



Illegal online trade in endangered parrots:

A groundbreaking investigation



WORLD PARROT TRUST



Contents

Introduction.....	03
Background: Parrots threatened by illegal online trade.....	04
Findings.....	05
Illegal and non-compliant trade continues despite rule changes.....	06
Online trade is a significant threat to wild parrot populations and their welfare....	06
Monitoring online trade offers significant enforcement opportunities.....	07
An opportunity for public education.....	07
Recommendations.....	08
Strengthening regulation and monitoring of online trade.....	08
Opportunities for airlines to support enforcement of illegal trade.....	08



Above: Michele D'Amico / Getty Images

Introduction

Our study of online trade in wild-sourced parrots is the first study of its kind about this highly threatened group of birds. By analyzing information contained within social media posts and public databases regarding trade in grey parrots over a four-year period, this investigation provides new insight into the scope and scale of trade, trade routes, modes of transport and the extent of compliance with national laws and international agreements.

The findings highlight the significant role of social media in facilitating trade in threatened wildlife, and identifies recommendations for governments in strengthening the regulation of trade in wildlife. The findings also reinforce the need for airlines to act on their commitments through agreements such as the United for Wildlife Transport Taskforce, the United for Wildlife Buckingham Palace Declaration, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the Animal Transport Association (ATA).

Background: Parrots threatened by illegal online trade

Parrots are among the most threatened groups of birds, with wild populations of many species exploited in large numbers to supply the global pet trade. The threats to wild populations posed by this trade have led to almost the entire order being protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which is an international agreement that commits governments to regulate international trade in endangered species.

Despite the international recognition of the threat to parrots, inadequately managed trade –which increasingly occurs online– results in the overexploitation of wild populations and trade practices that fail to meet basic animal welfare requirements. Online platforms enable traders to procure wildlife more efficiently and expand their networks and consumer base. This allows new traders and small businesses to establish themselves on the global market at relatively little cost, while also providing increased anonymity for illegal traders.

The challenges of monitoring online trade in parrots are exacerbated when transactions are made using closed (nonpublic) networks and when financial transactions occur through third-parties, making them difficult to track and verify. However, the use of social media in illegal trade presents a number of unique opportunities to gain insight into the structure of trade networks and identify opportunities to disrupt illegal trade.

Wild populations have collapsed by 90-99% in Ghana

1990's



2010's



Annorbah et al (2016)

Groundbreaking investigation used innovative methods

Data collection:

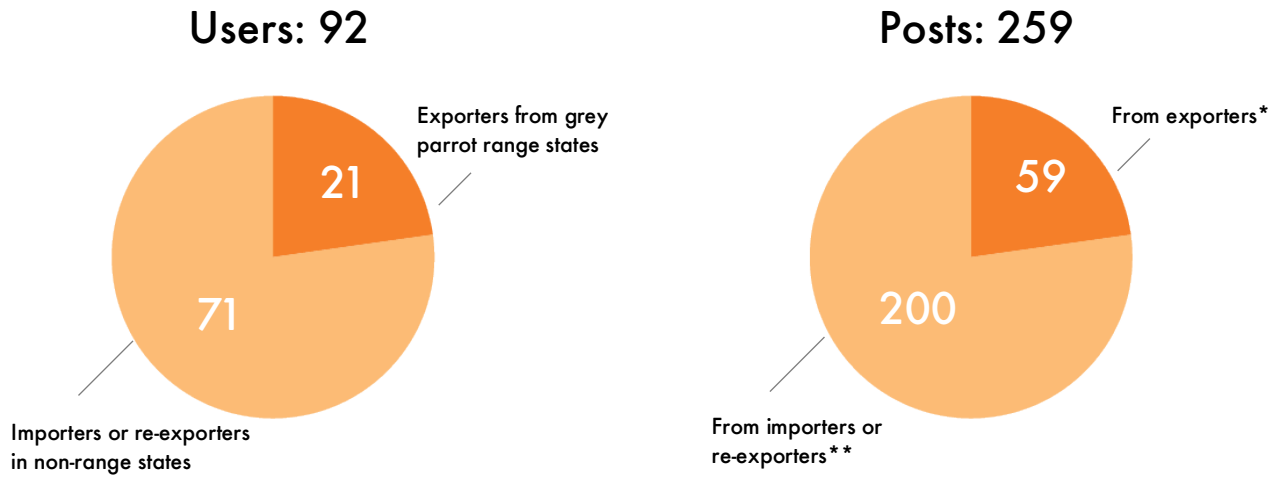
- ❖ “Snowball” data collection method started with users of a single social media platform known to be involved in the trade of wild-sourced African grey and Timneh parrots.
- ❖ Their public posts and other users’ responses were used to identify additional parties involved in parrot trade over a four-year period.
- ❖ Text, photos, and videos from posts related to trade activity provided data about the source, destination, route, volume, ages, and price of the parrots.
- ❖ Posts that identified cargo tracking codes provided additional data regarding transit points, dates, and airlines involved.
- ❖ Where possible, this data was cross-referenced with publicly available databases of shipment records to confirm trades and identify the name of the exporter, shipment contents, airline, date and route.

