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Drop in illegal wildlife trade here

By Nicholas Yong

A Singaporean who tried to smuggle live birds through the Woodlands Checkpoint in his car in mid-February was given away by squawks coming from the glove compartment.

Customs officers found a plastic bag containing three newspaper-wrapped bundles. Inside were a zebra dove and two long-tailed parakeets, which he claimed he had bought.

The birds were confiscated and the case referred to the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA).

The parakeets, highly endangered, are worth about \$250 each; prices for the zebra dove start at \$150 and go up to as much as \$50,000.

Ten cases of possession or illegal import of protected wildlife cropped up in the first quarter of this year.

Last year, there were 17 wildlife-related enforcement cases, down with the 46 cases the year before. The numbers have been on the downtrend since 2004's high of 97 cases.

Singapore is a signatory to an international agreement that seeks to ensure trade does not threaten wildlife species with extinction. The convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or Cites as it is called, protects about 5,000 species of animals and 28,000 species of plants.

A person found guilty of smuggling protected wildlife here can be fined up to \$50,000 for each species on the Cites list, up to \$500,000 in total, or jailed up to two years, or both.

The same applies for those caught possessing, selling or offering for sale endangered species illegally imported into the country.

The AVA has been stepping up enforcement against the illegal wildlife trade. Its officers at the various checkpoints have been briefed on Cites and wildlife smugglers' tactics.

But wiping out the smuggling is tough because the trade is global, estimated by Interpol to be worth US\$10 billion (S\$14.7 billion) to US\$20 billion a year.

Wildlife trade monitoring network Traffic said the problem is “rampant” in South-east Asia. Contributing factors include the region’s diverse collection of animals and plants and its uneven enforcement measures stemming from a lack of resources.

Traffic has listed Singapore, Malaysia and the United States among the world’s top 10 wildlife smuggling hubs. Traffic’s regional director for South-east Asia Azrina Abdullah said the “world-class” infrastructure in these countries facilitates the trade.

Mr Louis Ng, executive director of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), said constant enforcement here is paying off.

In the last three years, 9,000 animals have been confiscated as a result of public tip-offs, and fewer pet shops are selling protected species.

Mr Ng noted, however, that the illegal wildlife trade had gone online – Acres now gets tip-offs on websites selling exotic wildlife almost weekly.

There is an upside to this. “People are more aware now, when previously, they might not have known that these animals were illegal,” he said.