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One of the most significant wildlife smuggling attempts in a decade foiled

In an unrelated development, several cases of illegal possession of protected birds disclosed over past few weeks

Through a joint operation on 23rd and 24th July 2014, officials of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit, Customs and the Police Administrative Law Enforcement Unit foiled a significant wildlife smuggling attempt involving over 400 bird skins.

On Wednesday 23rd July a passenger who had just arrived on a Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt caught the attention of Customs as he was behaving suspiciously. An inspection of the person's luggage revealed that they contained bird skins. The person had just returned from a hunting trip in Argentina.

Following investigations into the contents of the seized luggage it was established that the bags contained 411 bird skins the importation of which is restricted. The consignment was made up of several species including grebes, swans, ducks, eagles, hawks, falcons, storks, flamingos, ibises, crakes, gulls, owls and passerines, the majority of which are protected in their country of origin. In addition, about 120 of the specimens are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Commenting upon the seizure, an official of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit said that this consignment comprises one of the most significant cases of wildlife smuggling attempts involving dead protected birds disclosed during the last decade. The last time an attempt on a similar scale was disclosed was in 2005, when two persons were detained at the Malta International Airport whilst trying to smuggle over 500 dead birds following their arrival from a hunting trip in Egypt.

A 37 year old man from Mgarr is helping the Police in their investigations.

In an unrelated development, over the past weeks, officers from the Administrative Law Enforcement Unit and the Specialist Enforcement Branch of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit also conducted several inspections in private residences that resulted in a seizure of around 70 protected birds. Amongst the seized birds were a stuffed Booted Eagle and a Short-toed Eagle, which are suspected to have been shot in October last year. A carcass of a Common Cuckoo suspected as having been shot in April this year was also seized. Six persons are being charged in court in relation to these cases.

In a separate, unrelated development, two Gozo residents were found guilty by the Court of Magistrates (Gozo) for being in possession of a number of protected bird species. A man from Kercem was fined 1,000 euro and had his hunting licence suspended for a year after he admitted to having kept in his possession a Flamingo carcass, suspected to have been shot in September last year. In a separate case, a man from Xaghra was fined 2,300 euro and had his licence suspended for a year after admitting to being in possession of 78 mounted and 8 carcasses of protected birds.

These cases were disclosed following investigations by Gozo Police and officials from the Wild Birds Regulation Unit. The courts also ordered the confiscation of the protected birds, which are being handed over to the National Museum of Natural History.