Animal importing is dicey game

Miami's other melting pot: birds, snakes and lizards

JIM STEINBERG
Miami News Reporter

Looking for a deadly Gaboon viper to liven up the den? How about the dazzling blue of the hyacinth macaw?

No matter how strange the animal, someone in Dade County is likely to have it for sale.

The world of exotic animals is another layer of Miami's fascinating, and sometimes, bizarre canvas.

On the illegal side, the details mirror Miami's most visible fast lane to easy money and hard falls — the infamous drug trade. There are pick-ups at Miami International Airport in yellow Mercedes, an overcoat full of finches and a nefarious evening rendezvous at a private boat dock.

While smugglers dodge authorities, legal importers fight virulent diseases, unscrupulous dealers, burgeoning red tape and outspoken opposition from naturalists. In a "heartbeat," thousands of dollars can disappear, importers say.

And there is a growing legacy in the wilds of South Florida. Snakes, birds, lizards and monkeys flown here for profit now thrive in our trees, canals, lakes and swamps.

About 40 percent of all birds imported legally to this country come in through Miami International Airport. That's nearly 300,000 screeching birds with their kaleidoscope feathers and hooked beaks. Only Los Angeles imports more.

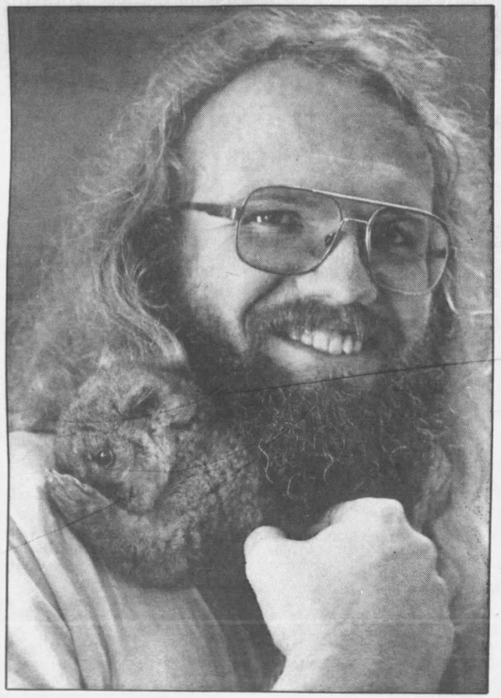
The 21 government-approved commercial bird quarantine facilities in Dade County amount to a quarter of the national total.

Miami is also a significant port of entry for monkeys and reptiles, say importers and government officials.

Miami pet wholesalers fill orders for distributors and pet stores across the country. Some also supply animals for zoo exhibits throughout the world.

It is air connections — not South Florida's sub-tropical climate — that play the biggest role in Dade's emergence as a major animal importation point.

Miami is the premier gateway to Central and South American birds, turtles, snakes and reptiles, according to Louie Mantas, and other Dade-based wholesalers. It is also convenient for European, African or even Asian points of origination, importers say.



The Miami News — Patricia Cordell

Cuddling kinkajou-style — Mark Lucas of Zoological Imports and Central America kinkajou

This is a mercurial business. Money can be made and lost with breathtaking speed.

The risk of disease can wipe out an entire shipment. New entries into the business are likely to fall victim to unscrupulous business operators looking to take the money and run.

The uncertain and frequently shifting regulations of exporting nations add to the industry's instability.

But animal importation is blasted by some naturalist groups. They charge the industry with severe ecological disruptions and animal cruelty.

However, the industry views itself in a much kinder light. It saves wildlife gene pools that might otherwise vanish in the development of many Third World nations. And, importers say, they satisfy a tremendous human need for animal companionship that otherwise would be filled only by smugglers.

And it is the smugglers, they say, who engage in animal cruelty, on a grand scale.

Worse, smugglers don't comply with quarantine regulations and therefore pose a severe threat to livestock.

Even legal importers run a heavy risk. An importer "can make or blow $100,000 in a heartbeat," said Bob Weiner, a former bird importer who now owns American Bird & Supply Co.

But, if everything goes well, animal importation can be lucrative. The emerald swift on the cover of today's Money cost Zoological Imports Unlimited about $3.50, and will be sold to retail stores for about $8 each. It will be sold to retail stores for $16.