Analysis:

- ❖ Trade data was assessed using set criteria to determine whether parrots were sourced from the wild.
- ❖ Data was further assessed using a second set of criteria to identify whether the trade was likely to be non-compliant with CITES or national laws.

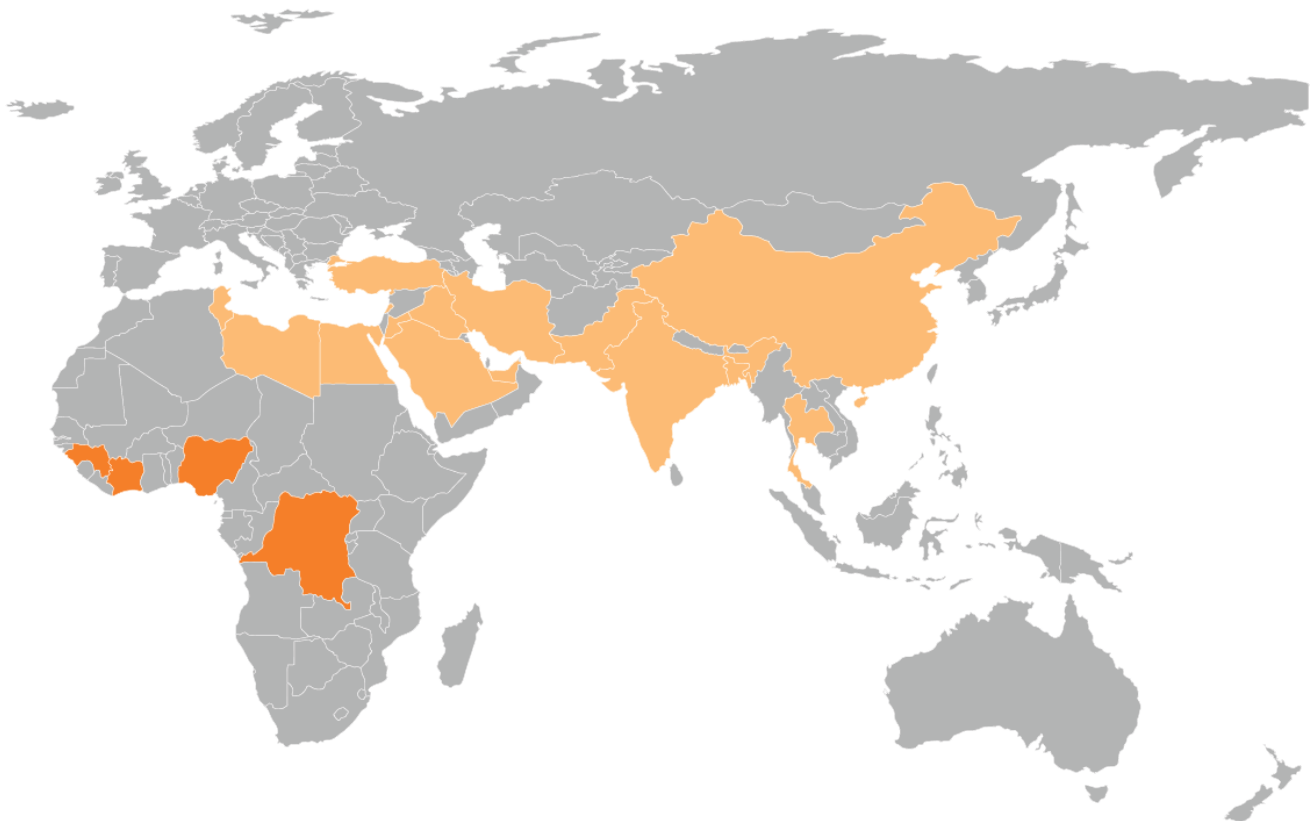
Findings

Origin and destination of traded parrots



***59 from exporters:** The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (84.8%), Côte d'Ivoire (12.1%), Nigeria (1.5%) and Guinea (1.5%).

****200 from importers or re-exporters:** Pakistan (25.0%), Turkey (22.5%), Jordan (15.5%), Iraq (9.0%), India (5.0%), Thailand (4.5%), Libya (4.5%), Egypt (4.0%), Kuwait (3%), Bangladesh (2%), United Arab Emirates (1%) and China, Iran, Lebanon, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia (0.5%). 4% were undetermined.



Illegal and non-compliant trade continues despite rule changes

Of the 259 posts, 190, or 73.4% were identified as featuring trade that was likely in breach of national laws or non-compliant with CITES. Of these, 32.6% occurred in 2016, after the CITES recommendation to suspend trade in wild-sourced grey parrots from the DRC, and 33.6% in 2017, following the transfer of the species to CITES Appendix I. The enhanced CITES protections in 2016 and 2017 provided regulatory clarity that made it easier to identify posts that portrayed illegal trade during this period. While it's not possible to draw conclusions about the precise impact of the CITES changes on illegal activity, it is clear that illegal trade was happening before the rules changed, and continued to be an issue after. This points to the need to accompany enhanced CITES protections with additional enforcement efforts that take advantage of methods demonstrated in this study to disrupt and prevent illegal online trading.



Online trade is a significant threat to wild parrot populations and their welfare

