

# Criminals are making a killing on birds that go for more than a song

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Goldfinches are not endangered in Ireland but trapping them is illegal  
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

The illegal trapping of goldfinches is on the rise, according to conservationists, with criminals eager to cash in.

Last month two men were convicted in Portlaoise district court after being found with 22 wild goldfinches, tubes of banned rat glue and other devices for trapping birds after a two-month investigation by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

Kieran Buckley, of the wildlife service, who led the investigation said that the birds had a price on their heads which was fuelling a criminal trade.

Goldfinches are an attractive bird with bright colours and striking black and yellow wings and the males have a pleasing song which makes them more desirable for trappers. They are not endangered in Ireland but are protected under wildlife law. Mr Buckley learnt how the two men carried out their illegal trade and applied for a search warrant. He found that chaffinches and linnets were of no interest and only goldfinches were kept, which can sell for up to €150, or €10 per gram, in some countries. The court was told that all of the goldfinches were stressed and kept in poor conditions. A square board with the remains of a dead goldfinch glued to its surface was presented as evidence.

Mr Buckley said that the birds could have been sold on for export to markets in Belgium or France, where a crackdown on trapping has made the bird more expensive, or on the fringes of legitimate markets in Ireland. Sometimes they are cross-bred with canaries to make a mule bird with a beautiful song.

“There is money involved because the goldfinch is a beautiful bird and highly desired,” Mr Buckley said. “The trappers know what they are doing is illegal and it is somewhat sophisticated in terms of selling them. When you catch someone with 22 goldfinches, it is not lovable Mr Greengrass in *Heartbeat* chancing his arm.”

Josepha Madigan, the heritage minister, welcome the conviction in Portlaoise and said: “The case should act as a deterrent to individuals engaged in these abhorrent illegal activities.”

Mr Buckley said it was unlikely to deter people who made at least €50 a bird in Ireland. “They’re beautiful little things but they have a price on their heads and that could be their downfall,” he said.

Niall Hatch, of Birdwatch Ireland, the conservation charity, said that illegal trapping appeared to be making a resurgence. Mr Hatch said: “It sounds something that you might read in an Enid Blyton or Dickens novel but it still persists in Ireland. Up until the 1950s it was seen as a respectable thing to do because so many people kept songbirds but it is cruel.”

It declined in the 1970s with the introduction of the Wildlife Act but many birds are sold after being bred in captivity. He said young breeding pairs fetch hundreds of euro. Mr Hatch added: “It is a cruel practice, rat glue is stuck on a perch or stick with birdfeed to attract them. They often pull off their feathers and skin from their feet trying to get free, or die from stress. This activity is not about love for birds. It is about commerce.”