While the retail store might own the lizard for a month before selling it, Zoological Imports will move 400 swifts in two days, said Mark Lucas, the company's manager.

Importers can gain a higher return from large animals. A 5-foot iguana costs the importer about $15, and can be sold for between $75 and $100, said Lucas.

Zoological could hold onto the lizards longer and try to sell them for more, but then lizards would begin to die and the company would end up taking longer to earn the same profit.

"We are like an auto factory. Volume is what drives our business. Retailers buy from us and sit on the merchandise. It may take them a while to sell, but eventually they get their price," Lucas said.

That's if everything works out well.

Pet Farms owner Levine remembers that several years ago, an incurable disease called exotic newcastle mysteriously struck a bird shipment after it had cleared the USDA's 30-day quarantine period. As a result, several thousand birds had to be destroyed.

Four years ago, Bob Jeffries, co-owner of Imperial Bird Co., received an $85,000 shipment of parrots, parakeets, and macaws, from Argentina, Peru, Guyana and Honduras and then watched the birds drop dead before his eyes from an incurable virus. On top of that, he owed the U.S. government $18,000 for laboratory fees related to the outbreak.

Imperial had expected to sell the bird shipment for $300,000, for an impressive 252 percent gross profit. Instead, it lost $103,000.

Later, Jeffries sent $28,000 to an Argentine bird exporter and never received a single bird.

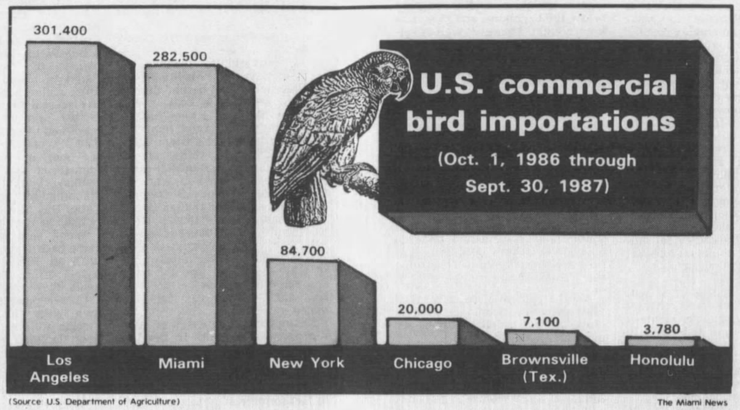
"This business can be a real nightmare," he said.

Many in the business have to rely on related pet ventures to smooth out the volatility.

"Just the importation of live animals is not all that profitable," Levine said.

About 60 percent of the sales for his Pet Farms Inc., which has annual sales in excess of $5 million, is related to pet supplies. The rest of the business comes from live animal sales.

Disgusting," is how wildlife researcher Susan Lieberman describes the wild animal trade. "The best place for wildlife is in the wild," said Lieberman, associate director of wildlife and environment for the Humane Society of the United States. Importation rapidly depletes the world's supply of wild animals because many creatures die on their way to the pet store, she said.



(Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture) The Miami News

> "This business can be a real nightmare."
>
> — Bob Jeffries, Imperial Bird Co.

The Humane Society estimates that between five and 10 wild birds die for each creature displayed on the retail level. "Stressed out" from their capture and shipping, birds are more susceptible to disease, she explained.

Steven King, spokesman for the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Counsel, disputed Humane Society researcher Lieberman's figures on bird import losses. King said field and quarantine losses appear to be 20 percent.

Many importers say that wild birds may now be in more danger at home than in captivity.

"The most serious threat to birds and all tropical species is the destruction of the rain forest," said King.

"Every four days, a rain forest the size of the state of New York is cleared of all growth," said Gary Lilienthal, spokesman for the American Federation of Aviculture, an association of bird breeders that supports the importation of exotic bird species.

Said King: "An argument could be made that by taking birds from the wild, we are helping to establish a gene pool in captivity that one day could be used to restock the wild."

These exotic animals, importers say, are essentially a commodity to be harvested from tropical rain forest land. Without such a harvest, the land would be worth less and Third World countries would be compelled to strip the land for farming, they say.

