

German arrested in US spider smuggling sting

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A tarantula makes its way through the grass on August 2010. US authorities have arrested a German man for smuggling hundreds of tarantulas and other spiders into the country, after mounting a sting operation to catch him, officials said Friday.

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Sven Koppler, 37, was arrested Thursday after arriving in Los Angeles to meet an associate, following a nine-month investigation dubbed "Operation Spiderman," prosecutors said.

The probe began in March when customs officers found 300 live tarantulas during a routine search of a package.

US Fish and Wildlife agents then intercepted a second package containing nearly 250 live tarantulas wrapped in colored plastic straws, as well as 22 Mexican red-kneed tarantulas.

In a bid to catch the organizers red-handed, agents ordered more tarantulas from Koppler, who sent a package containing 70 live ones and one dead spider.

Koppler, from Wachtberg in western Germany, allegedly earned some 300,000 dollars from [tarantula](#) sales to spider fanciers in dozens of countries, including nine in the United States.

According to an affidavit, a number of the packages included [spiders](#) whose import was in breach of the Convention on International Trade in [Endangered Species](#) (CITES).

If found guilty he could face 20 years in jail and a fine of 250,000 dollars, according to prosecutors, ahead of the German man's expected initial appearance in court Friday.

"Sending light and small packages containing tarantulas is the best way to avoid customs detection around the world," Koppler allegedly claimed in email exchanges with an undercover US agent.

Koppler added that he could in theory smuggle tarantulas in his luggage when flying to Los Angeles, and would not be caught nine times out of 10. But he preferred not to take the risk.

"I am a foreigner and they will probably put me in prison. You have special laws. You have other laws that we don't have" in Germany, he said, according to the affidavit.

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