

Wildlife trafficking ring killed at least 118 eagles, prosecutors say

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This undated image from a court document provided by the U.S. Attorney for the District of Montana shows golden eagle feet recovered by law enforcement officers from a Washington state man's vehicle. Credit: Courtesy of the U.S. Attorney for the District of Montana via AP, File

A man helped kill at least 118 eagles to sell their feathers and body parts

on the black market as part of a long-running wildlife trafficking ring in the western U.S. that authorities allege killed thousands of birds, court filings show.

Travis John Branson is scheduled to be sentenced in [federal court](#) on Sept. 18 for his role in the trafficking ring that operated on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana and elsewhere.

Prosecutors say the Cusick, Washington man made between \$180,000 and \$360,000 from 2009 to 2021 selling bald and golden eagle parts illegally.

"It was not uncommon for Branson to take upwards of nine eagles at a time," prosecutors with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Montana wrote in a Tuesday court filing. "Not only did Branson kill eagles, but he hacked them into pieces to sell for future profits."

Eagle wings, tails, feathers and other parts are highly sought after by Native Americans who use them in ceremonies.

Prosecutors asked Judge Dana Christensen to sentence Branson to "significant imprisonment" and restitution totaling \$777,250. That includes \$5,000 for every dead eagle and \$1,750 for each of 107 hawks that investigators said he and his co-conspirators killed.

Branson's attorney disputed the prosecutors' claims and said they overstated the number of birds killed. The prosecution's allegation that as many as 3,600 birds died came from a co-defendant, Simon Paul, who remains at large. Branson's attorney suggested in [court filings](#) that the stated death toll has fueled public outcry over the case.

"It is notable that Mr. Paul himself went from a 3,600 to 1,000 bird estimate," Federal Defender Andrew Nelson wrote in a Tuesday filing,

referring to a statement Paul made to authorities in a March 13, 2021, traffic stop.

Nelson also said restitution for the hawks was not warranted since those killings were not included in last year's grand jury indictment. He said Branson had no prior criminal history and asked for a sentence of probation.



An adult golden eagle circles overhead in a remote area of Box Elder County, Utah, May 20, 2021. Credit: Spenser Heaps/The Deseret News via AP, File

Branson and Paul grew up in the Flathead Reservation area. Since their indictment, Paul has been hiding in Canada to evade justice, according

to Nelson.

Paul's defense attorney did not immediately respond to a telephone message seeking comment.

Investigators documented the minimum number of eagles and hawks killed through Branson's text messages, prosecutors said. Two years of his messages were not recovered, leading prosecutors to say the "full scope of Branson's killings is not captured."

Government officials have not revealed any other species of birds killed.

Bald and [golden eagles](#) are sacred to many Native Americans. U.S. law prohibits anyone without a permit from killing, wounding or disturbing eagles, or taking their nests or eggs.

Illegal shootings are a leading cause of golden eagle deaths, according to a recent [government study](#).

Members of federally recognized tribes can get feathers and other bird parts legally through from the [National Eagle Repository](#) in Colorado and non-government repositories in Oklahoma and Phoenix. There's a yearslong backlog of requests at the national repository.

Branson pleaded guilty in March to conspiracy, wildlife trafficking and two counts of trafficking federally protected bald and golden eagles. He faced a maximum of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine on the most serious charge, conspiracy. Under a plea deal, [prosecutors](#) said they would seek to dismiss additional trafficking charges.

Federal guidelines call for a sentence of roughly three to four years in prison for Branson, they said.

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