The ‘Snakescam’ Sting

Word went out from Atlanta and spread through the dealers’ grapevine: the “exchange” had ready cash, and it was buying. Shortly afterward, a small-time poacher made an anonymous phone call, met his exchange contact, handed over a bag containing twelve Eastern indigo snakes and walked away with $1,200 in cash. What the seller didn’t know was that he had also made his recording debut: the transaction, taped by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was part of a “snakescam” operation designed to uncover illegal traffic in protected animals. Last week the service began its sting. It sent agents on a fourteen-state sweep to arrest 25 suspects and seize more than 1,000 illegally traded animals in what Assistant Interior Secretary G. Ray Arnett called “the largest and most successful fish-and-wildlife law-enforcement investigation ever conducted.”

Federal agents say they are astonished by the scope of the traffic. They now estimate that hundreds of thousands of protected animals and birds—from Gila monsters to copperhead snakes to snowy owls—are poached every year. Much of the illegal trafficking takes place in the South and Southwest, but it is also a cottage industry for poachers in states such as Wisconsin, Kansas, Pennsylvania and New York. Dealer catalogues routinely list protected animals for sale, principally to collectors who want something more exotic than goldfish on their mantelpieces. The illegal trade is not an organized conspiracy; rather, it is an informal network of small groups whose members know each other but work independently. Even these small-time operators can have a devastating effect on endangered animals. “For a number of species,” says Arnett, “this illegal market [in live animals] is a primary threat to their survival in the wild.”

The animals, primarily reptiles, are imperiled by their rarity and beauty. The vivid colors and intricate patterns of the Texas gray-banded kingsnake, for instance, make it worth $200 to aficionados, who can’t buy this protected species in law-abiding pet shops. With its white, orange and black rings, the California mountain kingsnake fetches $150 in the illegal market. The exchange paid $300 for an Indian python, which might bring four times that price in Japan or Europe. With that markup, poachers are willing to flout the Endangered Species Act, more than a dozen state laws and an international treaty prohibiting trade in rare species. They often ship live snakes through the mails—wrapping the rattle-snakes’ rattlers in masking tape to quiet them. Poisonous snakes shipped this way could endanger the public.

Turtles and Parrots: After four years of sleuthing had hinted at the extent of this trade, the Fish and Wildlife Service decided to try to intercept it. Undercover agents opened the wholesale “Wildlife Exchange” in a commercial park in the Atlanta suburb of Doraville, Ga. They advertised in two national magazines and printed flyers listing prices for such legal animals as turtles and parrots. At the bottom, the exchange added that it was also interested in purchasing “native species,” a code word for rare protected animals. Almost immediately, the exchange had more business than it could handle. Most of the illegal deals were struck by phone, with callers saying they could deliver, for instance, 40 Trans-Pecos rat snakes. If the agents were interested, the poachers usually shipped the animals—often marking the boxes as fruit or machine parts—but sometimes they brought the illegal wares to Atlanta in person.

After eighteen months agents had filled their cages with 10,000 illegal animals. In the process, they endured snakebites from the very creatures they were trying to rescue from extinction and watched one 13-foot-long Indian python lay a brood of eggs during its stay. Last week, after the exchange was closed and the arrests were made, Justice Department official Kenneth Berlin said the sting had made “a major dent in the traffic in protected wildlife.” The recovered animals will be released or given to zoos.

Penalties: Snakescam revealed that the illicit trade touches otherwise respectable citizens. The arrested collectors include a college professor, policemen, an attorney and a mortician—all of whom knowingly broke laws that ban trade in rare reptiles and migratory birds. Three endangered species—the San Francisco garter snake, Jamaican boa and Indian python—were sold through the Wildlife Exchange, as were three threatened species. 48 species of reptiles protected by state law and seven species of birds, including the great horned owl and red-tailed hawk, covered by the Migratory Bird Act. Snakescam is a small start in protecting vanishing American species, but with legislation pending to make penalties stricter for illegal animal traffic, the rare breeds may soon have a better chance to survive.

SHARON BEGLEY with MARY HAGGER in Washington