Moreover, importers say that elimination of legalized importing would only increase the demand for smugglers and their profits.

And that is the one thing naturalists and legitimate importer agree on: Smugglers pose tremendous dangers for domestic bird populations. And many of the smuggled birds die on this illicit trail.

Bird smuggling is big business, with a profit margin that competes with the illicit drug trade, said Patrick Hyde, chief inspector for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Miami.

Potentially, a smuggler could turn a scarlet macaw purchased for $100 in Latin America into a $3,000 or $4,000 sale inside the United States, said U.S. Fish & Wildlife Inspector Rosa Perez.

Last year an estimated 100,000 parrots were smuggled into United States, with most going across the Mexican border.

Smugglers frequently sedate large parrots by forcing them to drink tequila, then tape their beaks, Lieberman said, before attempting to smuggle them into the United States in suitcases, boxes or dumped into the back of pickup trucks.

Fish & Wildlife inspectors in Miami talk about one bird smuggler whose coat started to wiggle and shake as he was attempting to clear U.S. Customs at Miami International Airport.

When curious Customs officials peered inside the coat, they were surprised to discover numerous hand-sewn pouches individually encasing small, frightened and squirming finches.

As this variety of finch is was not a protected species, agents deduced the smuggler merely wanted to save quarantine costs, Hyde said.

Last year, the USDA traced illegal parrot shipments to two separate exotic newcastle outbreaks. A total of 1,738 birds worth $181,000 were destroyed to keep the deadly virus from spreading, according to an agency report.

The more sophisticated bird smugglers frequently use forged documents when transporting rare bird species whose export is tightly controlled, said Hyde. Often they will attempt to

Please see PETS, 15M

Finding money under rocks

JIM STEINBERG
Miami News Reporter

Tim Barken of Perrine has the kind of job guidance counselors never tell you about.

He is among a handful of Dade County residents that makes a living collecting snakes for the pet trade.

After catching snakes in the wild, this rare breed sells their harvest to one of several Miami area wholesalers, who, in turn, ship the snakes to their customers nationwide.

"I never think of it as work," said Barken, 31, who cheerfully works 10-hour days, six days a week. On occasion, when hunting is really good, he will work all day and all night.

With a snake hook, a few burlap bags and possibly a flashlight, Barken is his own boss.

He likes the company he keeps. Working outside, he sees a lot of deer, foxes, birds, raccoons — and of course snakes.

"It's a challenge. I like not having people tell me what to do."

Barken decribed his income as "comfortable" but didn't want to be more specific. As a rule, snake hunters keep their finances private to avoid attracting competition, he explained.

Every business has its risks. Even after investing 10 hours, there is no sure thing in a snake hunt.

A good day might bring in 100 feet of king snakes at $4 per foot. But then the next day might yield only 40 feet, he said.

Of course, there can be snakeless days. But having very few of them is what separates professionals like Barken from amateurs.

Barken has his secret spots for collecting snakes — enough to use a different one every day for a month. Rotating them daily makes hunting "not so hard on one colony of snakes."

But it's land development, not overhunting, that really puts a dent in the snake population, he said. More than one top snake-hunting ground has fallen prey to the bulldozer, he noted.

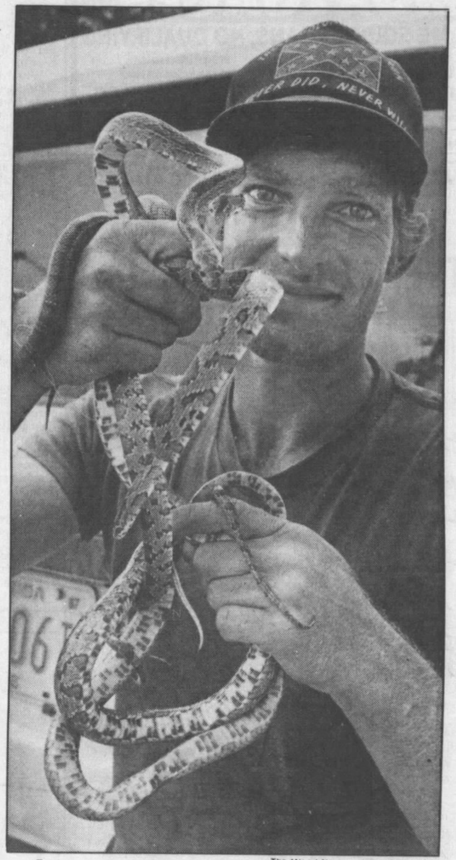
Barken bicycles to some hunting locations close to his Perrine apartment. More often, he takes his pickup as close as possible to a more distant spot, then pedals in with his all-terrain bicycle.

