

# The Smuggling of Parrots

## A Dangerous Practice

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Nearly 25,000 parrots are smuggled into the United States, each year, from Mexico.

Although the United States has banned the importation of wild caught birds, certain captive bred species from approved avian facilities are commercially allowed. These species include certain Australian, Asian, and African parrots. These birds are not wild caught, but captive bred. Permits for commercial shipping are granted allowing the birds to be admitted to the United States. The countries involved in this trade are, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Once here, the birds are placed in quarantine for 30 days and undergo various health checks and tests for various avian diseases that are contagious and deadly to domestic stock (chickens, turkeys, and ducks), native species birds, other avian species and man.

However, some of the birds are taken to various world trade centers where exportation is allowed. At the center, falsified permits can be purchased and the bird is shipped out. If the bird finds its way into Mexico, it could easily be smuggled into the United States.

Unfortunately, many of the illegally smuggled birds are carriers of highly contagious viruses. Smuggling of birds is a million dollar business and is classified as the second largest illegal business from Mexico, with the first being the trafficking of drugs. According to some smugglers, there is a lesser chance of getting caught smuggling birds than drugs, and many of these parrots go for hundreds of dollars once sold in the United States.

The most common way to smuggle parrots is to drug or feed alcohol to the bird. Once, the bird is overcome by the drugs, or is in an alcoholic stupor, the bird's beak is tied shut, preventing the bird from making a sound. The bird's legs may also be tied together, so that the bird can not move. These birds are then placed in spare tires, wheel wells, blueprint tubes, or any type of case with a false bottom and smuggled across the Texas-Mexican border. They are crowded together in small areas, and lack food and water. When the parrots reach their designated location, and if not dead from drug and alcohol overdosing, or the lack of oxygen, the birds are revived, and checked for injuries. The birds then are then given enough drugs or alcohol to calm them. When calmed, these parrots lose the natural fear of

man and appear to be loving and beg to have their heads scratched. Many of these parrots end up in unorthodox pet shops or facilities that are aware of the bird's history. While at the location, the bird is given his or her daily dose of alcohol or drugs until a buyer is found.

After being purchased and taken home, the drugs or alcohol begin to wear off. Soon afterward, the bird becomes a raging destructive ball of feathers, screaming when approached, and bites viciously. The new owner is now bewildered by the parrot's actions, wondering as to what went wrong.

The danger of buying a smuggled parrot is that the bird may be a carrier of highly contagious virus. Various viruses are highly contagious to domestic fowl, and if spread, the fowl die or have to be euthanized to prevent further spread. Some of these viruses can be transferred to bird species native to America. The native species then carry and transmit the viruses back to the domestic fowl. Another problem is that some of these viruses can be fatal to man, and to take home an infected parrot puts all family members and guests at risk. Furthermore, adding a smuggled parrot to a breeding facility is asking for very costly problems. These contagious viruses can wipe out an entire aviary or cause the destruction of the surviving parrots preventing the further spread of the contagious disease.

Some of the contagious diseases are Newcastle which played havoc with Californian fowl in 2002-2003. Newcastle caused the death of 32 million birds, with those that had not succumbed to the disease being euthanized to prevent further spread, and cost poultry producers 170 million dollars.

West Nile originally was caused from a bite of an infected mosquito. However, if an infected mosquito feeds upon a bird, the West Nile virus will spread to that bird. If an uninfected mosquito feeds upon the bird, carrying West Nile, that very mosquito will become infected and has the capability of spreading the virus to humans through its bite.

The H5N1 or bird flu is a great concern to scientists today. Although, not easily contracted by humans, the H5N1 has caused human deaths in such countries as Asia, Africa, and Thailand. The problem that concerns scientists and health officials alike is that viruses often mutate. If the H5N1 virus mutates, spreading from human to human, it would create a world-wide pandemic disease.

