Heathrow's wildlife trade team inspects a consignment of terrapins to ensure it contains no banned species. These pond sliders are legal.

THIS LITTLE TURTLE WENT TO MARKET...

Every year, 200 million live animals pass through Heathrow. Most are part of the legal worldwide trade, but many rare species of wildlife are not. JAMES FAIR meets the team looking for the lemur in your luggage.

Photos by CHARLIE BEST

IN A SMALL, nondescript office in the Animal Reception Centre at Heathrow Airport, CITES team officer Ann Ainslie points to some green bottles lined up on a shelf. She picks one up so that I can clearly see the contorted, ghostly body of a small, hooded reptile staring at me with vacant eyes. It's snake wine from Vietnam.

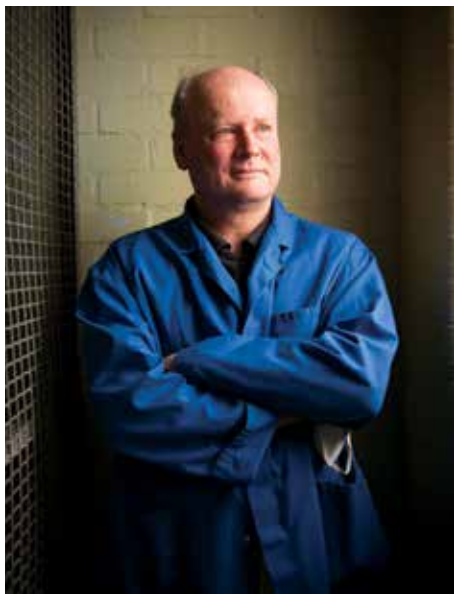
I check the label. "Usages: rheumatism, lumbago, sweat of limbs. Dosage: twice a day, each a small cup before meals."

"Do people believe this works?" I ask Ainslie, incredulously. "Yes," she replies. "But what they don't realise is that they are fuelling the trade in that snake species. These wines used to contain Asian cobras, but they were too heavily exploited, so now the manufacturers use keelback snakes."

Another bottle, labelled "Hippocampus elixir", contains a seahorse and a gecko. "Tonic for body, kidney, helpful for seminal fluid, good for health," read the instructions.

It is easy to be cynical about the supposed benefits of these sort of concoctions, of course, but there's another key point: importing some of them into Britain is illegal. Do you really want to purchase one of these potions, only for it to be confiscated when you pass through customs? More to the point, perhaps, do you really want to contribute to the unnecessary and possibly unsustainable deaths of wild animals?

Above: the numerous wildlife items seized by customs and sent to Charles Mackay (below) and his CITES team include the heads and skins of tigers, wolves and bears.



Many people, while travelling abroad, have probably been tempted to take home a wildlife curio that they believe to be no more than an innocent object of desire. But doing so can be a criminal offence.

For instance, it is illegal to bring back a piece of dead coral to any EU country, unless it is fossilised; the same would be true if you bought more than three conch shells, without the appropriate permits. Importing a pendant made from the tooth of a great white shark has been prohibited since controls on the trade in this species were put in place in 2004.

NOT-SO-INNOCENT MISTAKES

Trade regulations concerning wild animals deemed to be rare or of conservation concern are largely enforced through a global treaty called the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES (see box, opposite). At Heathrow a dedicated CITES team checks live animals and wildlife-related products detected by customs officers to make sure that they are not listed under CITES, or, if they are, that they are accompanied by the correct paperwork. If you have got a rare turtle hidden in your pocket, the team will be waiting.

'Souvenirs' that have been confiscated over the years include tiger heads, polar bear skins, tortoise shells, a pair of snakeskin boots

Clockwise from top left: CITES officer Ann Ainslie inspects the paperwork for a shipment of butterfly and moth pupae; a keelback snake in a bottle of snake wine from Vietnam; some of the wildlife potions and elixirs confiscated over the years.

> "I can see the ghostly body of a small reptile staring at me with vacant eyes – snake wine from Vietnam."

complete with snake heads and packs of tiger-bone plasters. CITES senior detection manager Charles Mackay is cynical: "Put one on and it heals everything," he says. "If you've got a severed arm, it will probably heal that, too."

When I showed our photos of the packs to Rob Parry-Jones, European director of wildlife trade monitoring group Traffic, he pointed out that – though the ingredients list may tell a different story – the Chinese characters on the packet indicate that the tiger image is used for brand recognition only. The plasters are, however, claimed to contain 'musk' from musk deer, which also have a CITES listing. Not everything is as it seems in the complex and murky world of wildlife trade.

