

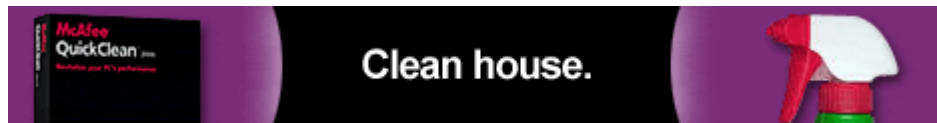
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OSLO — Smuggling is driving many species of falcon towards extinction in an illicit market where prized birds can sell for a million dollars each, an expert said on Thursday.

The black market in birds of prey, centred around the Middle East and Central Asia, can yield bigger profits than selling drugs or weapons, according to the U.S.-based Union for the Conservation of Raptors (UCR).

"Imagine having something weighing 2 lb (1 kg) on your hand that can sell for a million dollars," UCR chief Alan Howell Parrot told Reuters of the most prized falcons.

He estimated smuggling of raptors peaked in 2001 with 14,000 birds, ranging from eagles to hawks.

"The illicit trade has gone down dramatically, not because of law enforcement, but because the falcons don't exist any more," he said.

Saker falcons, among the most prized for their aggression in hunting prey including the rare houbara bustard bird favoured as a target by Arab falconers, are among those exploited to the brink of extinction, he said.

In the wild in Kazakhstan, for instance, one estimate was that there were just 100-400 pairs of Saker falcon left, down from 3,000-5,000 before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The UCR ([www.savethefalcons.org](http://www.savethefalcons.org)), funded by public, private and corporate donors, wants Washington to impose limited trade sanctions on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan and Mongolia for failing to stamp out the trade.

All deny any involvement in smuggling.

## FARMED BIRDS

Parrot said smugglers often skirted controls by travelling to falconry camps abroad with farmed birds. These, he said, were then freed, replaced with more valuable wild birds and re-imported.

"You enter with 20 birds and leave with 20 -- but they're not the same birds," he said. "The starting price is \$20,000 and they can go for more than \$1 million," he said. "Perhaps 90-95 percent of the trade is illicit."

Another way to catch falcons was to attach a satellite transmitter to a wild bird and then release it -- hoping that it would eventually guide you to a nest and valuable eggs.

He said farmed birds usually failed to learn how to hunt prey when released to the wild because captivity did not give harsh enough training.

"It's the same with people. If you take someone from Manhattan and put them in Alaska or Siberia and they will be running around trying to dial 911," he said, referring to the U.S. emergency services phone number.

"Only one in 10 farmed falcons can hunt well. You buy many and use the other nine as live bait to help catch wild falcons," he said.

Source: Reuters

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