



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE UNCOVERS MASSIVE BALD EAGLE KILLING;
MANY ARRESTS MADE TODAY IN EIGHT STATES

Between 200 and 300 bald eagles were deliberately killed over the last 3 years on and near a national wildlife refuge in South Dakota to supply feathers, beaks, talons, and bones for a lucrative black market in Native American artifacts, according to a major Federal undercover operation concluded today in eight States and announced by Secretary of the Interior James Watt.

The 2-year investigation by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to result in the charging of up to 50 individuals for their involvement in the killing or sale of 19 species of Federally protected birds. Eighty Federal and State conservation officers began contacting subjects and executing arrest or search warrants this morning in Florida, California, Utah, Oklahoma, Montana, Colorado, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Large quantities of bird parts and finished craft items are expected to be seized.

The bird feathers and parts were used to manufacture "authentic" reproductions of Indian artifacts such as headdresses, rattles, jewelry, lances, hair ties, wing and peyote fans, whistles, and other ornaments. The items were then sold to collectors and hobbyists in other parts of the Nation and in Europe, where interest in American Indian artifacts is strong.

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Secretary Watt said that the investigation indicated that the "feather traffic" exists in most States. "Nationwide, it is thought to be directly responsible for the slaughter of at least 300 bald eagles every year along with other protected species. Last year's bicentennial celebration of the naming of the bald eagle as our Nation's symbol brought news that the species is beginning to recover from a number of threats," Watt said. "That's why it is particularly saddening to learn of this wanton slaughter."

The killing of migratory birds and sale of their feathers and parts are prohibited under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Bald eagles and golden eagles are also protected under the Endangered Species Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

In spite of the Federal laws, birds continue to be killed because of the high prices that can be earned on the black market. War bonnets made with eagle feathers can sell for over \$5,000, depending on the number of feathers used and the quality of the workmanship. Peyote fans (clusters of feathers used traditionally for Indian religious ceremonies) can sell for as much as \$800. In the highly secretive black market, a single eagle tail feather sells for \$25 to \$35 and an entire bald eagle carcass sells for \$500 to \$1,000.

Secretary Watt said that the focus of this investigation was to infiltrate the illegal trade in bird feathers and parts and identify the individuals who were killing and selling them. "It is shocking that so many birds continue to be killed, since there have been several other major Federal crackdowns on illegal feather traffic that have received widespread news coverage in the last 2 years," Watt said. "Apparently some people still haven't gotten the message that we are serious about ending this business."

"We hope that this investigation will demonstrate once again our national commitment to protect the bald eagle and other migratory species."

Service enforcement officials note that this case differs from others in the past in that never before have such large numbers of whole carcasses been offered for sale, nor have so many individuals been charged with killing migratory birds at one time. During the investigations agents were sold 24 freshly killed bald and two golden eagle carcasses along with parts from a mix of 25 bald and golden eagles and hundreds of items made from other Federally protected bird species including hawks, owls, songbirds, scissor-tailed flycatchers, and anhingas.

Many of the scissor-tailed flycatchers were killed in Oklahoma where they are the State bird and a protected species. These birds are desired because of their two long tail feathers that are used to make decorative fans. Typically between 30 and 40 of these birds must be killed to make a single fan.

The majority of the bald eagles were killed on or adjacent to the Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota and Nebraska that was established in 1974 as a sanctuary for wintering and migrating eagles. Most were killed with baited traps or shot at night while roosting in trees.

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"This investigation revealed that the illegal activity has existed for several years on or near the wildlife refuge," said Philip Hogen, U.S. Attorney for the State of South Dakota. "Federal grand juries in South Dakota have returned felony and misdemeanor indictments against 28 individual defendants charging from one to 14 counts of violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act," Hogen stated. The majority of defendants will be prosecuted in South Dakota by Hogen.

Carol Dinkins, Assistant Attorney General for Land and Natural Resources, said: "The Department of Justice and the United States Attorneys throughout the country fully support criminal prosecution of cases resulting from this undercover investigation of illegal feather trade."

Under Federal regulation, the Fish and Wildlife Service provides Native Americans with eagle feathers for religious uses only from a feather repository in Pocatello, Idaho. These feathers are obtained from birds that are found dead from various accidents, natural causes, and human-related sources of mortality. The feathers may not be traded, bartered, or sold. The Fish and Wildlife Service has also provided Indians with waterfowl wings and tails and other wildlife parts obtained from hunting surveys and other sources. Possession of these items by Native Americans is legal, but sale and trade are not. Indian leaders have supported prosecution of these violations and have spoken out against the exploitation of their heritage and religion.

Penalties for each offense include: 1 year imprisonment and/or a \$5,000 fine under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act; 2 years imprisonment and/or a \$2,000 fine for felony sale under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and 1 year imprisonment and/or a \$20,000 fine for violations of the Endangered Species Act. Since 1981, 113 individuals have been convicted for violation of the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

The undercover operation was coordinated by the Justice Department's Division of Land and Natural Resources (Wildlife Section) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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Note to Editors: Photographs are available by calling (202) 343-8770.