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HCSO assists federal wildlife agents in two arrests

AVON PARK -- Members of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office Tactical Anti-Crime Team assisted four special agents of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in serving federal arrest warrants on two Avon Park residents Tuesday morning, April 25.

Vanessa Burgos, 33, and her husband, Robert Burgos, 43, were arrested at their home on East Canfield Street in Avon Park shortly after 7 a.m. Both were charged with smuggling prohibited wildlife into the United State, a felony with a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

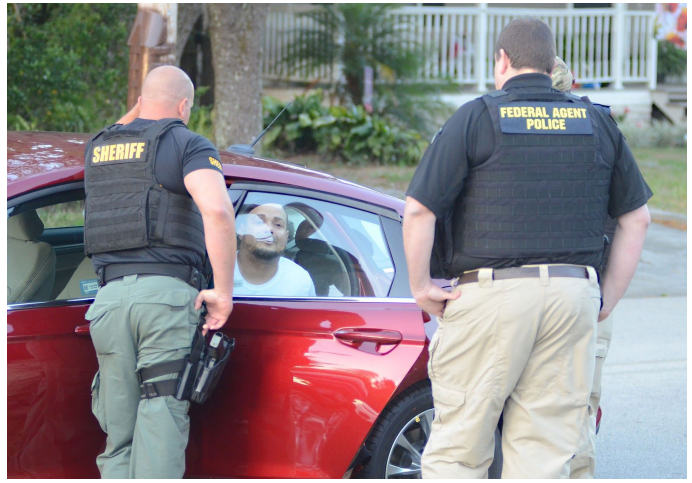
The couple are accused of bringing 12 Fischer Lovebirds into the country in 2015 under false paperwork that claimed they were Rosey Faced Lovebirds. Fischer Lovebirds, also called Eye-Ring Lovebirds, are illegal to bring into the country without a permit from the USFWS under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Rosey Faced Lovebirds, while very similar to Fischer Lovebirds in size and color, are not under the same restrictions. Fischer Lovebirds, found naturally in just a small part of eastern Africa, are classified as a "near threatened" species. Depending on color, breed, bloodline and other factors, Fischer Lovebirds can be worth up to nearly \$3,000, according to USFWS agent Thomas Loring, who was the lead investigator on the Burgos case.

Vanessa Burgos had claimed that she and her husband traveled to Spain to get Rosey Faced Lovebirds, but the USFWS investigation showed that the couple traveled from the US to Spain and then to Indonesia, where they purchased the Fischer Lovebirds for their company, Aviary La Familia Inc. The birds arrived at New York City's JFK International Airport on June 11, 2015.

An investigation of Vanessa Burgos' Facebook account turned up pictures of the couple in Indonesia, and Robert Burgos' Facebook account revealed a conversation with a person in Indonesia about changing the paperwork to indicate the birds were Rosey Faced Lovebirds imported from Spain.

Note: All arrests do not lead to convictions. Everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty in court.



Left photo: Vanessa Burgos is taken into custody by USFWS agents Monday morning.

Right photo: Robert Burgos is questioned by the HCSO TAC Team and USFWS agents after being placed under arrest.