It was evident from the content of some posts that social media played a role in connecting buyers and sellers. By facilitating the connections that resulted in illegal transactions that involve large numbers of grey parrots, social media contributes to a significant threat to wild populations. Some of them involve in excess of 150 parrots, and at least one shipment that was intercepted and confiscated contained approximately 340 grey parrots. These findings add to a growing number of studies pointing to the animal welfare threat posed by online trade in wildlife and the urgent need for improved monitoring and regulation.

Images in posts also revealed frequent breaches of animal welfare standards both during transit and in holding facilities, including the absence of perches and overcrowded containers of parrots held together in a single compartment.





Monitoring online trade offers significant enforcement opportunities

The openness with which traders publicly shared information on illegal trade strongly suggests that traders are operating in an environment in which they are unafraid of enforcement. Effective monitoring of social media sites for posts containing information about illegal trade in wild-sourced parrots, along with rapid and efficient sharing of this information with enforcement agencies, provides an opportunity for swift enforcement actions against importers and exporters. This could include inspecting the holding facilities of exporters identified in online trade activity and investigating their contacts and paperwork to learn of previous shipments. This enforcement activity could allow for the confiscation of the birds, the closure of the export facility and prosecution of exporters. It could also allow for shipments that have already been illegally imported to be confiscated and the importers prosecuted, or assist in the interception of illegal shipments at international borders.

