

# A Brave New World: Fighting parrot trafficking in the age of social media

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**DEFINITION:** 'A BRAVE NEW WORLD' – USED, SOMETIMES IRONICALLY, TO REFER TO A NEW AND OPTIMISTIC SITUATION RESULTING FROM MAJOR SOCIETAL OR TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES.

**Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp. It's indisputable that the rise of social media is disrupting many aspects of society and the way we live our lives.**

While greater connectedness between people offers new opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for educating people around the world, it has also brought with it challenges. Social media has been blamed for the rise of 'fake news' and for polarising politics, but less reported are the ways it has opened up new avenues for traffickers of threatened wildlife, including parrots.

The World Parrot Trust has been quick to recognise the emerging threat and has been at the forefront of efforts to understand and tackle this problem. Investigations, led by WPT Trade Specialist Cristiana Senni, have monitored trade in parrots on social media for several years. Information gleaned from publicly available social media posts have been combined and verified with data from other sources, such as CITES records and national shipment records, to build a picture of trade. Details of specific shipments

as well as trade routes, key actors and the extent of illegal activity, have been shared with law enforcement agencies, CITES Parties and other groups. This information provides a basis for targeted enforcement as well as for decisions on how to regulate trade.

In 2017 WPT teamed up with World Animal Protection to take a systematic approach to investigating the role of social media in the trade of wild Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*). Wild populations of Grey Parrots have been decimated by both legal and illegal trade – estimates vary but it seems likely at least 1.2 million wild Grey Parrots have been trapped since 1975, and the true figure could be much higher.



In the four years between 2014 and 2017 we identified 259 posts featuring shipments of wild Grey Parrots. While it's possible a small number of these were scams – people soliciting sales for parrots that don't exist – information that accompanied photos and videos in other posts could be used to verify that shipments had indeed taken place, in some instances identifying the time, date of the shipment and the airlines involved.

The research has provided some fascinating and at times disturbing insights. Many of the posts made for difficult viewing. Images of parrots crammed into containers or piled on the floor are difficult to unsee, but highlight the way parrots and other birds are treated as simple commodities. Over 50% of the trade activity in 2015 and 2016 was considered to be in some sense illegal – the true figure may have been greater but due to the complexity of the regulatory system at the time it was often difficult to determine with certainty if shipments were illegal. The transfer of the species to CITES Appendix I in early 2017 ended legal trade in wild Grey Parrots. This move, which was welcomed by range states, provided valuable clarity in making

it much easier to identify illegal activity. There was a notable spike in trade activity in the 90-day period following the decision by CITES Parties to end the trade, but before the new rules came into effect.

This shines a light on how the legal trade provided cover for trade that was illegal or non-compliant with CITES. Significantly there was no increase in trade in wild parrots as a result of the new rules, which also required international exporters of Grey Parrots to register with CITES. Owners of breeding farms, who produce thousands of Grey Parrots for international markets each year, had argued that the mass production of parrots for export served to offset demand for wild parrots, and that increased regulation would undermine their businesses. The data would suggest otherwise.

Encouragingly we also saw imports into Pakistan, one of the major destinations for wild birds from the Democratic Republic of Congo, all but end in mid-2017. However, illegal trade to other countries continues, and there remains much work to be done. Fortunately our research also points the way. By tracking the trade routes used to traffic parrots, it is possible to identify opportunities to disrupt the trade. Ethiopian and Turkish Airlines were found to be pivotal, and Istanbul airport is a commonly used transit point.

Together with World Animal Protection, WPT is working with the airlines and CITES agencies to encourage more action. In November 2018 WPT helped organise a symposium in Istanbul on the trade in Grey Parrots. The event was introduced by key CITES figures, and a seminar by WPT field vet Gino Conzo on the care of parrots rescued from illegal trade was well received by local veterinarians. Additionally, a seizure of over 300 Grey Parrots transported on a Turkish Airlines flight from Kinshasa in the DRC to Istanbul in early 2018 was an important step in the right direction, but parrots continue to move via this route. Illegal shipments transiting Istanbul have been identified as recently as December 2018.

Social media has opened up a new front in the ongoing battle against the trapping of wild parrots. While providing new opportunities for traffickers to ply their trade, it also affords valuable insights into how to stop it. And while creating new opportunities to educate people about the conservation and welfare of parrots, traffickers are also wising up to how social media can be used to spread disinformation and undermine global regulations.

It's a brave new world, but you can be assured that WPT will continue to adapt and fight tirelessly to protect wild parrots around the globe. 🌐

## Trade in Southeast Asia

Using social media to illegally trade parrots and other birds is far from unique to Africa. A recent report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime highlighted the role of social media in the parrot trade in Indonesia and identified the rise of couriers for transporting parrots between buyers and sellers who might never meet, protecting the identity of the parties involved. In 2018, investigations by the Wildlife Conservation Society noted a big increase in sales of Critically Endangered Yellow-crested Cockatoos (*Cacatua sulphurea*).

For many years WPT has been working to spread awareness about the cumulative and devastating effects of trapping, and helping to manage confiscations wherever they happen, particularly in the Moluccas and Sulawesi Islands.

WPT has aided efforts to rescue Chattering Lorries (*Lorius garrulus*), White Cockatoos (*Cacatua alba*), Eclectus parrots (*Eclectus roratus*) and Red-and-blue Lorries (*Eos histria*) among others, and has assisted in building a network of rehab workers and local and regional officials in a collaborative effort to halt trade.

## Research

The research by WPT and WAP was published in leading peer-reviewed Journals. They are available open access and can be found via search engine:

- Martin, R. O., Senni, C., and D'Cruze, N. C. (2018). *Trade in wild-sourced African grey parrots: Insights via social media*. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, e00429. doi: 10.1016/j.gecco.2018.e00429
- Martin, R. O., Senni, C., D'Cruze, N. C. and Bruschi, N. (2019). *Tricks of the trade—Legal trade used to conceal Endangered African Grey parrots on commercial flights*. *Oryx - The International Journal of Conservation*, 53 (2)