HORNS AND HOODIA TABLETS

Mackay, a genial if slightly world-weary man in his mid-fifties, tells me that the British public is beginning to get the message that the trade in many wild animals and their derivative products is illegal. But there is still a huge problem on a global scale.

The explosion in demand for rhino horn has precipitated a poaching epidemic across many of Africa's rhino range states. In other parts of the world, according to Traffic, the demand for wild-caught tortoises is rampant. For example, 1,000 illegally traded Egyptian tortoises were seized by EU member states between 2002 and 2006 – a figure representing 13 per cent of the species' wild population.

Mackay and his team see less of this type of wildlife crime at Heathrow, but are coming across more rare plants – many imported in various forms by traditional Chinese medicine traders. Traffic in wild orchids and other exotic plants is highly lucrative, too.

Take the powdered extract of succulent plants in the *Hoodia* genus from southern Africa, which for centuries has been used by indigenous people as an appetite suppressant. There has been massive interest in exploiting the plant as a slimming aid. After searching the internet for just 10 seconds I found all manner of websites selling *Hoodia* tablets. In 2005, CITES realised that the trade was affecting wild populations of the plants, so they were listed. "We still encounter *Hoodia* products at Heathrow, but not in the quantities we did before," Mackay says.

CITES FACTS

What is CITES?
It is an international agreement between governments that sets out the rules for the trade in wild animals and plants.

Has every country signed up to it?
Not exactly – there are 175 signatories to the convention, compared with 192 members of the United Nations (a recognised benchmark for determining countries). North Korea is not a signatory. But most major trading nations are.

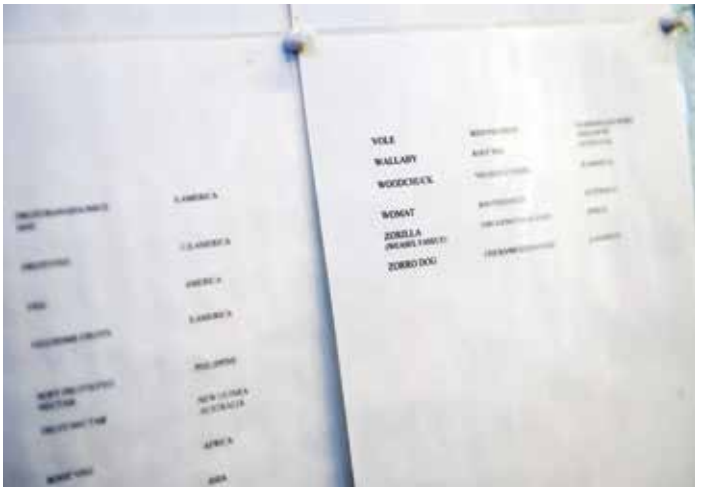
How does the agreement work?
Each species considered at risk is listed in one of three appendices. Appendix I is the strictest – anything here can be traded only in exceptional circumstances. Trade in the species on Appendix II is regulated to ensure that their wild populations are maintained; those listed on Appendix III are protected in at least one state, which has asked other member states to help control the trade.

How many species are covered?
Approximately 5,000 animals and nearly 29,000 plants. Many charismatic mammals such as tigers and all species of rhinoceros are on Appendix I.

Are any British species listed?
Yes. For example, the basking shark was first listed in 2000 due to the impact of the shark-fin trade. It is now on Appendix II.

Basking sharks enjoy protection under CITES.

Dan Burton/naturepl.com



Clockwise from left: this ring-tailed lemur came to Heathrow's Animal Reception Centre from a private collection in Northern Ireland; feeding charts for all of the species that have passed through the centre are pinned to the walls; a yellow-crowned Amazon parrot in the centre's care.

Then there is agarwood: resin-impregnated wood from trees in the genus *Aquilaria*, found all over the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia. It is used to make fragrant incense and perfumes prized in the Middle East, but is increasingly reaching the UK, too. "Suddenly, we are finding agarwood everywhere," Mackay says, "and it's only when you check a bottle's ingredients that you realise it contains a controlled product."

Aquilaria trees only produce this fragrant resin in response to a wound or fungal infection; since you cannot tell whether a tree is 'infected' without felling it, trees are often harvested for no reason. A 2003 CITES report confirmed that demand for agarwood has resulted in "unsustainable harvesting" and "local extinctions" all over Asia.

