

**Quick scan of  
illegal wildlife trade  
from Latin America  
to Europe**



## **Acknowledgements**

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Content warning: This document contains images of animals in situations where they are being mistreated.

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A male slate-colored seedeater in Colombia.

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# Executive summary

This report has examined the illegal trade in Latin American species of amphibians, birds, mammals, and reptiles to Europe, based on seizures reported in the media between 2017 and 2023, a survey to assess online trade in these species in Europe, and interviews with Dutch and Spanish law enforcers. This is a snapshot to provide an initial idea of the situation, although further research would be needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. However, the data collected provides a useful indication of key trafficking routes, traffickers' profiles and modus operandi, species affected, and online trade in these species.

The report's key findings include:

## Species affected

▶ Between 2017 and 2023, a total of 34 wildlife seizures were identified in or en route to Europe and Russia. These 34 seized shipments affected 2,495 wild

animals of 69 different species, including 36 bird species, 23 reptile species, eight amphibian species, and two mammal species. Of these, only 25% (17 species) of concerned species are listed in CITES, the other 75% are only protected by domestic laws in the source countries.

- ▶ Amphibians were the most seized class with 59% (1,280 specimens), followed by birds with 29% (641 specimens), reptiles with 12% (254 specimens), and mammals (2 specimens). The species most targeted included poison dart frogs from Colombia, Panama, and Brazil; songbirds from Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Suriname; and endemic reptiles from Mexico, and Brazil.
- ▶ 30% of the Latin American species identified in seizures between 2017 and 2023 are endemic (including 12 reptile species, seven amphibian species, and two bird species). This finding corroborates previous reports which have highlighted that traffickers

operating in Europe are increasingly targeting less monitored endemic non-CITES-listed species.

- ▶ The online survey provided evidence that Latin American birds and reptiles trafficked to Europe are readily sold online and in high demand with breeders and pet owners.
- ▶ As such, European demand for rare and/or endemic species poses a significant threat to already vulnerable species. For instance, the illegal trade of harlequin poison frogs (*Oophaga histrionica*) and Lehmann's poison frogs (*Oophaga lehmanni*), both endemic to Colombia, to Europe has contributed to such severe imperilment that the species are now IUCN-classified as Critically Endangered.

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▼ A red-eyed tree frog.







Photo: © CONAP

### Main source and destination countries

- ▶ Most shipments were seized in or en route to the Netherlands, Germany, and Russia. However, looking at the number of animals seized, Germany is by far the most significant destination country in this study, followed by Russia and Spain.
- ▶ As for source countries in Latin America, the highest numbers of seizures were reported for Suriname, Brazil, and Mexico. The highest numbers of animals seized originated from Colombia, Panama, and Mexico.

### Live animal trade

Some 94.1% of the seized wildlife destined for Europe concerned live animals. This confirms that the European exotic pet trade is a key driver for illegal wildlife trade from Latin America.

### Inadequate criminal justice responses

European countries' criminal justice responses to smuggling of illegally sourced, non-CITES wildlife specimens are inadequate. In most if not all European countries, non-CITES-listed species are not

covered by national wildlife protection laws. As a result, smuggling of these species is often a low priority, and penalties are non-existent or significantly lower than for smuggling of CITES-listed species (usually limited to fines based on violation of Customs, animal welfare, or veterinary legislation). The low risk involved in smuggling non-CITES species is an incentive for traffickers to target these species.

- ▲ A car trunk with 216 turquoise-fronted amazon chicks, seized in January 2021, Santiago del Estero province, Argentina.





Photo: © SERFOR

## Modus operandi

Most seizures identified between 2017 and 2023 concerned individuals (sometimes traders/hobbyists, often mules) caught with illicit wildlife in their luggage or on their body. In addition, several parcels containing live animals and/or parts and products were seized. However, European law enforcers indicate that the large bulk of illicit wildlife from Latin America is brought in through air cargo imports by some legitimate industry players, with the use of fraudulent documents and abusing loopholes in EU legislation.

## Europe as a transit and source

- ▶ In addition to the 34 seizures destined for Europe, two seizures were identified of wildlife transiting in Europe en route to Asia, confirming Europe's role as a transit point for illicit wildlife trade from Latin America. These two seizures likely represent just a fraction of wildlife trafficked via Europe, as transit shipments tend to receive little attention in most European countries, and transit seizures are rare as a result.

