



The United States Attorney's Office

## Central District of California



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### **SEVEN 'ROLLER PIGEON' ENTHUSIASTS CHARGED WITH KILLING, OR HELPING TO KILL, PROTECTED HAWKS AND FALCONS**

Federal authorities have charged seven Southern California men associated with "roller pigeon" clubs on charges related to the fatal beatings and shootings of federally protected raptors. Six of the defendants were arrested throughout the day yesterday as part of a nationwide investigation – Operation High Roller – that is targeting roller pigeon owners who believe that hawks and falcons, while protected under federal law, should be killed because they attack pigeons, particularly when they suffer seizures in flight and tumble uncontrollably toward the ground.

The seven cases in Southern California, along with charges filed against defendants in Oregon and Texas, are part of a 14-month investigation by special agents with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. In California, a special agent infiltrated several roller pigeon clubs and learned about members' efforts to trap and kill raptors, specifically Cooper's hawks, red-tailed hawks and Peregrine falcons, according to court documents. Investigators estimate that leaders and members of the National Birmingham Roller Club (NBRC) and other enthusiast organizations in the Los Angeles metropolitan area are responsible for killing 1,000 to 2,000 raptors annually. One official of the NBRC claims to have killed as many as 50 raptors annually for the past several years, according to court documents. One defendant told the investigating agent that he had filled a five-gallon bucket with talons that he had cut from slain hawks.

The seven California defendants are affiliated with clubs that promote and compete with roller pigeons – also known as Birmingham rollers – which are native to England and have a genetic defect that causes them to flip backwards while in flight. Enthusiasts breed the pigeons with an eye toward having a group of the birds roll simultaneously, while recovering before hitting the ground. However, the distinctive nature of the birds' flight attracts predators, such as Cooper's hawks, because the in-flight flipping makes them appear to be easy targets.

The seven defendants are charged with violating the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which protects birds such as the hawks and falcons that prey upon roller pigeons. It is illegal to harass, kill or possess migratory birds, such as the Cooper's hawk, without a special permit. Criminal complaints filed May 17 in United States District Court in Los Angeles allege that the defendants used traps baited with pigeons to collect raptors and that they used sticks or pellet guns to kill the birds. In some cases, according to an affidavit, individuals admitted to the undercover agent that they used shotguns or .22-caliber rifles to shoot hawks and falcons out of the air. The affidavit states that one member of the NBRC admitted to the undercover agent that he sometimes sprayed hawks with a bleach and ammonia solution, which created poisonous chlorine gas and suffocated the birds.

On repeated instances, the undercover agent observed roller pigeon fanciers in Los Angeles using "goshawk" traps to capture Cooper's hawks. According to the agent's affidavit, many of the roller pigeon aficionados openly discussed trapping, shooting and poisoning hawks and falcons. Fish and Wildlife Service agents around the country report that members of the NBRC are using the same goshawk trap found in the California investigation in the states of Oregon, Washington, New Mexico, Texas, Wisconsin and New York.

All of the defendants are charged with at least one count of the unlawful or attempted unlawful taking of a migratory bird. The six defendants arrested yesterday are:

- Juan Navarro, 44, of the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles, who is the national president of the NBRC.
- Keith London, 42, of South Los Angeles, who is the owner of The Pigeon Connection store and is president of the Inner City Roller Club.
- Darik McGhee, 38, of San Bernardino, who builds and sells hawk traps and pigeon lofts.
- Brian McCormick, 40, of Norco, a past-president of the California Performance Roller Club.
- Timothy Decker, 60, of Mira Loma.
- Rayvon Hall, 46, of Rialto.

Navarro, London, McGhee and McCormick made their initial court appearances yesterday afternoon and were released on bond. They are scheduled to be arraigned next month. Decker and Hall remain in custody and are expected to make their initial court appearances this afternoon in United States District Court in Los Angeles.

An arrest warrant has been issued for the seventh defendant – Efren Lopez Jr., 28, of Hacienda Heights.

Each of the offenses charged against the defendants carries a maximum possible penalty of six months in federal prison.

*Criminal complaints contain allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.*

The cases announced today are the product of an ongoing investigation by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which conserves and manages the 913 native species/populations of migratory birds. The California Department of Fish and Game assisted in the arrests made yesterday.

In other districts, federal authorities have charged several individuals as a result of Operation High Roller.

The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Oregon filed charges on Monday against Mitch Reed, 29, of Mount Angel, Oregon, and Peter Kaufman, 53, of Portland, Oregon, who were each charged with one count of violating the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by attempting to take a raptor. Ivan Hanchett, 54, of Hillsboro, Oregon, was charged with two counts of violating the act. Reed, Kaufman and Hanchett are expected to make their initial court appearances in the coming weeks.

Federal prosecutors in Houston filed charges yesterday against Neil Keng, 58, of Laporte, Texas, a member of a local pigeon racing club, for trapping a Cooper's Hawk in his backyard in December 2006. Keng will be summoned to appear in court in the coming weeks.

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