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RSPCA Says: “It’s Time To Stop Winging It”

Millions of parrots, finches and other birds die or suffer appallingly because of the trade in wild birds, a disturbing new RSPCA report reveals today.

The report, “It’s Time To Stop Winging It”, also exposes serious failings in quarantine arrangements for wild birds imported into the EU.

The findings – together with shocking footage from the World Parrot Trust – illustrate the tragic effects of trapping and shipping wild-caught birds and reveal a worrying gap in EU defences for keeping out diseases like avian influenza.

The RSPCA is calling for a permanent ban on wild bird imports into the EU to end both the suffering caused by this unnecessary trade and a potential route for importing disease. Currently, there is only a temporary ban in place, which expires on 31 July. Crucially, the new report concludes that - contrary to some assumptions - a ban would not drive the bird trade underground nor increase smuggling.

The Society has seen shocking undercover footage of the suffering and stress inflicted by wild bird trappers in Argentina. The film shows:

- A parrot, held by its open wings, struggling to resist being forced into the tiny compartment of a trapper’s box
- Patagonian conures thrusting their heads between the bars at the top of a cage in futile efforts to be free
- Amazon parrots entangled in trapping nets desperately growling and squawking as their heads are manipulated to disentangle them and put them in boxes for transit.

40-60% of wild birds caught for the pet trade are estimated to have died before they have even left their country of origin, according to studies for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). The Environmental Investigation Agency has estimated that for every one bird that survived the further journey, three died in transit.

David Bowles, RSPCA Head of External Affairs says: “The scale and degree of cruelty in this wasteful trade is wholly unacceptable. Legislation outlaws the capture of wild native birds within the EU. Yet the EU continues to fuel the

international trade even though captive-bred birds are readily available. Millions of birds have died or suffered as a direct result of these double standards.”

Suffering is not limited to capture and export, it can occur throughout the remainder of a wild bird’s stressful life in captivity.

This inhumane trade is allowed to continue even though captive-bred birds have better disease resistance and are easier to keep. The 25 member states of the EU are the largest consumers of wild-caught birds taken from their natural habitat. Between 2000 and 2003, more than 2.7 million birds listed by CITES were imported into the EU – a massive 93% of global imports.

The RSPCA report also includes the results of a study of bird quarantine arrangements in Ghana - just one of the many countries which export wild birds to the EU. Worryingly, it found that there is no reliable quarantine system in place.

“Although the EU has agreed rules to keep out diseases like bird ‘flu,” explains David Bowles, “it has no controls over quarantine in the countries exporting wild birds and has done no checks on those countries since the rules were put in place six years ago.”

The RSPCA investigation revealed serious problems including:

- No genuinely sealed quarantine stations in Ghana – most are simply holding stations and none can be regarded as quarantines envisaged under EU rules
- All but one of the 13 quarantine stations in Accra failed the Ghanaian Government’s inspections - the centres had problems with disease control, untrained staff, high mortality rates and poor record keeping
- Some birds could be exported *after only a week* in the holding station – instead of the *21 days* required by the EU rules
- New birds entering the holding stations can be mixed with those cleared for immediate export
- Birds are not ringed for identification – thus, birds certified as healthy can be mixed with birds which have had no health check at all.

David Bowles concludes: “The EU bans the export of its own native bird life but is likely to be responsible for the extraction of hundreds of thousands of birds from the wild each year. As the key consumer, the EU bears some responsibility for the damage caused by the international trade in wild-caught birds. It should withdraw from the international trade now.”

It’s been estimated that an import ban imposed by the US saved as many as 9.3 million CITES-listed birds alone between 1992 and 2005. The RSPCA believes an outright ban on wild bird imports would be simple to enforce and

remove the opportunities for a legal trade to mask an illegal one by, for example, smuggling 'mislabelled' birds.