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ONLINE MARKETS FOR AFRICAN GREY PARROTS IN AFRICA

Evidence for a growing trade
for endangered birds as pets



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NOVEMBER 2021

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The World Parrot Trust (WPT) is an internationally recognized parrot conservation non-profit, founded in 1989, whose work covers 80 species of parrot in 43 countries. WPT's strategy aims to end harmful trade in parrots through a range of integrated actions, including working with communities to protect key populations, supporting law enforcement agencies in dismantling trafficking networks and care for seized parrots, and working with governments and corporations to ensure parrots get the protection they need.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the engineers at the Centre for Social Media, particularly Jack Pay, for their role in this study. Special thanks also go to Ana Paula Oliveira, Iris Oustinoff, Theo Clement, Cristiana Senni and Alisa Davies for their research assistance. Thanks also to Maribel Rodriguez and Naila Bhatri of Wildlife T.R.A.C.K, Kenya Wildlife Service, Nigerian National Environmental Standards and Regulation Agency, Nigerian CITES Management Authority for providing inputs into the laws and regulations related to the African grey parrot trade at the national level in various African countries.



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Market Monitoring and Friction Unit

The Market Monitoring and Friction Unit (MMFU) is a team within the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) dedicated to monitoring online markets of endangered wildlife species and working towards innovative, effective strategies for disrupting them. The Unit collaborates with civil society organizations and mandated authorities to shut down online illicit wildlife markets.

Websites on the open web – sites that people can access and use every day – host some of the biggest online markets for endangered species.¹ Evidence of wildlife crime is widespread across the internet and private platforms and law enforcement agencies are either unwilling or unable to mount an adequate response.²

This mirrors a broader challenge in combating cyber-enabled crime, namely that criminals are on the web, but the police are not. Reasons for this include responses to cybercrime being under-resourced, a lack of explicit mandates to address it and the absence of investigatory authorities. This situation manifests unequally around the world. While rich countries have the largest internet-using populations, they also have the most resources to combat on-line harms. The greatest challenges are found in developing countries with the least resources for regulating cyberspace or implementing strategies to combat cybercrime.

Within this broader crisis, the online trade in endangered species is easily overlooked, leaving a gap in the global response that allows wildlife traders to openly seek customers online, market goods, conduct transactions and stimulate demand. This contributes to the wider problem of the illicit wildlife trade, which can lead to extinction of species and heightened risk of outbreaks of zoonotic diseases; it also encourages corruption while enriching highly organized criminal networks.

The MMFU's investigation into the illicit online trade in endangered species grew from the recognition that innovative responses were needed to combat this type of crime. The Unit's aim is to make the open web a space where there are fit-for-purpose laws protecting us – and endangered species – and that they are respected in letter and spirit.

With trend reports such as this one, the MMFU intends to share its knowledge with the various communities responding to the harms caused by illicit online wildlife trade. It is hoped that such reports will help to scale the lessons learnt and multiply the number of effective interventions to rein in illicit wildlife markets.