Websites of internet traders – many operating out of Malaysia or Thailand – claim that their agarwood is grown in plantations, where trees are deliberately infected. This may be true, but the trade is still regulated – if you bring home *Hoodia* or agarwood products, ensure they're accompanied by the correct paperwork or you could be breaking the law.

INGENIOUS DEPRAVITY

Though this work is, of course, important, it is the seizures of animals – particularly live, and occasionally dead, ones – that perhaps afford a greater insight into the lengths to which some people will go to turn a quick buck.

Mackay recounts the story of a white-tailed eagle that turned up at Heathrow *en route* from Russia. With the correct paperwork, it is legal to transfer this species for the purposes of captive breeding, but any trade in wild-caught individuals is forbidden. "When a vet examined the bird, he was concerned to find that its wings were singed. We think it was brought down using a flame-thrower," Mackay explains, with the look of someone who is no longer shocked by such ingenious depravity.

One Christmas Eve, Mackay and his team were alerted to a shipment from a supplier whom they knew to be involved in illegal activity. "We opened the container and, sure enough, it was packed to the gunnels with about 400 royal pythons from West Africa." This snake can be traded legally with the correct CITES paperwork, but in this case the accompanying documents incorrectly identified the shipment as a non-controlled species. "The supplier thought: 'It's Christmas Eve – there's nobody around and no one will notice,'" Mackay says.

"A vet found that the eagle's wings were singed. We think it was brought down using a flame-thrower."

These cases all involved shipments arriving in the UK, but Mackay occasionally has to deal with listed species *leaving* the country, too – proof that the wildlife 'trade' can stem from simple ignorance as well as commercial incentives. Mackay recalls the case of a woman and her son who had flown in from Israel and were travelling on to Paris. The boy was carrying a live turtle in a bottle.

"We went over, assuming it was a terrapin, and it turned out to be a sea turtle." The boy said that he had found the hatchling running across the beach and had taken it to save it from some feral cats. His new 'pet' was confiscated. This story has a happy ending: the turtle was returned to the wild, its chances of surviving to adulthood probably increased by its adventure.

TURTLE MAYHEM

Mackay invites me to visit Heathrow's Animal Reception Centre, where all of the live animals that pass through the airport are taken for inspection. On the morning of my tour I see a newly arrived shipment of 400 turtles and terrapins from North America – part of the legal pet trade (see box, p54).

THE RHINO HORN BUST

IN 2009, ANTIQUES dealer Donald Allison was stopped at Manchester Airport with a suspicious 'bronze' sculpture that he claimed to be taking to China as a favour for a friend. An X-ray revealed a package hidden within the sculpture, but it was not identified until the item was sent to Charles Mackay's CITES team, who found that the fake bronze contained two rhino horns.

But why was anyone smuggling rhino horns out of the UK? They could only have come from zoo animals, and zoo records revealed that two rhinos had died in the past three months. Perhaps one of these was the source?

The team took samples and dispatched them to a forensic lab in Edinburgh, where they were matched with a white rhino called Simba that had died at Colchester Zoo. To be absolutely certain, the team took the horns to the zoo – staff immediately recognised the telltale marks where Simba had rubbed himself against the wire of his enclosure over many years.

It turned out that the zoo had sent Simba's body to a slaughterhouse without considering how valuable his horns might be. "A guy there had lopped off the horns and sold them to a third person [who has never been identified], who then sold them to Allison," says Mackay. Just how valuable rhino horn is was revealed recently when a single one sold for £60,000 at auction. No wonder some people are tempted to try to pull scams like this.

X-ray & package: UK Border Agency

Top to bottom: the package after the fake bronze had been broken into; the X-ray image that revealed it; and Charles Mackay shows James Fair the confiscated rhino horn.

"The crocodile came here and lived in a paddling pool. Sometimes you think that the world's gone crazy."

"Live baby turtles," announces a label on the crate. "Rush! Will die if delayed. Keep out of the cold. Keep out of draughts."

Together with Ann Ainslie and the centre's assistant manager, Tristan Bradfield, we examine the crate to check that it contains no banned species and that the tiny hatchlings, their carapaces not much bigger than 50p pieces, have been packed in accordance with animal welfare regulations.

The travellers comprise musk turtles and yellow-bellied and Cumberland sliders (the last two are subspecies of the pond slider). Another race, the red-eared slider, was imported from the USA in its millions during the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* craze of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Satisfied that no laws have been broken, the team decide that the shipment can be allowed to proceed to its destination.

