

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release February 2, 1979

Alan Levitt 202/343-5634

MAJOR ORGANIZED POACHING RING BROKEN UP

The gamey flavor of freshly killed wild animals was so irresistible to many Detroit residents that they created an outlet for one of the Nation's largest organized commercial poaching rings, which illegally killed more than 100,000 ducks, geese, deer, squirrels, rabbits, fox, fish, and other animals in the last few years. The ring was broken up recently by Federal and State wildlife law enforcement officers.

An intensive 15-month undercover investigation climaxed on January 20 when 25 special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and 125 Michigan conservation officers simultaneously arrested 53 people in the Detroit area for illegally killing, selling, buying, and marketing dozens of species of fish and game. By last week, all warrants had been served and records seized.

"The entire operation is one of the most extraordinary cooperative wildlife law enforcement efforts ever engaged in between a State and the Federal Government," said Clark Bavin, Chief of the Law Enforcement Division of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Thanks to the teamwork and cooperation between the two enforcement organizations, the largest and most highly organized market hunting ring uncovered in recent years has been destroyed."

According to Howard Tanner, Director of Michigan's Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the illegal commercialization involved nearly 300 deer, 1,700 squirrels, 4,400 ducks (including 500 redhead ducks), over

(over)

11,000 rabbits, and thousands of pounds of walleye fish. The poachers also killed and sold badgers, raccoons, red fox, pheasants, partridge, and geese.

The existence of a poaching ring was first suspected in late 1975 when the Michigan DNR learned from tipsters that an organized group was supplying several Detroit retail markets with wild game. Federal law enforcement officers were called in a year later to investigate possible violations of two Federal wildlife laws. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act makes it a Federal offense to kill, possess, or transport protected migratory birds, while the Black Bass Act outlaws interstate transfer of illegally caught fish.

In the fall of 1977 and throughout the remainder of the investigation, four Federal and two Michigan DNR undercover agents penetrated the organization. The agents posed as route men and customer suppliers and dealt frequently with ring members who routinely carried weapons. The agents were frequently in personal danger from ring members who were constantly alert to the possibility of being caught by conservation officers.

In their undercover capacity to obtain evidence, agents bought the carcasses of illegally killed game and fish more than 75 times.

As route men, the agents would pick up the slaughtered game from poachers in southern Michigan and deliver it to another member of the ring for further processing. Customer suppliers would then deliver the meat to various retail meat markets in Detroit. The prices paid by the customers for the wild game were often much higher than for the same domestically produced species which could be bought legally.

"We suspect market hunting rings exist in and around several other major U.S. cities," Bavin said. "However, we hope that our success in dismantling this large operation and the publicity surrounding it will reveal to the thousands of American consumers just what they are doing to the Nation's wildlife."

Some of the methods used to obtain game and fish illegally included deer skinning (locating the animal with a powerful light and then shooting it); luring flocks of ducks to baited feeding areas for slaughter; and cutting down trees with chain saws to drive raccoons from their dens for easier capture.

The FWS and Michigan DNR law enforcement agents began to serve 14 Federal and 143 State arrest warrants and 5 Federal and 17 State search warrants at dawn Saturday, January 20, for violations of Federal and State fish and game laws.

U.S. Attorney James K. Robinson of the Eastern District of Michigan in Detroit said that those arrested under Federal warrants may be charged with violations of the Black Bass Act and/or the Migratory Bird Treaty Act which carries both misdemeanor and felony penalties. Robinson said that the matter would be presented before a Federal Grand Jury in the near future.

The investigation is part of a continuing effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to halt the illegal commercialization of the Nation's wildlife.