Summary

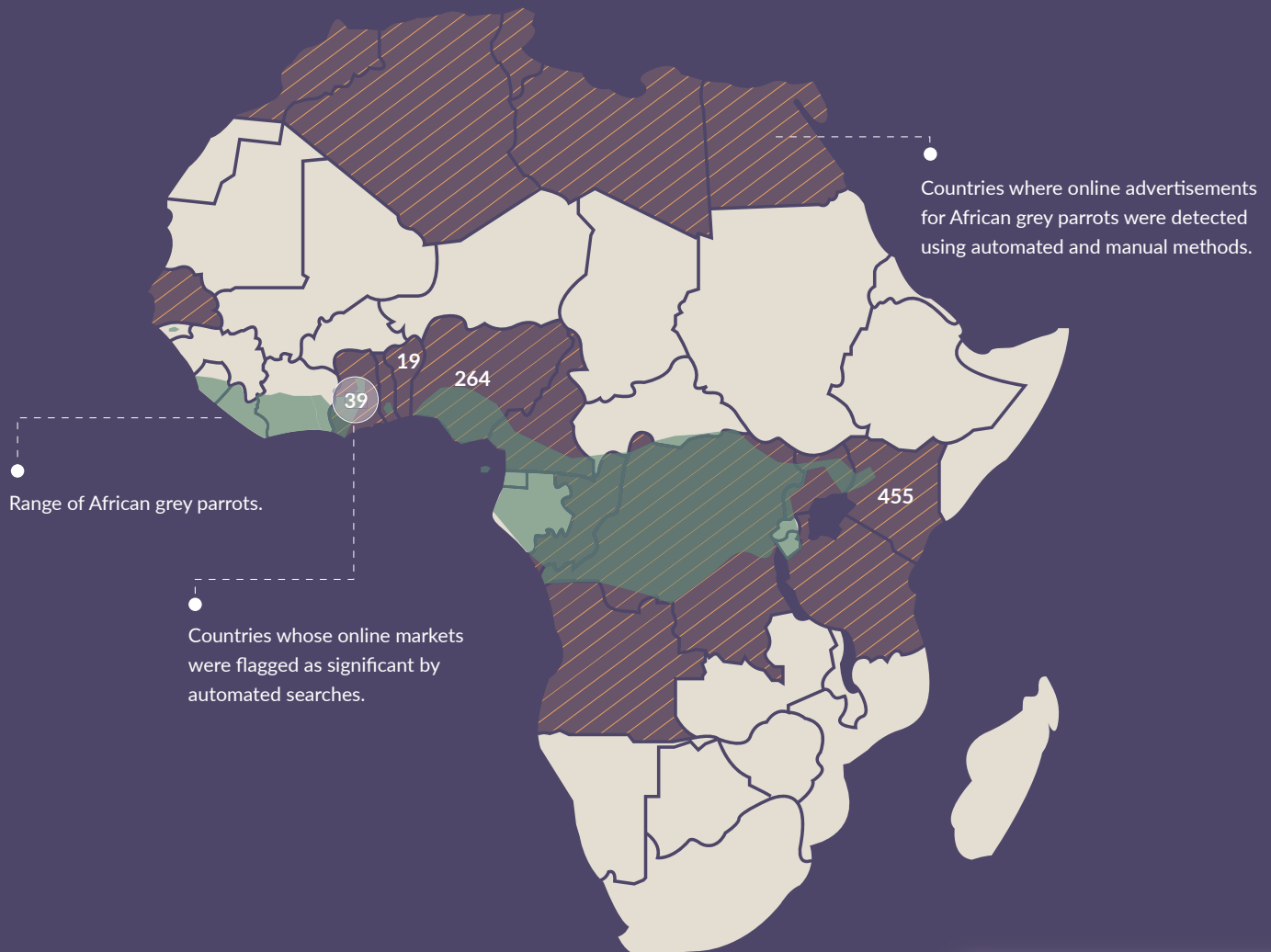
The research described in this trend report is a response to concerns raised by the World Parrot Trust (WPT) over the scale and scope of online markets for African grey parrots within range states in Africa. African Grey parrots are popular pets in many countries but international trade in wild African grey parrots is prohibited under multilateral agreements and national laws in some countries. However, preliminary investigations into advertisements for these birds on Nigerian internet platforms raised concern. Analysis of data from an ongoing project of the Market Monitoring and Friction Unit (MMFU), which focuses on monitoring the online marketing of live endangered birds, revealed an emerging online market for African grey parrots in several African countries. This report provides evidence that, despite high levels of local and international protection, live sales of this endangered species are being advertised on so-called 'classifieds platforms' across the continent, including in countries outside the species' natural range, and which represent some of the largest and most rapidly developing economies.

The study sought not only to highlight specific concerns about the trade in African grey parrots but also to elucidate the dynamics of its international and regional regulation so as to inform targeted engagement and potential action at a malleable stage in market development. A total of 782 online advertisements were identified over a six-month period (October 2020–March 2021), with almost all of them being on classifieds sites. The high number and frequency of advertisements in Kenya (455) and Nigeria (264) were concerning, and action is urgently needed to address the problem in both countries. Noticing advertisements in countries such as Benin, Ghana and Angola, even in low numbers, is an early-warning sign of nascent markets elsewhere.

