



News Release

California - Nevada Operations
2800 Cottage Way, Suite W-2606
Sacramento, CA 25825
Telephone: 916-414-6464 Fax: 916-414-6486

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Contacts: Sean Mann (FWS) 916-414-6660
Luke Macaulay, U.S. Department of Justice 415-436-6757
Email: luke.macaulay@usdoj.gov

Redwood City, Calif. Man Pleads Guilty to Smuggling Federally-Protected Eagle Owls

Jeffrey A. Diaz of Redwood City, Calif., pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in San Francisco to two felony counts of smuggling live eggs from federally-protected eagle owls (*Bubo bubo*) and two felony counts of making false statements to federal agents, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California announced today.

Diaz was charged by federal grand jury in January 2006 with two felony counts of smuggling live eagle owl eggs on two occasions from Austria to the United States during the Christian and Orthodox Easter holidays in March and April 2005. In an effort to disguise the owl eggs, Diaz partially painted them to resemble Easter eggs. He then placed them in an Easter basket with plastic grass and hand warmers that temporarily incubated the eggs while being transported. He was also charged with making false statements to federal law enforcement authorities, a felony, in connection with the eagle owl smuggling. In March 2006, special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in coordination with Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, arrested Diaz at his residence.

Three of the smuggled eggs eventually hatched and the birds are currently being cared for in area wildlife centers.

Eagle owls are native to Asia, Europe and the Middle East and are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a treaty through which the United States and more than 150 other countries protect certain species of fish, wildlife, and plants against over exploitation by regulating trade in the species. Protected species are listed in appendices to CITES. Eagle owls are listed as Appendix II in CITES. The United States implements CITES through the Endangered Species Act which prohibits trade in specimens contrary to CITES as well as possession of specimens that have been traded contrary to CITES.

The smuggling investigation was led by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with assistance from Customs and Immigration Enforcement, and the California Department of Fish and Game. The case is being prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California and the Environmental Crimes Section of the Department of Justice.

Diaz pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court before the Honorable Marilyn Hall Patel in San Francisco. Diaz could receive up to five years in prison and up to a \$250,000 fine for each felony charge. No sentencing date has been set.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

More information about federal wildlife protection laws is available on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/le/>

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