

Songbirds silenced as Colombia fights wildlife trafficking

August 14 2019, by Joshua Goodman



In this Aug. 5, 2019 photo, canaries caught from the wild by animal traffickers sing in their cages in a quarantined area of a wildlife center before being freed in Bogota, Colombia. Songbird competitions have been a pastime throughout the Caribbean for centuries, but trapping wildlife without a license is a crime in Colombia. (AP Photo/Ivan Valencia)

The metal doors of a shoebox-sized cage open up and a bird tagged #811 launches into a giant aviary. The palm-sized finch performs a midair pirouette, lands on a willow branch and curiously twitches its saffron-colored head sideways, as if surprised by its good fortune.

"That's what it feels like to be free," said Juan Camilo Panqueba, a veterinarian at a quarantine center in Colombia's high Andean capital, far from the canary's natural habitat along the humid, Caribbean coast.

The moment of liberation contrasts with the dreadful conditions in which the finch was found. Three weeks ago, authorities in the capital seized 32 finches in a surprise raid on a cockfighting ring where a high-stakes, booze-filled songbird contest billed as "the clash of titans" on social media was taking place.

While sparring by way of song has been a pastime throughout the Caribbean for centuries, trapping wildlife without a license—even species like these saffron finches, or *Sicalis flaveola*, which are not threatened—is a crime in Colombia, though one that authorities ignored in a country overrun by drug cartels, leftist guerrillas and other armed groups

Until now.

Taking advantage of a decline in violence, and spurred by a growing awareness of Colombia's importance as the country with the second highest biodiversity in the world, authorities are going after animal trafficking like never before. Last year, police seized more than 34,600 animals illegally poached from the wild—a 44% increase over 2017. Many were detected by a pack of 16 feather- and skin-sniffing dogs stationed at airports and bus stations.



In this Aug. 5, 2019 photo, veterinarians check cages of the canaries that were caged by animal traffickers, in a quarantined area of a wildlife center before the birds are freed in Bogota, Colombia. Authorities say the birds were subjected to prolonged abuse by their captors, mostly migrants to the capital from the Caribbean coast and Venezuela, who would keep them in the tiny cages and force them to listen to loud music around the clock in an effort to spur them to sing. (AP Photo/Ivan Valencia)

"Just because it's a tradition doesn't make it right," said Maj. Paula Ortiz, head of a 500-strong police unit that combats environmental crimes.

Prosecutors are also more aggressively going after the criminal networks that thrive on the illegal trade, whose profits trail only drug and arms smuggling, according to police. Globally, the wildlife trade is worth

more than \$10 billion, according to the United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crime.

The focus on law enforcement coincides with a debate about the rights of wild animals raging in Colombia and around the world.

This month, judges on Colombia's constitutional court heard arguments in a long-running case over the fate of an endangered Andean spectacled bear named Chucho, who years ago was taken from a nature reserve and locked up a zoo in Barranquilla. A lawyer claiming to act on the bear's behalf successfully sued to have Chucho released. If the high court upholds that ruling it would be the first time a wild animal in Colombia has ever been granted habeas corpus rights similar to those enjoyed by human beings.

The seizure of the 32 birds was the result of an undercover operation led by members of Bogota's environmental secretariat. In May, with police they seized 16 birds, including an endangered cardinal, locked in small cages in three working-class apartments. Leads from that raid allowed authorities to clandestinely penetrate a network that organized last month's event.

A video posted on a closed Facebook group promised participants and the paying public plenty of whiskey and "something wonderful" as they cheered on the birds hanging in cages above an artificial turf ring. The owner of the bird with the biggest pipes, as measured by judges counting chirps on a giant abacus with a star at one end, was to take home a \$100 prize.



In this Aug. 5 , 2019 photo, canaries that were caught by animal traffickers sit in a quarantined area of a wildlife center before being freed in Bogota, Colombia. While wildlife trafficking is punishable with jail sentences of between 4 and 9 years, few of the more than 3,500 people caught in the act so far this year for environmental and wildlife crimes are currently behind bars. (AP Photo/Ivan Valencia)

Officials from the environmental secretariat say the birds were subjected to prolonged abuse by their captors, mostly migrants to the capital from the Caribbean coast and Venezuela, who kept them in the tiny cages and force them to listen to loud music around the clock in an effort to spur them to sing. In the wild, the birds croon to defend their territory or court a mate.