This approach identifies the need for urgent action by various entities including airlines, technology companies and government agencies to disrupt illegal trade and support the implementation of CITES in the protection of globally endangered grey parrots. Airlines that handle shipments of grey parrots could play a role in identifying shipments that may be the result of illegal trade, and coordinate with law enforcement when incidents happen. Technology companies can support the monitoring of online posts to identify trade activity that requires further investigation. If there was effective coordination with government agencies, together these entities could have a significant impact in preventing illegal online trade. Similar real-time monitoring of other wildlife products may yield equally powerful results into trade, which are much needed to boost the effectiveness of CITES.

An opportunity for public education

Social media also presents opportunities to inform and educate consumers on the impact of trade on animal welfare and the conservation of threatened species. It can also be used to ensure consumers understand the poor conditions involved in all stages of the pet trade, including the capture, transport, and often the final destinations of grey parrots. An understanding of trade networks and consumer markets gained through the monitoring of social media will help to build a foundation on which efforts to change behaviour can be based. The conservation community must harness this potential as part of informed and multi-faceted strategies to manage wildlife trade.

Recommendations

Strengthening regulation and monitoring of online trade

Our study shows that the effectiveness of regulating online trade activity can be strengthened by:

- Synthesizing information from a variety of sources, such as customs databases and shipping data.
- Utilizing expert knowledge on parrot behaviour, breeding practices, and trade restrictions. Social media companies and enforcement agencies should liaise closely with experts in particular taxonomic groups when implementing systems to monitor and restrict trade activity online.
- Adopting clear and consistent regulations on trade, including the listing of species in Appendix I of CITES, which provides clarity for enforcement agencies attempting to determine the legality of shipments.
- Focusing attention of airlines and enforcement agencies on key transit points in source, destination and transit countries, such as exports from DRC, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire and imports into Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait and Lebanon.
- Furthermore, the removal of posts clearly advertising illegal trade could have a potentially major disruptive effect on trade networks.

Opportunities for airlines to support enforcement of illegal trade

Airlines can play an enhanced role in enforcement efforts in two ways:

- Our study showed that wild-sourced grey parrots were transported by plane, and although the responsibility for enforcement lies with governments, airline staff can play a critical role in gathering intelligence and sharing information with enforcement agencies. Grey parrots are readily recognizable, and large shipments of wild parrots requiring food and water are difficult to conceal.
- The Buckingham Palace Declaration commitment to shut down trade routes exploited by traffickers must be met with real actions, including training airline staff to detect illegal shipments, creating safe and rewarding environments for whistle-blowers, and developing mechanisms for rapid sharing of information with customs and other law enforcement authorities.
- Members of IATA must ensure that shipments meet the requirement of the Live Animal Regulations including the provision of adequate space, perches, food and water and that "compliance with national legislation is evident at the time of live animal shipment acceptance" and that "the appropriate CITES documentation is completed before acceptance of shipment."

Full details of this study and further discussion of the results are available in the peer-reviewed research paper published open access in the journal *Global Ecology and Conservation*. Martin R.O., Senni C., D'Cruze N.C. 2018. Trade in wild-sourced African grey parrots: Insights via social media. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, 15, e00429

Below: Nature's Gifts Captured / Getty Images



Addendum

Since the completion of the peer-reviewed study, further investigations have revealed ongoing illegal trade of wild-sourced African Grey parrots following similar trade routes. The additional investigations have also provided further insights into methods of trafficking including the fraudulent use of CITES permits. This information together with other instances where the legal trade in birds is used as a cover for the trafficking of threatened wildlife including primates is reported in an article titled "Tricks of the trade - Legal trade used to conceal Endangered African Grey parrots on commercial flights" accepted for publication in Volume 54 of the journal *Oryx* - The International Journal of Conservation.

