

Wildlife Detector Dogs at Work

This past April, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) deployed its first cadre of professionally trained wildlife detector dog teams at four of the Nation's busiest ports of entry for wildlife trade – Los Angeles, Louisville, Miami, and Chicago.

Inspection K9s Locket, Butter, Viper, and Lancer spent their first weeks on the job getting accustomed to their new workplaces (settings that include air cargo warehouses, ocean containers, international mail facilities, U.S./Mexico border crossings, and the U.S. "hub" for the international package delivery company UPS). But the dogs and their wildlife inspector handlers have been more than busy since then.

What have they found? Here are a few examples:

- A cargo shipment packed with 15 live birds, including CITES-listed species, headed out of Miami
- Elephant skin in Los Angeles
- In Louisville, more than \$26,000 worth of falsely labeled CITES Appendix II python skin handbags being shipped via UPS
- A commercial shipment of shark cartilage powder imported from South America to Miami
- In Chicago, an elephant ivory statue headed out of the country
- A package of Asian medicinals made from seahorse discovered in Louisville
- A shipment of suspected alligator boots at the Otay Mesa border crossing in California
- A commercial quantity of whale teeth in Louisville
- In Miami, two shipments of handbags made from skins of CITES Appendix III Russell's viper
- In Los Angeles, numerous boxes of python skin shoes concealed between layers of shoes made from domestic leathers

The dogs sometimes alert on "animal" scents that are not wildlife and thus not regulated by the Service. In Miami, Viper responded to bovine gall stones (a high-priced, highly prized Asian medicinal), while in Louisville Butter discovered a UPS parcel containing plasticized human remains (a shipment that was turned over to Customs and Border Protection).

Other Facts about the FWS Wildlife Detector Dog Program:

- Launched in April 2013 in response to the toll that wildlife trafficking is taking on elephants, rhinos and other species worldwide
- Use of dogs to sniff out hidden wildlife products expands Service inspection capabilities
- The four dogs and their inspector handlers completed a 13-week training course at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Detector Dog Training Center in Newnan, Georgia, before reporting for duty
- The Service experimented with a single dog in the mid-1990s, but this is the first time in the U.S. that wildlife detector dogs have undergone an intensive training regimen and certification process
- OLE's dogs were "recruited" from shelters and a breeder
- All are Labrador retrievers or Lab mixes
- Dogs were trained on key scents (such as elephant ivory, rhino horn, and snakeskin), but will learn other scents as needed at the ports
- For detector work, the "ideal" dog is between one and three years old, has a high food drive, and is energetic, nonaggressive, and outgoing
- A detector dog's career typically lasts 5 to 7 years