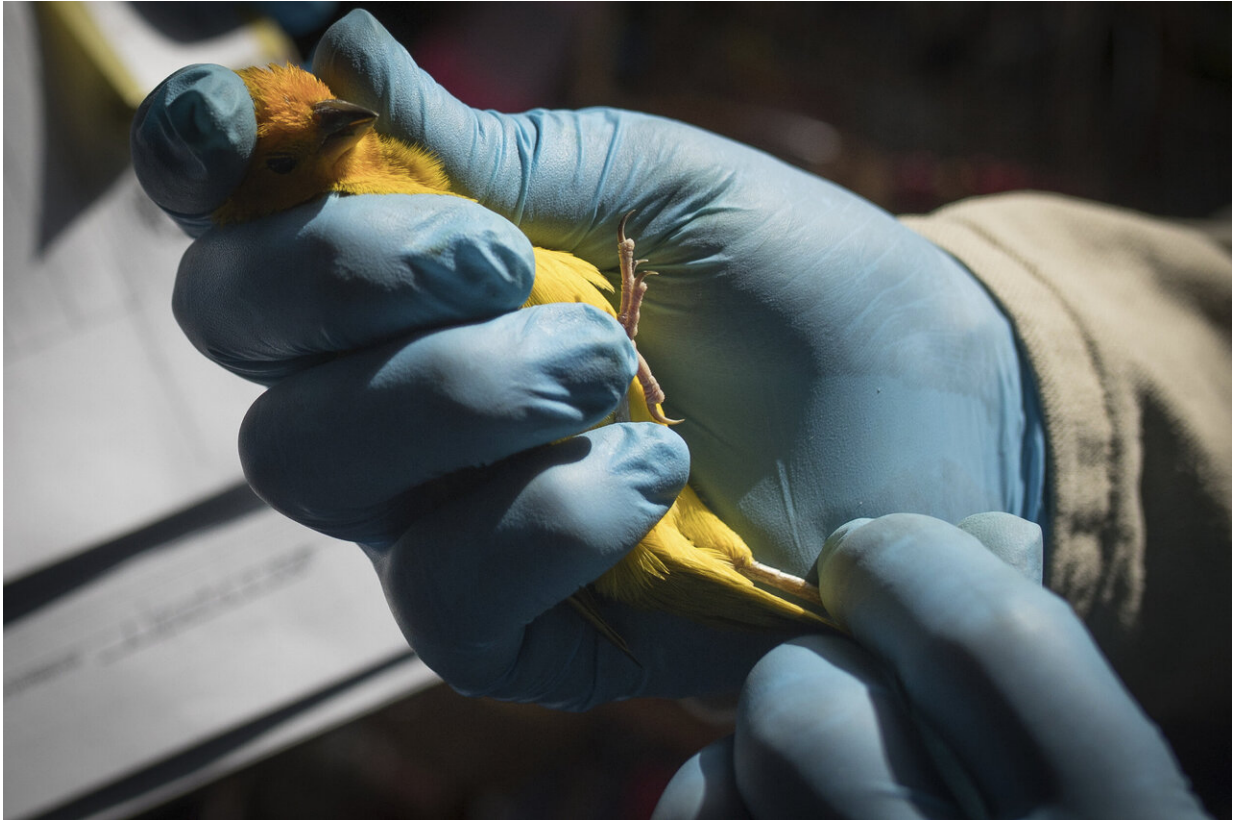
"For them, it was like torture," said Panqueba, the veterinarian, who is technical supervisor at the city-run wildlife center where the birds are cared for alongside more than 1,000 animals, among them rainbow-colored macaws, endangered sea turtles and tiny titi monkeys—all of them rescued from traffickers.

"Unfortunately there's not a single day where we don't receive a wild animal," said Panqueba, who did not partake in the police operation.

While the aim is always to return the animals to their natural habitat, many are unfit to survive in the wild, having developed diseases or grown too accustomed to human beings. In the case of the canaries, 11 of the 32 tested positive for a parasite that needs to be treated before they can resume flight.

Not all bird lovers support the crackdown.

Carlos Castellano, a Colombian judge for the World Ornithological Confederation, believes authorities are criminalizing a rich cultural tradition. Birds have been bred in captivity for their colors, shape or song since at least the 14th century, he said, and the tradition is especially rooted in Latin America, where the practice arrived with the Spanish conquistadores.



In this Aug. 5 , 2019 photo, a veterinarian holds a canary that had been caught by animal traffickers, in a quarantined area of a wildlife center before it is freed in Bogota, Colombia. 11 of the 32 canaries, tested positive for a parasite that needs to be treated before they can resume flight. (AP Photo/Ivan Valencia)

"I wish it were so easy to obligate a bird to sing," joked Castellano, whose singing sidekick "Caruso" in 1989 won Colombia's only top prize ever at the World Ornithology Championship, held in Italy. "If a bird isn't happy in its cage, which is its home by birth or destiny, it won't ever sing, no matter what you do."

While Castellano acknowledges that taking the birds from the wild is illegal, he accuses authorities of overlooking the fact that their abundant population, widely distributed throughout Latin America and a

colonizing presence even in urban areas, isn't at risk. Even breeders like himself need to supplement their domestic population from time to time with wild specimens, he says.

"This is going to convert a cultural tradition into a clandestine activity," Castellano said.

Authorities want to deliver a blow to the highly organized, dangerous syndicates behind the illegal trade. While wildlife trafficking is punishable with jail sentences of four to nine years, few of the more than 3,500 people caught in the act so far this year for environmental and wildlife crimes are currently behind bars. Many are repeat offenders. In the case of the canaries, prosecutors for the first time are trying to stiffen the punishment by adding conspiracy charges.

For the most part, traffickers continue to operate with impunity.

After the canaries were rescued, an unidentified man showed up at the wildlife center offering to bribe a security guard a few hundred dollars to have the birds returned. When he was sent away, he said, "We're going to leave you alone for now," Panqueba said. Days later, one of the birds' former owners was discovered inside the wildlife center trying to blend in with a group of workers carrying out a construction project on the premises.



In this Aug. 5 , 2019 photo, a veterinarian walks past animals that were rescued from animal traffickers, in the rehabilitation area of a wildlife center in Bogota, Colombia. While the aim is always to return the animals to their natural habitat, many are unfit to survive in the wild, having developed diseases or grown too accustomed to human beings. (AP Photo/Ivan Valencia)

As a result of the repeated threats, the birds are being relocated to another wildlife center in an undisclosed location to continue their rehabilitation, which will last a minimum of 45 days.

"Unfortunately the justice system in our country guarantees more the rights of individuals than wildlife," said Ortiz, the police major. "But we're not going to give up and will continue to act severely against these crimes."

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