- ▶ Europe is also a source for (exotic) wildlife trafficked to Latin America, as was evidenced by two seizures of wildlife from Europe destined for Latin America. These seizures, too, most likely represent just a small segment of the actual volume of illicit trade from Europe to Latin America.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to decision makers:

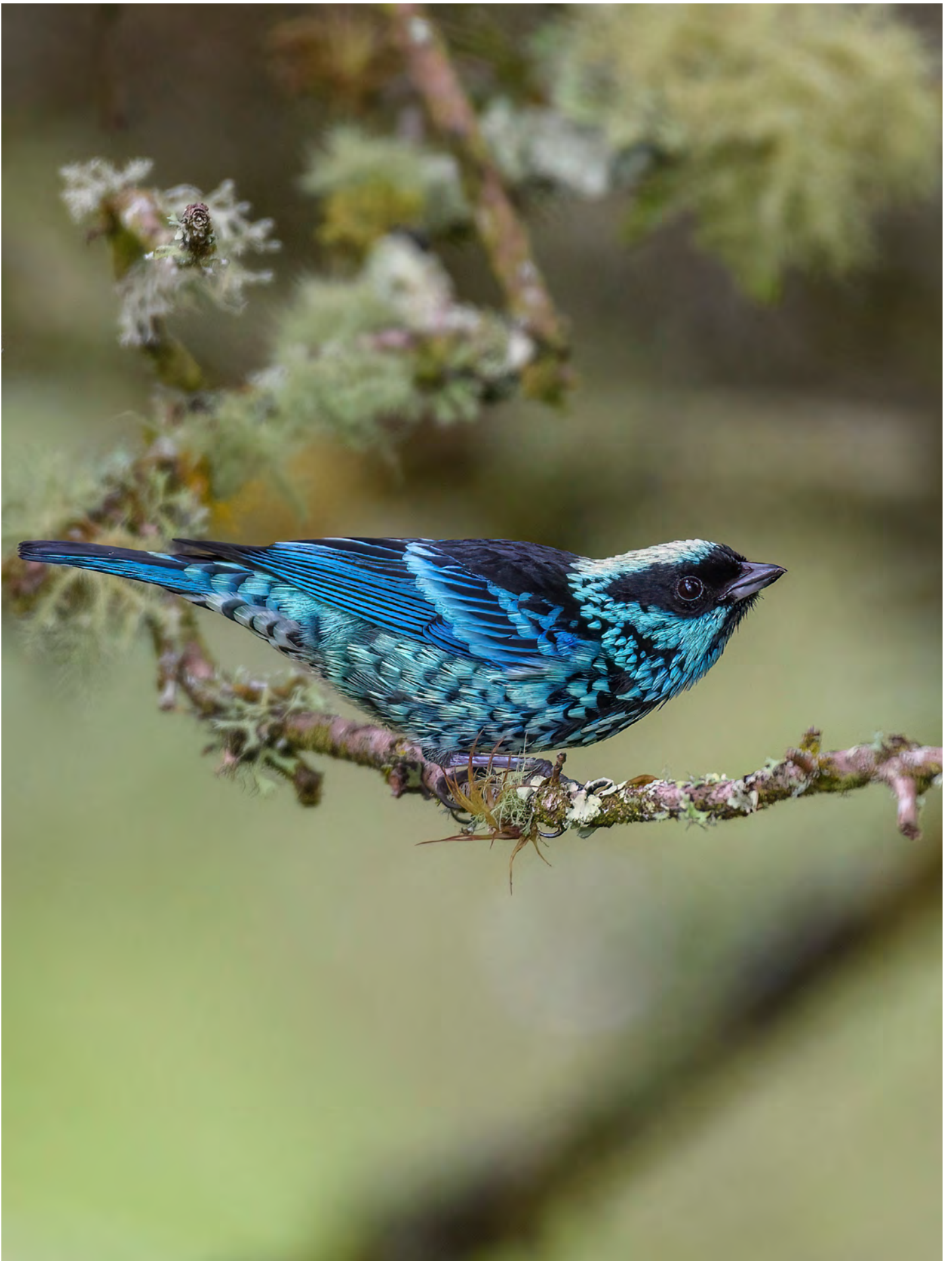
- ▶ The findings from this report highlight the need for stricter EU legislation obliging Member States to adequately penalise smugglers of illegally sourced wildlife species that are not listed in CITES; this would significantly strengthen law enforcement deterrence.
- ▶ Additional research should be conducted to understand the scale and nature of illicit cargo imports of Latin American wildlife into Europe by legitimate industry players. This is also pertinent given the alleged abuse of exemptions provided under the European ban on wild bird imports, increasing the risk of the introduction of bird diseases into the EU.

- ▶ In cooperation with various stakeholders, including NGOs and the private sector, a demand reduction campaign should be designed and launched, based on consumer behaviour science and using appropriate messaging to target consumers of live exotic pets with the aim of reducing demand for rare and/or endemic wildlife species in Europe.

- ▶ The development and implementation of a centralised EU wildlife trade data collection system is crucial to ensure consistent data collection across Member States, to provide relevant information on imported and exported wildlife species, and to share trade data in cross-national platforms enabling better coordination of intelligence. Similar to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's LEMIS database, such a system would collect information on all wildlife species, including both CITES-listed and non-CITES-listed species, entering or leaving the EU, allowing analysis and early detection of trends in (illegal) wildlife trade to and from the EU.

▲ SERFOR seizes 24 specimens of taxidermized wildlife in Junin, Peru.





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▲ A beryl-spangled tanager.

International Fund  
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