Twice, Barken has been bitten by rattlesnakes.

As a 13-year-old collector, he got "careless" with a pygmy rattlesnake. It bit him on the finger, causing it to turn black and "swell up like a sausage." He spent three days in the hospital, getting the finger — and his swollen arm — drained.

Five years later, a captured Eastern diamondback rattlesnake bit through the snake bag to get him on the leg.

"My pants absorbed most of the venom. I felt real sick for about three hours. I was dizzy, my leg stung, and my vision was blurred. But that was it." Barken never went to a doctor.



The Miami News — A.G.MONTANARI

> "My pants absorbed most of the venom . . . I was dizzy, my leg stung, and my vision was blurred. But that was it."
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> — Tim Barken, snake hunter

Every now and then, Barken stumbles upon a snake not native to Florida, that has either escaped or was set free by its owner. One of his more impressive exotic snake catches was a 14-foot-reticulated python resting along a canal bank. It earned him $100.

Unlike many Americans, Barken isn't worried that he might be forced to learn another trade one day.

"There'll always be a place to catch snakes," he said.

PETS, from 11M

mask the bird's true country of origin.

Smugglers attempting to bring protected birds into the country without paperwork sometimes try to mask the bird's true identity by putting food dye on the bird's feathers.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife last month arrested a New York man in Dade for allegedly smuggling black palm cockatoos, and other protected bird species, into the country for sale to bird wholesalers and other buyers in Miami, New York and elsewhere.

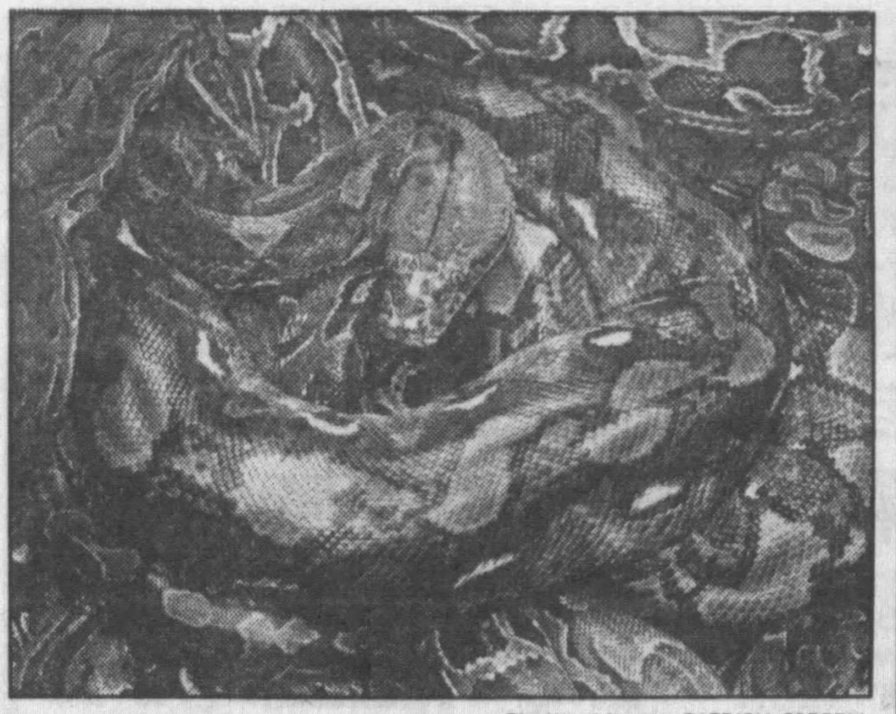
An exotic bird fancier might pay as much as $30,000 for a pair of the endangered cockatoos, said Weiner of American Bird & Supply.

