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Man sentenced for monkeys in pants

Traveler discloses monkeys after bird flies through terminal

Thursday, December 19, 2002 Posted: 7:38 PM EST (0038 GMT)

LOS ANGELES, California (Reuters) -- Customs officials opened his suitcase and a bird of paradise flew out but that was nothing compared to what they found in his pants -- a pair of pygmy monkeys.

Californian Robert Cusack has been sentenced to 57 days in jail for trying to smuggle the monkeys, a total of four exotic birds and 50 rare orchids into Los Angeles Airport after a trip to Thailand, officials said on Thursday.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Johns said Cusack had been undergoing a routine inspection when he arrived last June until an official opened his suitcase.

"It became non-routine when they opened his luggage and a bird of paradise took off flying in the terminal," Johns said.

Johns said the agents found three more birds in his bag, tucked into nylon stockings, along with 50 orchids of a threatened species.

Asked by agents if he had anything else to tell them, Cusack responded: "Yes, I've got monkeys in my pants."

Though Cusack told authorities that he was a concerned environmentalist who had purchased the animals in Jakarta, Indonesia and was taking them to a Costa Rica wildlife sanctuary. He was arrested on smuggling charges.

Johns said that because the monkeys are listed as a threatened and endangered species in the United States, they cannot be brought into the country without special permits that are typically granted to zoos and not individuals.

Cusack pleaded guilty to one count of smuggling earlier this week under an agreement with prosecutors that called for him to spend between six months and one year in prison and pay \$15,000 in restitution.

Johns said Cusack was given a lighter sentence in part because he is suffering from full-blown AIDS.



Pygmy monkey

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"I know this is an amusing story in ways but we are trying to gain deterrence," he said. "The average person under these circumstances is going to do more than a year in prison."

He said wildlife represents the world's second-largest black market and runs a wide gamut.

"It covers everything from people smuggling baby Bengal tigers into Hollywood because they think it's cool to own a big cat -- only to become disabused of that notion once the cat grows up -- to individuals in China purchasing bear gall bladders to use in traditional medicines," he said.

The two monkeys in this case, who were 3 and 4 months old when confiscated at the airport, are now at the Los Angeles Zoo, Johns said, while all four birds have died.

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