

A Pipeline of Smuggled Florida Wildlife— Operation Brooklyn

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Abstract: In October 1996, investigators of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission confirmed the existence of a major black market operation dealing in protected wildlife in South Florida. The suspects conducting this operation were dependent on local poachers to supply illegally taken game. The animals purchased by the suspects were resold at highly inflated prices to outlets in Florida and New York. Covert investigators, in an operation dubbed Operation Brooklyn, infiltrated the enterprise and identified the suppliers and retail buyers of wildlife. The suspects came to trust the investigators so much that investigators accompanied the suspects in a business trip to New York to sell Florida wildlife. After 14 months of investigation, Operation Brooklyn was brought to closure with the arrests of 9 suspects on 40 charges: 14 felonies and 26 misdemeanors. Intelligence gathered after serving a search warrant and interviewing suspects showed this market had been in operation for at least 3 years and had purchased and resold more than 500 deer.

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In July 1996, investigators received intelligence reports indicating a commercial market dealing in wildlife was operating in the Hendry County area of South Florida. The primary suspect, a native of Trinidad, was purchasing various species of wildlife for resale. An operational plan was developed for a covert investigation to confirm the validity of the information and determine the extent of the market. An undercover investigator met the primary suspect and began selling legal species of wildlife such as wild hogs and armadillos. After several transactions, the suspect solicited the investigator to illegally harvest and deliver deer and ducks. The suspect supplied the covert investigator with a price list detailing the wildlife he would purchase and the prices he would pay.

Cooperative agreements with private ranches allowed nuisance wildlife harvested from depredation permits to be used by the investigator. During the next several months, the investigator sold many animals, both legal and illegal, to the suspect. As the investigator became more trusted, the suspect bragged that he was purchasing the wildlife for resale in numerous markets in both Florida and New York. The animals were being resold to Caribbean restaurants and communities. The suspect bragged at times he was making 2 to 3 trips to New York a month. The suspect was transporting the meat with a large, custom made, insulated fiberglass box in the bed of a truck. This box could transport more than a thousand pounds of meat on each trip. The suspect further boasted that when the demand was very high, he would rent a large moving truck to transport thousands of pounds of meat for resale in New York.

The wildlife was processed in a crude slaughterhouse behind the suspect's home. This butchering barn was outfitted with a blow torch, bath tub, meat cleavers, and hacksaws. The blow torch was used to sear off the animal's hair and singe the hide. The bath tub was a cauldron for boiling wild hogs and ducks. Five chest-sized freezers were used to store the animals. Blood, feathers, and flies were numerous; heads, hooves, and entrails were thrown to the side. Sanitation was not a consideration.

After 6 months of investigation, multiple charges were documented on the main suspect for illegally purchasing wildlife. It was clearly established the suspect was conducting an illegal commercial enterprise. The next logical step in the investigation was to identify and determine the extent and organization of the suppliers. A second undercover investigator was brought into the operation. The delicate task now was to reverse the investigation from a supply function to an acquisition operation to identify the local suppliers.

In March 1997, the first investigator introduced the second investigator to the primary suspect. The new investigator played the role of a young entrepreneur seeking to expand his family's nursery business in the South Florida area. The new investigator made several business trips into the area and stopped to see the suspect for social reasons. After several conversations of business opportunities in the nursery industry, the new investigator and primary suspect agreed to enter the nursery business together. Opportunities for entrepreneurship and greed quickly formed the basis for this new relationship. The suspect offered the use of his property for the construction of a nursery and invited the new investigator to move onto his property. The covert investigation now became a live-in assignment.

Business cards, price sheets, and letterheads were created and "Tropics Nursery" was born. Plants, equipment, and nursery supplies were moved onto the suspect's property. A travel trailer was moved on the property to use as a new home for the investigator. The travel trailer was strategically placed next to the wildlife butchering barn so all poachers delivering animals would be forced to park in the front of the investigator's home to make deliveries. In return for rent, the suspect said he would occasionally require the investigator to help clean wildlife and accept deliveries in the middle of the night.

Life on the suspect's property consisted of nightly parties by the suspects, young adults used the property as a "hangout." New relationships were formed, and

these new contacts introduced the investigator to other avenues of criminal activity. Narcotics (marijuana, crack cocaine, and heroin), dealing in stolen property, prostitution, and burglary were commonplace. Counterfeit passports and Social Security cards were readily available. Marriages for hire occurred to solve immigration problems. It was during these nightly parties, however, that the core of the commercial wildlife business was conducted. Phone calls would come in nightly requesting orders for wildlife. Suppliers would drop off animals and request payment. Buyers were discovered to live in Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, and Miami, Florida, and Brooklyn and Queens, New York. The suspect would take orders for wildlife and call and solicit hunters for the animals. The suspect installed "Caller ID" on his phone system as a security measure. Unfortunately for the suspect, this left a record of callers for documentation by the investigator. The suspect also had a habit of writing on scrap sheets of paper of who called and what they ordered. All of this evidence started piecing together a picture of the suppliers and retail consumers of the wildlife.

It was during this time that the suspect started asking for additional species of protected wildlife such as alligator and wild turkey. Due to the extreme susceptibility of illegal hunting to reduce wild turkey populations, it was made a priority to investigate the extent of wild turkey commercialization. National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) State President Jamie Adams was contacted by Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Division of Law Enforcement Director Colonel Robert Edwards to help in this investigation. The NWTf supplied 5 legally harvested wild turkeys to use in the investigation. The suspect readily purchased them all.