Key findings include:

Between January and December 2018 four social media posts featuring wild-sourced African Grey parrots were posted by exporters, while 54 were posted by importers. These included three shipments on which Cargo Tracking Codes were clearly visible:

- On 15th August 2018 a shipment departed Kinshasa, DRC and travelled on a Turkish Airlines flight via Istanbul, Turkey arriving in Kuwait on 17th August. It was seized by customs on arrival and found to be accompanied by documentation for bird species not listed on the Appendices of CITES. (Source: WPT pers. comm. with the CITES Management Authority of Kuwait).
- On the same date, 15th August 2018 another shipment departed Kinshasa, DRC and travelled on a Turkish Airlines flight via Istanbul, arriving in Beirut, Lebanon, on 16th August. Over 40 were dead on arrival.
- On 18th December 2018 a shipment departed Lagos, Nigeria travelled on a Turkish Airlines flight via Istanbul, arriving in to Beirut, Lebanon the 20th December (see photo).
- In January 2018, over 300 wild-sourced African Grey parrots were seized at Istanbul Ataturk airport. The shipment originated in the DRC and was destined for Iraq transiting Turkey on a Turkish Airlines flight (Source: WPT pers. comm. with the CITES Management Authority of Turkey).
- In September 2018 an employee of a wildlife exporter based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) explained to investigators working for World Animal Protection how Grey parrots are concealed within legal shipments of "green parrots" with a green netting placed on containers to help disguise the contents. "Green parrots" is a locally-used name for *Poicephalus gulielmi* listed on Appendix II of CITES. In 2018 the DRC published an export quota of 2,850 for this species, exports of which have risen five-fold since African Grey parrots were transferred to Appendix I of CITES (mean exports between 2017-2018 compared with mean exports between 2012-2016; CITES trade statistics derived from the CITES Trade Database on December 19th 2018, UNEP-WCMC). This increase likely reflects an increase in the fraudulent use of permits for other species to traffic African Grey parrots. Employees also confirmed that exporters frequently use Turkish Airlines to transport African Grey parrots.



A shipment of Africa Grey parrots which departed Nigeria on 18th December 2018 and arrived in the Lebanon 20th December 2018. The stickers of Turkish Cargo are clearly visible. In addition to be illegal, an apparent lack of perches and dense packing suggests the shipment may not comply with the International Air Transport Association Live Animal Regulations.



[ONLINE SERVICES](#)

[PRODUCTS AND SERVICES](#)

[NETWORK](#)

[ABOUT US](#)



[LOGIN](#)

[TR](#) | [EN](#)

235-32729045

Latest Information	Shipment Received from flight - 20-Dec-2018 12:54:00 - BEY - 1 piece(s) / 50 kg
Origin	LOS-LAGOS AIRPORT
Destination	BEY-BEIRUT AIRPORT

Flight No	Flight Date	Segment	Pieces	Weight	Volume	Confirmed
TK0626	18.12.2018	LOS-IST	1	50,00	0,36	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
TK0824	19.12.2018	IST-BEY	1	50,00	0,36	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

LOS

RCS

DEP

BEY

RCF

DLV

20 Dec 12:54
1 Pieces/50,00 kg

The World Parrot Trust (WPT) is a wildlife charity dedicated to protecting parrots, the most threatened group of birds on earth. Working with in-country partners, WPT conducts ground-breaking field research and hands-on conservation programs, encourages habitat protection and restoration, and supports educational programs for both wild and companion parrots.



Dr. Rowan O. Martin rmartin@parrots.org
Director, Africa Conservation Programme, World Parrot Trust

Cristiana Senni csenni@parrots.org
Wildlife trade specialist, World Parrot Trust

We are World Animal Protection.

We end the needless suffering of animals.

We influence decision makers to put animals on the global agenda.

We help the world see how important animals are to all of us.

We inspire people to change animals' lives for the better.

We move the world to protect animals.



Contact us

World Animal Protection

222 Grays Inn Road, London, WC1X 8HB

T: +44 (0) 7239 0500

F: +44 (0) 7239 0654

E: info@worldanimalprotection.org

Web worldanimalprotection.org

Fb/[WorldAnimalProtectionInt](https://www.facebook.com/WorldAnimalProtectionInt)

Tw/[@MoveTheWorld](https://twitter.com/MoveTheWorld)