fascinating mainly for its large size — it can grow up to half a metre long.

In September 1985, wildlife officers apprehended two German nationals and one Australian in possession of Shingleback and Blue-tongue lizards which they had taken from the wild. Shinglebacks are appealing because of their unique enlarged scales which give them the look of a conifer's cone. The most valued of all reptiles which live in Western Australia, however, is probably the Woma snake, a pretty and gentle creature which is extremely rare.

Bird Smuggling

Rare birds, particularly parrots and galahs, are very much in demand by big overseas collectors. Some species, such as the Major Mitchell Cockatoo and the Golden-shouldered Parrot are on the endangered species list. Palm Cockatoos, Eclectus and Naretha Parrots are virtually priceless, and their rarity could well put them in danger of extinction.

It is not only the rare birds, however, which are popular. It may come as a surprise to know that some very common species, a few of which are considered rural pests, are also fetching high prices overseas. Pink and



Bob Hodge

Cruelty is a hallmark of the trade.
(Top)

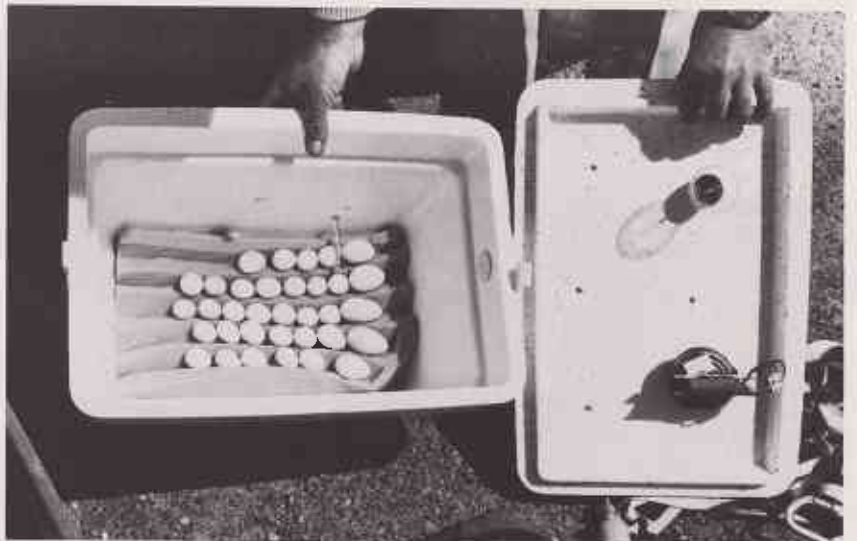


Photo courtesy of Generation Guardian.

Eggs confiscated from two
Americans convicted of
poaching. (Centre)

Packing the goods. Birds are
bound with masking tape and
packed tightly together. (Below)



Bob Hodge



Bob Hodge



Kevin Marshall

Grey Galahs, 28 Parrots, Red-tailed and White-tailed Black Cockatoos can fetch prices ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000. Even though these species are in no immediate danger of extinction, they are a unique part of our natural heritage, and, according to Dr Stephen Davies, chairman of the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union's research committee, roughly 50 per cent of Australia's parrots have suffered a decline in status. Even with common species we cannot afford to be complacent.



Jiri Lochman

Snakes alive in their native habitat: Olive Python (above) and Black-headed Python (left).

The Central Blue-tongue is popular with overseas collectors. (Below)

Raptors, or birds of prey, form a small but increasingly lucrative section of the market. According to Phil Pain of the Perth Zoo, 'more and more Australian raptors are showing up overseas, and to my knowledge, very few are legally exported'. Sought-after species include Red Goshawks, White



Jiri Lochman

and Grey Phase Goshawks and Crested Hawks, one of Australia's most beautiful species. The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service recently confiscated a large consignment of eggs, many of which were raptor species, in the A.C.T..

Of all the birds of prey, however, the most popular are the falcons. We possess one of the largest falcons found anywhere in the world, the Peregrine Falcon. Falconry is undergoing a worldwide revival. Phil Pain says 'I was approached by a business man in Perth on behalf of some Saudi Arabian falconers. They were interested in obtaining 50 to 100 falcons so that at a certain time of year they could come in and fly them'. Inevitably, where there is a market, smugglers will find a way to exploit it.

Counter Measures

Smuggling wildlife is made easier if the penalties are low, and it is easy to find lucrative markets. Effective counter measures must, therefore, attack the problem from both ends.

