

Man Who Killed Hundreds of Eagles and Hawks Gets Nearly 4 Years in Prison

Travis John Branson was part of a conspiracy that killed 3,600 birds, prosecutors said. He also trafficked and sold bird parts on the black market.

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Law enforcement confiscated these golden eagle feet from Travis John Branson's vehicle in 2021. U.S. Attorney for the District of Montana, via Associated Press



By **Hank Sanders**

Oct. 31, 2024

A Washington man who killed hundreds of eagles and hawks in Montana that he later helped traffic and sell on the black market was sentenced to nearly four years in prison on Thursday, prosecutors said.

From 2015 to 2021, the man, Travis John Branson, 49, of Cusick, Wash., traveled to the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana to help kill hundreds of birds in a “killing spree,” the U.S. [Attorney’s Office](#) for the District of Montana said. In addition to his sentence of three years and 10 months in federal prison, Mr. Branson was ordered to pay \$777,250 in restitution, prosecutors said.

“Branson went on self-described ‘killing sprees’ for thousands of eagles and hawks,” Jesse Laslovich, the U.S. attorney for the District of Montana, said in a statement. Mr. Laslovich added that Mr. Branson “butchered” the birds “and sold the parts and feathers for profit on the black market.”

Mr. Branson, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy and trafficking [charges in March](#), killed at least 118 eagles and 107 hawks himself, according to investigators who traced the killings to Mr. Branson through text messages. In total, Mr. Branson worked with others to kill about 3,600 birds, prosecutors said.

In December, [prosecutors indicted](#) Mr. Branson and a co-conspirator, Simon Paul, who at one point lived in St. Ignatius, Mont. The two worked together to shoot, traffic and sell hundreds of birds, according to court records. Mr. Paul was also charged with conspiracy and wildlife trafficking charges in December but was a fugitive as of Thursday, the U.S. attorney’s office said.


Court records quoted text messages and cited PayPal transactions that showed that Mr. Branson had sent photos and received text messages and payment for a golden eagle tail feather set.

“Got that thang from Simon,” a buyer texted Mr. Branson, referring to feathers Mr. Paul had sent. “And the mirror feathers. Tnks.”

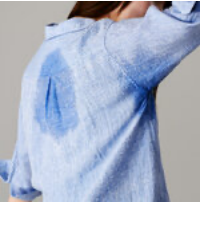
In March 2021, law enforcement officers stopped Mr. Branson and recovered from his vehicle a golden eagle’s severed feet connected to long, obsidian black talons and feathers. Mr. Branson and Mr. Paul also killed deer to lure eagles to the area, court records said.

From 2009 until 2021, Mr. Branson made between \$180,000 and \$360,000 by selling eagles’ feathers and parts on the black market, prosecutors said. How much Mr. Branson sold between 2009 until 2015 was not immediately clear.


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Andy Nelson, a lawyer for Mr. Branson, declined to comment on his client’s case on Friday. A lawyer for Mr. Paul did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment.

Bald eagles, which were among the birds Mr. Branson and others killed, are revered in the United States as a national symbol.

“We are going to feel the impacts of the Flathead Reservation’s raptor loss for years to come,” Mike Dolson, the chairman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, said in a statement. “Eagles are not only a treasured and important part of the Reservation’s ecosystem, but they also have a profound place in C.S.K.T. cultural and spiritual practices.”

Hank Sanders is a Times reporter and a member of the 2024-25 [Times Fellowship](#) class, a program for journalists early in their careers. [More about Hank Sanders](#)

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