Bradfield explains that traders and airlines have become better at protecting the welfare of the animals in their care, mainly due to regulations brought in 10 years ago. Carriers can be prosecuted if a failure to comply with prescribed standards results in suffering. Even so, events outside everyone's control – if the heating in the aircraft's hold fails, for instance – can easily kill an entire shipment of animals.

The Animal Reception Centre also houses a motley collection of confiscated animals. On my visit I saw ring-tailed and brown lemurs, monitor lizards, various tortoises and a 90cm-long caiman.

"One time," recalls Mackay, "a child went into a telephone box not far away and found a sack with a crocodile inside. It came here and lived in a paddling pool. Sometimes you think that the world's gone crazy."

MENAGERIE AT THE AIRPORT

The reception centre keeps feeding charts for all of the species that have passed through its doors – rhinos, lions, tigers, honey badgers, uakari monkeys, dugongs, platypuses and mandrills are among the hundreds listed. "We seized two cheetahs once," says Mackay. "They were supposed to be joining a breeding programme in a zoo, but it didn't have any other cheetahs and both of the cats were male." He shrugs. "I think they ended up in Cornwall."

Above: reptiles such as tortoises, lizards and snakes are kept at the Animal Reception Centre until they can be rehomed, often in a zoo or wildlife park. Below: a tiger-bone plaster – in reality, it probably does not contain a tiger product, though it claims to use CITES-listed musk.

Usually, live animals are only passing through, but even if one stays for just a couple of hours, it needs feeding. "Tiger: raw meat," says the chart. "Tarsier: live food, pinkies." You don't need a dark sense of humour to work here – but it probably helps.

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

Back in Mackay's office, I ask him what qualities you need to be part of Heathrow's CITES team. "You don't have to be an animal lover," he replies, "but you do need an enquiring, open mind." A suspicious mind, I wonder? "Absolutely! And you have to be self-motivated: you often work on your own."

So anybody who thinks they have a talent for smelling rats – CITES-listed ones, at least – may consider this a worthwhile career. But the job doesn't only involve checking shipments passing through customs. CITES officers also carry out their own intelligence and build profiles of import and export companies.

"You can't investigate everything," Mackay points out, "or hold onto a shipment for a week to check it. It's a fast-moving environment. You must allow legitimate trade through – that's the whole point."

Before I leave, Mackay shows me some rhino horns seized in 2009 (see box, p53). Animals such as rhinos are potential goldmines, so I suspect that he is not being entirely flippant when he points out that he ought to frisk me, in case I have secreted away any of the wildlife products I have seen that day. Mackay knows just how valuable they are – and the lengths to which people will go to get them past his ever-twitching nose.

ON OUR PODCAST

Hear Charles Mackay discuss the wildlife trade at www.discoverwildlife.com/podcasts

THE TRADE IN REPTILES

Reptiles are among the pet trade's most valuable 'commodities'.

- IT IS ESTIMATED that 8–10 million reptiles are kept as pets in the UK – about the same number as dogs. The majority are snakes; lizards, tortoises and turtles are also popular.
- BETWEEN 1989 and 1997, 52 million red-eared terrapins were exported from the USA during the turtle-keeping fad sparked by the popularity of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cartoon.
- RED-EARED terrapins are now ranked among the world's top 100 invasive species. Though they have become established in ponds and lakes in the UK, they cannot breed here and so have a minimal impact.
- THE IMPORTATION of red-eared terrapins into Europe was banned in 1998, but other subspecies of Trachemys scripta can still be legally brought to the continent.
- ACCORDING TO the UK's Non-Native Species Secretariat, fears of these terrapins killing ducklings have never been realised (they are largely vegetarian).
- CHRIS NEWMAN of the Reptile and Exotic Pet Trade Association (REPTA) says that the number of turtles being imported into the UK has declined in recent years – from an estimated 200,000 a year to 44,000 in 2010.
- THE ORIGINS of reptiles sold as pets is often disputed. Animal Aid claims that they are largely caught in the wild; REPTA says that 80–85 per cent of them are captive-bred.
- CONTROVERSY surrounds the extent to which reptiles are suitable pets. The RSPCA says: "Reptiles often carry disease and are difficult to look after." The Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) has stated that keeping a small reptile can be easier than keeping a dog.

Reptiles coveted as pets include this monitor lizard…

…and all manner of turtles, terrapins and tortoises.

These Cope's alligator lizards were discovered in a video cassette intercepted by customs officers at Gatwick Airport.

Cassette: UK Border Agency