

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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LARGEST ILLEGAL SHIPMENT OF FURS SEIZED

More than 17,500 fur pelts, many from endangered animals, representing the largest seizure of illegal furs in the history of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been condemned by the Government. All of the skins from the non-endangered animals will be sold at public auction in El Paso Wednesday, the Interior Department agency said.

The 2½ tons of raw hides, many with the flesh of animals still attached, were seized February 24 by special agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Customs Service at a remote ranch along the Rio Grande near Marathon, Texas. Following a tip from the U.S. Border Patrol law enforcement officers obtained search warrants and seized the furs and records and arrested five men.

Because of the perishable nature of the furs, the U.S. District Court in the Western District of Texas authorized the sale of the pelts of non-endangered animals with the revenue to be held in bond. The auction will be conducted by the District Director of Customs. Their wholesale value, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service, is \$1.1 million.

The smuggling occurred in a sparsely populated area in southwest Texas near Big Bend National Park. "That high desert and mountainous area has been the focus of numerous smuggling operations in the recent past," said Clark Bavin, Chief of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Law Enforcement Office. "In the last 4 to 5 years, prices of furs have skyrocketed and

(over)

with the domestic and international restrictions on commerce, it's become profitable for smugglers. We've seen an increase in smuggling of ocelot and jaguar skins and other non-endangered animals' furs, only in lesser amounts. The smuggling of live parrots and reptiles for the exotic pet trade is particularly intense. It's especially difficult to intercept shipments in this area and it was only because of the cooperation of the Customs Service that this case could be made."

The furs are thought to have been trucked across the border during January and February and brought to a 37,000-acre ranch owned by David Adams. His ranch borders the Rio Grande at Stillwell Crossing.

Most of the 17,538 pelts involved in the seizure were destined for European markets and included ring-tailed cat, gray fox, coyote, raccoon, skunk, badger, and 1,556 Mexican bobcats called lynx. The Mexican bobcat is a subspecies of its non-endangered U.S. cousin but is on both the Mexican and U.S. endangered species lists and is protected by an international treaty which prevents trade in endangered species. Lynx are highly prized in the fur industry and coats made from 10 to 15 pelts sell for as much as \$20,000 at retail stores. Most of the other furs are used as trim on apparel.

Arrested were Adams and four Mexican nationals employed by him: Juventino Martinez, Castillo Jose Leon Flores, Jose Louis Cabello Diaz, and Chavez Ramos Riojas. They were arraigned before U.S. Magistrate John M. Preston at Pecos, Texas, on February 26 and were charged with illegally transporting the animal skins in interstate and foreign commerce (Lacey Act), conspiracy to smuggle, and importing an endangered species (Endangered Species Act). Adams was released on posting \$15,000 bond. The four Mexican nationals are being held under \$30,000 cash bond each.

The Endangered Species Act prohibits the import, export, sale, trade, or shipment in interstate and foreign commerce of any endangered species, and carries up to a \$20,000 fine and 1 year imprisonment. The Lacey Act prohibits the importation of wildlife obtained in violation of a foreign country's laws, and carries a fine of up to \$10,000 and 1 year imprisonment. Smuggling, a felony violation, carries a maximum \$5,000 fine and up to 5 years imprisonment.

The five men will be brought before a grand jury March 12 in the U.S. District Court, Pecos, Western District of Texas.

This seizure is part of a continuing effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to halt the illegal commercialization of wildlife.