The largest break in the investigation occurred when the suspect invited both investigators to accompany him on a trip to New York to sell wildlife. The suspect had more orders for wildlife than he had room in his truck to transport. The suspect asked investigators to load meat into their truck and follow him to New York. The investigators happily agreed. On 18 April 1997, the suspect loaded approximately 2,000 pounds of wildlife into both trucks. At approximately 2015 hours, the primary suspect, 2 additional assistants, and the 2 investigators began their trip to New York. Twenty-two hours later, the group arrived in Brooklyn, New York.

The first stop was at a wholesale dealer the suspect supplied. This dealer retailed out to additional markets he had cultivated in New York. This dealer had a separate building behind his house containing freezers and weighting scales. The meat was unloaded from the trucks, weighed, and placed in the dealer's freezers. This dealer purchased 53 pounds of whitetail deer, 3 wild turkeys, 594 pounds of wild hog, 24 armadillos, 12 opossums, and 5 Muscovy ducks. One investigator played the role of a tourist who had never left the state of Florida before and walked around with a camera around his neck. The entire transaction was photographed. Photos of immeasurable evidential value were openly obtained.

The suspect made deliveries throughout Brooklyn and Queens. Various Caribbean restaurants and cultural clubs were visited, and the meat was openly sold. One interesting stop occurred at a single family home in Brooklyn. Upon arriving, the suspect made several telephone calls and people started arriving. They unloaded

the meat from the trucks, separated it by species, and placed it on the ground. The people would walk through, pick their choice of meat, and purchase it from the suspect. The operation was conducted like an open flea market. The investigators would document who arrived, determine how much and of what species was purchased, and at times photograph the buyers. It was obvious from the exchange of money that this was a very profitable business.

After 7 hours of selling and delivering meat the 2,000 pounds of wildlife were gone. The group headed back to Florida. Fifty-five hours after leaving the suspect's home, the group returned. Fifteen criminal wildlife violations were documented during this trip.

The investigation continued and multiple suppliers of wildlife were identified and charges documented. The new investigator began purchasing illegal game from the primary suspect and the local suppliers. The operation was successfully reversed from selling wildlife to our investigator purchasing illegally taken game from both the suspect and local suppliers. Evidence obtained showed animals were being killed at night, during closed seasons, and while trespassing on private and corporate lands.

Results

Monday, 8 December 1997, 14 months after the investigation began, the take down phase of Operation Brooklyn was commenced during predawn hours. The logistics of the arrests, seizure of equipment, interviews of suspects, and service of a search warrant required the use of 54 officers. Nine suspects were arrested on 40 charges, 2 trucks were seized, and 1 search warrant was executed without incident.

The primary suspect purchased deer at \$40 per animal or \$1 per processed pound of meat. The processed meat was then retailed at \$4 to \$5 per pound. Wild turkeys were purchased for \$6 and retailed for \$20. Raccoons, opossums, armadillos, and Muscovy ducks were purchased for \$3 and retailed for \$18 to \$25.

The search warrant uncovered a wealth of evidence. Bank statements, canceled checks, receipts, and hand-written notes detailed an ongoing criminal enterprise. New suppliers and more buyers were implicated. Interviews with the suspects provided startling realization to the number of animals killed. One supplier admitted killing 9 deer in one night and said he supplied more than 40 deer in the past year. Information obtained from the evidence shows this market was in operation for more than 3 years. More than 500 deer, 1,500 wild hogs, and more than 3,500 raccoons, armadillos, and opossums were killed and sold. Estimates indicate the primary suspect grossed more than \$55,000 per year in the wildlife trade.

Discussion

This illegal wildlife market operated similarly to the illegal plume hunting around the turn of the century and the rampant alligator poaching of the 1960s that nearly wiped out the species in Florida. The number of animals being killed yearly would have inevitably decimated the wildlife populations in Hendry County if this

enterprise had been left unchecked. In addition, this illegal market would have certainly affected the local economy. Hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing is \$5.1 billion-dollar industry in Florida (A. Egbert, pers. commun.). These animals were illegally killed from private and corporate lands in Hendry County. A legal hunt for one wild turkey can bring as much as \$1,250 for a 2-day hunt in a South Florida ranch (Jamie Adams, pers. commun.). "These poachers are robbing us of our resources and robbing the local economy," reported Colonel Edwards (Saunders 1997).

The success of this operation was the direct result of an effective intelligence system, a coordinated investigative team, and cooperation from private entities. Without an organized intelligence management system, built on data supplied from cooperating private individuals, law enforcement agencies, and our own officers, persons who take wildlife to make a profit off the public's natural resources will not be apprehended (David Croonquist, asst. chief of operations, Colo. Div. Wildl., pers. commun.). Coordinated team work is also what made this investigation successful. Case agents working support for the covert investigators secured the seized evidence and conducted forensic tests. These case agents were also instrumental in providing accurate identifications on the suspects the covert officers conducted business with. Finally, the cooperation from the private entities such as the National Wild Turkey Federation and private ranches that supplied wildlife for use by our investigators, was what made this investigation possible.

Literature Cited

Saunders, Mindy. 1997. Poachers in Hot Water. Caloosa Belle, Labelle, Florida. 10 Dec. 1997, sec. 1:1.