A Fish & Wildlife special agent's report of stakeouts on this suspected smuggler reads like a Miami Vice script.

At one point, the report details how the alleged smuggler was met at Miami International in September by a woman in a yellow Mercedes. The man put a crate said to contain the smuggled cockatoos into the car and the two of them drove off.

Several bird wholesalers and retailers said they routinely receive "suspicious" calls from people offering an exotic bird at a very good price. They know that the bird is either stolen or smuggled.

Many exotics brought into South Florida for exhibit or the pet trade have escaped or been illegally released by their owner — much to the dismay of the Florida Game & Fresh Water Fish Commission.



The Miami News — PATRICIA CORDELL

Boas coil in a tub at Zoological Imports

According to Game & Fish Lt. Don Holway, there are flocks of parrots near Miami International Airport, a non-native lizard called the Cuban anole thrives in Coral Gables while green monkeys breed near the Fort Lauderdale airport.

Colonies of spider monkeys are breeding in parts of southwestern Dade, Holway said.

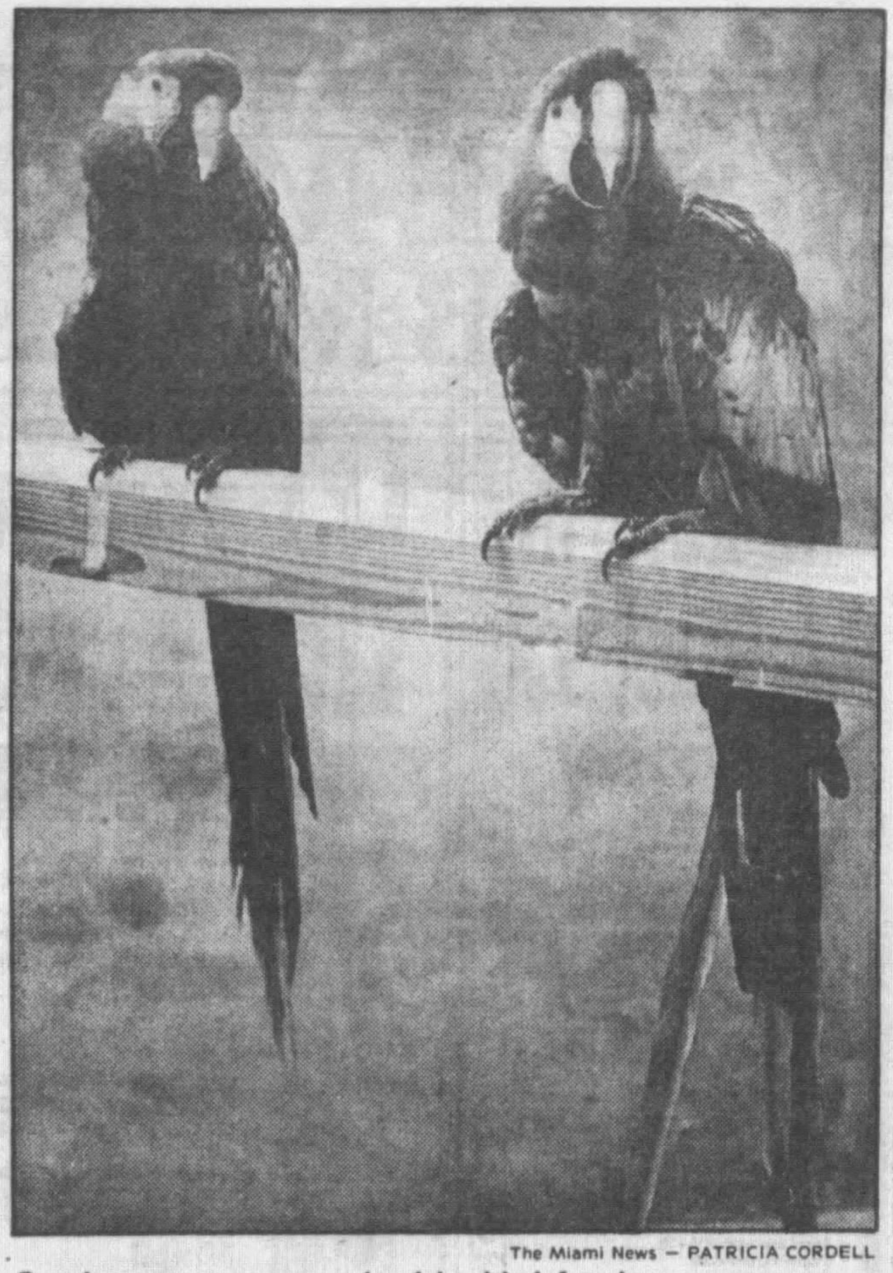
Dangerously aggressive caiman breed in lakes around Miami International Airport, in canals on and near Homestead Air Force Base and in many other parts of the county as well, he added.