Drying up overseas markets is difficult, but possible. An international agreement entitled Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) imposes import restrictions, or totally bans the import of species which are listed under CITES as rare and endangered. Countries which are signatories to CITES, including Australia, will simply not buy them, even if the animals have been provided with false papers and apparent legitimacy. CITES' participants

pledge to follow guidelines prohibiting the exploitation, or sale, of rare and endangered species, or the manufacture of any product from these species. People are less likely to risk increasingly stiff penalties for smuggling animals if it is too difficult to dispose of them on the overseas market.

Brand new State legislation allows for a tenfold increase in penalties — from \$400 to \$4,000 for possession and taking of any Australian fauna (the penalty for taking rare and endangered species is \$10,000). This legislation also clears up a few anomalies in the Act, and extends the Statute of Limitations.

Federal legislation, administered through the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, provides for fines of \$100,000 or five years' imprisonment. Customs officers and federal police enforce this legislation at exit points, but to do so successfully they rely heavily on groundwork provided by State wildlife officers and information from a number of other sources.

Investigating and tracing smuggling operations is a lengthy business, and wildlife officers need time to pursue any leads they are given to a point where it is possible, if appropriate, to press charges. Given the vast areas under the jurisdiction of a small group of wildlife officers, the importance of any leads and information is enormous. Combining several departments into the new Conservation and Land Management Department has improved the information base for wildlife officers. But information and leads provided by the public have always proved invaluable. Public participation is essential to prevent large crime networks from selling Australia's heritage.



These fledgling Wedge-tail Eagles were taken from the nest by poachers, and then dumped because rearing chicks was too much hard work.

'Money for nothing;

All Australian fauna, with the exception of the Dingo, are protected. Under the Wildlife Conservation Act the Department of Conservation and Land Management has the authority to adopt any necessary measures, such as classifying species as rare and endangered or issuing licences.

Some species have limited open season on them, either in restricted areas or for restricted periods of time. In the Northwest, for example, there are seven licenced finch trappers. The finch trapping season, opening on the first of September, lasts for 11 weeks.

Approximately 25,000 finches are trapped per year. Each trapper could expect to legitimately earn around \$42,000 for 11 weeks' work. Obviously, it would be tempting for other illegal operators to 'extend' the season. Another danger is that rare and endangered species, such as Gouldian Finches, which have been taken off the legal trapping list, will continue to be taken.

Legal finch trapping is self-limiting, because the licences are non-renewable and die with the current owners. Prior to 1975, saltwater crocodiles, although protected in Western Australia, were not protected in the Northern Territory or Queensland. They were subject

to hunting and shooting as well as poaching and smuggling across the State border and overseas.

Interstate smuggling of all fauna is still a significant problem. It is far less risky than smuggling overseas, and would provide consistently high returns. Small zoos and collectors in other States can fabricate breeding records to make it look like any illegally obtained fauna came from existing, legitimate breeding stock.

One of the worst aspects of poaching in Western Australia, however, is habitat destruction. Some operators are quite prepared to chainsaw trees which are nesting sites in order to obtain a few fledglings or eggs. The trees might be a hundred years old, or one of very few nesting sites available, but that will not deter people whose only discernible motivation is a quick buck, whatever the cost in real terms.

Wildlife Officers Contact Numbers

Albany	098 41 4811
Bunbury	097 25 4300
Carnarvon	099 41 1801
Geraldton	099 21 5955
Kalgoorlie	090 21 4148
Karratha	091 86 8289
Manjimup	097 71 1299
Moora	095 41 1424
Perth	09 364 9666
Pingelly	098 87 1273
Waroona	095 33 1331
Wongan Hills	096 71 1395
Wyndham	091 61 1342

Operation Overland

Operation overland was the first successful major campaign of the new Conservation and Land Management Department. Months of hard work and investigation finally resulted in several convictions.

John Franceschi and Stanley Osborne were found in Victoria with 80 Western Australian species of parrots. They pleaded guilty to exporting fauna without a licence and were fined \$400 each. The two were also fined \$4,480 in Victorian courts for importing fauna without a licence.

Siek Rabczynski was apprehended in Victoria with Franceschi and Osborne in December 1984. He was found guilty of the illegal export of 79 parrots and finches, and the illegal possession of parrots. Rabczynski was fined a total of \$581.

W.A.'s new maximum penalties are a more adequate reflection of the seriousness of such offences.

; chicks for free'



Kevin M. Smith

Poaching equipment: mist net, net, bags and traps. (Top)



Crocodiles are hunted less frequently now they are protected throughout Australia. (Left)

Poachers chainsawed this tree and then wired it back together to ensure the nestling Budgerigars could not escape. (Below)

Chris Whitmore



Kevin M. Smith