



The Conservation Crisis: International Trade in Live Exotic Birds Creates a Vast Movement That Must Be Halted

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# COMMENTARY

## THE CONSERVATION CRISIS International Trade in Live Exotic Birds Creates a Vast Movement That Must Be Halted

BIRD TRADE SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE AOU CONSERVATION COMMITTEE<sup>1</sup>

While we have heard warnings about a large decline in birds that breed in the Temperate Zone and winter in the tropics ("Neotropical migrants"), a "reverse migration" of sorts is draining avian diversity from many tropical areas to the living rooms of developed countries. In recent years, the international trade in live exotic birds has grown greatly. Estimates of the current magnitude of the live trade in exotic birds range from two to five million individuals annually (Inskipp 1990). These figures exclude the trade of 15.9 to 26.5 million swiftlet nests annually from southeast Asia (Lau and Melville 1990).

Because the United States is presently the largest importer of exotic birds in the world (Mulliken and Thomsen 1990), the conservation of birds in other countries will be affected greatly by regulations of the United States concerning trade. The AOU Conservation Committee formed a subcommittee of ornithologists concerned with bird trade issues in July 1990. The charge of this subcommittee was to review the problems associated with the bird trade and to make recommendations for effective ways to deal with the detrimental influences of trade on wild bird populations.

Nearly two million birds from 85 countries were legally imported into the United States between 1986 and 1988 (Nilsson 1990). Forty-three percent of these birds were parrots, while about 54% were finches (Estrildidae, Fringillidae, and others) primarily from Africa. The remaining 3% represented 77 different families. The countries exporting the most birds to the United States were Senegal, Tanzania, and Argentina. Accurate data on the scale of internal (nonexport) trade in birds are not available, although this trade is also thought to be substantial in many countries.

Parrots represent the largest monetary share of commerce. Forty-seven percent of all parrots sold internationally, and perhaps 80% of all Neotropical parrots, are sold in the United States. Most of the remainder is bought by members of the European Economic Community and Japan (Thomsen and Mulliken 1991). Approximately 1.8 million Neotropical psittacines, nearly all captured from the wild, were legally exported for trade from 1982 to 1988 (Thomsen and Mulliken 1991). Estimates of internal trade, parrot mortality before exportation, and the magnitude of

illegal smuggling suggest that the number of birds removed from the wild would actually have been two or three times as great as the legal exports (James 1991, Thomsen and Mulliken 1991).

This multimillion dollar trade increasingly threatens the existence of wild bird populations and even entire species. Although nearly all exporting countries are members of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Flora and Fauna (CITES), and many exporting countries have adopted trade regulations, the domestic and international laws that are supposed to ensure that trapping for trade does not result in species' declines have been largely ineffective (Thomsen and Mulliken 1991). Trade now threatens the very existence of a number of these species, but principal problems have been seen with psittacines, which as a group are unable to sustain much pressure on wild populations (Inskipp et al. 1988). Collar and Juniper (1991) concluded that 42 of approximately 140 species of Neotropical parrots are currently at risk of extinction. For 22 of these species, trade is a major cause of endangerment. Examples of parrots now critically threatened by trade include the Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*), the Hyacinth Macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*), and the Red-crowned Parrot (*Amazona viridigenalis*). Examples of other birds threatened by trade include Toucan Barbets (*Semnorhis ramphastinus*), Red Siskins (*Spinus cucullatus*), and Yellow-faced Siskins (*Carduelis yarrellii*) (Nilsson 1989). Thus, trade and habitat destruction together now clearly represent the two major conservation problems afflicting these and many other birds worldwide.

Captive breeding is the major source of individuals in trade for only a relatively few species—Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), Cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*), Common Canaries (*Serinus canaria*), Zebra Waxbills (*Amandava subflava*), and Bengalese Finches (*Lonchura domestica*), but *Agapornis* lovebirds, several species of cockatoos (*Cacatua*), and a number of Australian finches (e.g. *Chloebeia gouldiae*, *Poephila cincta*, and *P. acuticauda*). For most other species, essentially all individuals in trade come directly from the wild, either trapped as free-flying adults or taken as nestlings. In many areas the harvest of nestlings of hole-nesting species involves destruction of nest trees. This poses a further stress on wild populations limited by nest availability (Beissinger and Bucher 1991). *The Bird Trade Subcommittee believes strongly that current numbers of wild-caught live exotic birds being imported into the United States for commercial activities are indefensible*

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and that the sale of these wild-caught birds must be stopped as soon as possible.