Numerous python and boa species are routinely found loose in the Everglades as well as populated sections of the county, Holway said, adding that the large, powerful constrictors seem to relish pet cats.

And then there was the case of the deadly Gaboon viper found casually slithering near Collins Avenue in Miami Beach.

Iguanas, those prehistoric-looking lizards with the spiked backs, are now breeding quite successfully in South Florida, but Holway doesn't think the exotic snake population has reached a level where where breeding is likely to occur.

At least not yet.



The Miami News — PATRICIA CORDELL

Scarlet macaws are prized by bird fanciers

Associated Press

Short review

In Toronto yesterday, young Ryan Love, 2, took great delight in inspecting his grandfather, Maxwell McDougall, third from right, as he lined up with the 48th Highlanders during a ceremony dedicating a new variety of tulip at City Hall.

Miamians berate city officials over backyard 'zoo'

BILL GJEBRE and BETSY AUGUST
Miami News Reporters

A backyard collection of large cats, spider monkeys, cheetahs and exotic birds in a Coconut Grove neighborhood has residents in an uproar over the "private zoo."

A group of citizens from the Douglas Road area complained to Miami city commissioners today that the animals, living at 3940 Douglas Road, are causing many problems and should be prohibited from living there.

"It's a private zoo in a residential area," said Bruce Berckmans of Coconut Grove. "There are unpleasant odors."

Another neighbor, Douglas Erickson, said that a "toucan begins screaming at 6:30 in the morning for several hours and then again in the evening."

A dozen residents signed a petition to the commissioners, who asked City Manager Howard Gary to determine whether zoning laws are being violated and if the animals are a public nuisance. His report is due June 10.

The animals are owned by Mario Tabraue, owner of Pets Unlimited, an exotic pet shop at 2762 S.W. 27th Ave. A worker at the shop, Tony Munio, said all of the complaints are unfounded.

"The animals are not a nuisance because they do not make noise at night and they are not loose," said Munio, who said he is Tabraue's cousin. "They are all caged properly and he has all the necessary paperwork to house animals at his home."

Munio, who refused to elaborate on the types of animals kept at the home, said some of them are Tabraue's personal pets and others he breeds.

"This is an ongoing thing and I don't need the harassment," Tabraue said. "I have permits from the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. I have nothing to hide from anybody and I have everything under control."

Berckmans said that last summer a 10-foot-high concrete wall was built around the property and shortly thereafter, the animals were placed inside the compound.

Broward baby with leukemia fights for life

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE — Three-day-old Joseph Demeo, born with leukemia, is hanging onto life today in a Tennessee hopsital.

The 7-pound, 1-ounce boy, born shortly before noon Tuesday to Deborah and Phil Demeo of Plantation, was flown by air ambulance from Broward General where he was born to the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

"Both myself and my wife are being very strong about it. We have a lot of faith in God and we're prepared for the worst," said Demeo, 28, a Plantation service station owner.

Lesions on Joseph's body at birth prompted doctors to order blood tests. The tests showed Joseph had a rare form of leukemia, a cancer of the blood.

"It's very, very rare. It's the first one we have ever seen," said Dr. M.A. Siriwardena of the Broward Medical Center staff.

Doctors were uncertain about the infant's chance of survival. "For newborns in general, under 1 year of age, the prognosis is substantially worse than for children in general," said Dr. Stuart R. Toledana, assistant professor of pediatrics at Jackson Memorial Hospital. He specializes in cancer blood diseases of children.