A detailed report documenting our subcommittee's recommendations is in progress and will be completed shortly for publication. In this report we develop seven principles for guiding an international trade in live exotic birds, based on the implications of an international bird trade on the conservation of wild bird populations in countries of origin as well as in North America. If there is to be an international bird trade, then the importation of live exotic birds should (1) be sustainable and not pose risks of extinction for wild populations of species that are imported (several psitticines are now gone from the wild, their last representatives sold to parrot collectors); (2) not pose significant risks of transmitting exotic diseases to native species, poultry, or other birds held for legitimate purposes such as exhibition or scientific study (current quarantine procedures have not stopped outbreaks of exotic diseases and improved procedures are needed); (3) not result in significant potentials for the establishment of feral populations (many already exist in our country having been imported as pets); (4) be consistent with U.S. policies concerning the use of native species (most commercial uses of native birds are prohibited and those that are allowed require carefully regulated licenses, yet nonnative birds can be kept without permits); and (5) have regulations that are economically feasible, practically enforceable, simple, and effective (regulations should not preclude the scientific study of birds in captivity, international recovery efforts, or public exhibition for educational purposes). Captive breeding of exotic species for aviculture should (6) be self-sustaining (i.e. without requiring the continued importation of wild-caught birds) and conducted humanely; and (7) be used as a conservation strategy only as a last resort, and only as part of internationally recognized and structured programs fully integrated with preservation and reintroduction efforts (not a panacea promoted by aviculturists as a rationalization for keeping exotic birds in captivity). *The Bird Trade Subcommittee recommends that the importation of exotic live birds, including the importation of birds reared in captivity, should be conducted only if it can meet these seven general principles.*

In recognition of the pivotal role of the United States in affecting international trade and conservation of birds, two bills to decrease the trade of wild-caught exotic birds were introduced to Congress in June. The bills were submitted by the Cooperative Working Group on the Bird Trade (H.R. 2541, F. 1218) and by the Defenders of Wildlife (H.R. 2540, F. 1219). The proposal of the Cooperative Working Group on the Bird Trade was drafted by nine organizations including representatives of the pet trade industry and aviculture, and a number of conservation organizations including the National Audubon Society, the International Council for Bird Preservation, and the

World Wildlife Fund U.S., the coordinating organization. The proposal by the Defenders of Wildlife is supported by the Animal Welfare Institute, the Humane Society, the Sierra Club, and a variety of other conservation groups.

Both bills call for partial bans that would phase out the pet trade of wild-caught birds after varying lengths of time, but both bills allow the importation of captive-bred and ranched birds for commercial activities and continue the importation of wild-caught birds by permit for commercial aviculture. Neither bill specifically addresses quarantine regulations, the problems of establishment of feral populations, nor ethical inconsistencies with U.S. policies concerning the use of native species. Both bills exclude dead birds (specimens) imported for scientific purposes from regulations and permit live birds to be imported for scientific study.

Principal differences between the two proposals concern the immediacy of the phase-out (five years for the Working Group and one year for Defenders), the limits for the import of wild-caught birds for captive breeding (not addressed in the Working Group proposal vs. limited in the Defenders proposal), and the amount of detailed regulations governing each activity (large in the Working Group proposal and scant in the Defenders proposal). Both proposals represent positions that proponents feel have a chance of being enacted into law. Both proposals could result in a decrease in the number of exotic birds imported into the United States, but still provide avenues for many birds to be imported depending upon the nature of regulations and degree of enforcement.

The subcommittee supports the passage of legislation to curb the importation of live exotic wild-caught birds. The organizations that have crafted the two bills being considered by Congress should be commended. Unfortunately, neither bill explicitly deals with all of the principles that we believe are necessary to guide any trade in live exotic birds. The enactment of one of these bills could represent a positive step towards the conservation of biological diversity. But because these bills are incomplete, even if one is passed, we feel that additional legislation will be necessary to solve the bird trade problem.

The Bird Trade Subcommittee feels it is important to state an optimal solution to the bird trade problem from the standpoint of conserving wild populations of birds, recognizing that this position may present political difficulties in enactment. *The Bird Trade Subcommittee recommends a moratorium on the importation of wild-caught birds to the United States for a fixed period.* The two bills before Congress would both enact a partial moratorium, but even after the period of phase-out was completed, both bills would still allow birds to be imported for aviculture and private collections including threatened and declining species. We recommend a moratorium because it is the most sensible stance in terms of its potentials for immediately re-

ducing the detrimental effects of the trade in exotic live birds on wild populations, its simplicity and effectiveness of regulations, its ethical consistency in treatment of native and foreign wildlife, and its cost effectiveness. During a moratorium, experimental programs of captive breeding and ranching could be carried out in selected exporting countries to find solutions to the problems of disease control, illegal laundering of birds, and other associated problems. In our view, a moratorium would be held open for limited importations of birds as part of internationally recognized scientific studies of birds in captivity, recovery efforts, or public exhibitions for educational purposes.

Concerned citizens and readers of *The Auk* can urge their elected representatives to support the enactment of an exotic bird trade act and to strengthen the proposed legislation by strengthening quarantine regulations and enforcement requirements, and by decreasing the number of avenues for birds to be legally imported under these regulations.

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