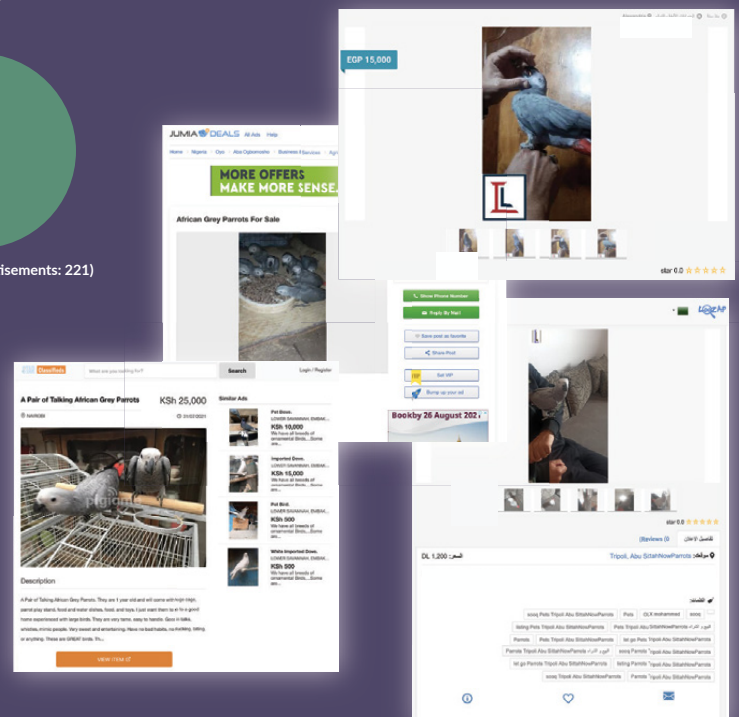
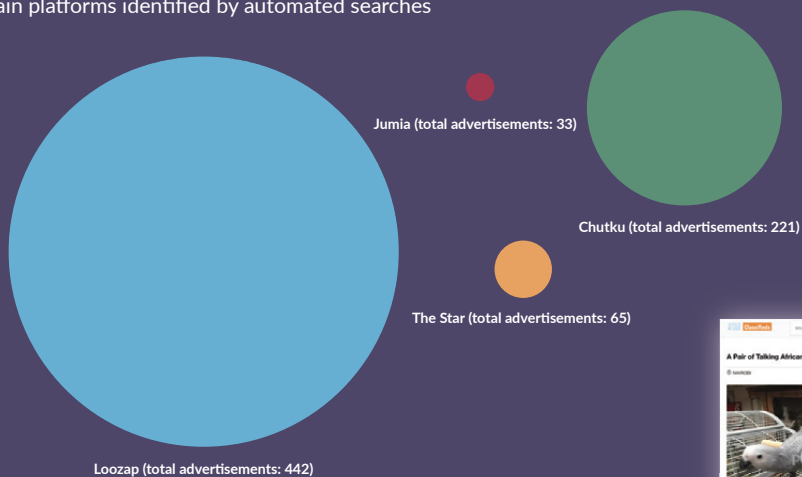
The analysis suggests a rising demand for the species as pets, which traders are seeking to meet. The pattern of these advertisements suggests illegal trade both across borders, contravening agreements under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and within countries, contravening national laws. National wildlife authorities are therefore urged to monitor the development of these markets and to take early action to shut down such marketing activities on the implicated platforms.

The MMFU will continue to monitor live-bird markets on the indexed web and social media sites to ensure sustained awareness about this problem and its effects, and engage with the platforms identified in the study to request action to curb the use of their service for this trade. More information about the online trade of endangered bird species will follow as the Unit's investigations evolve.

COUNTRIES WHERE ADVERTISING OF AFRICAN GREY PARROTS HAS BEEN DETECTED, AND THE MAIN HOSTING PLATFORMS



Main platforms identified by automated searches





INVESTIGATING A DEVELOPING PET MARKET

▲ Flock of African grey parrots, Central African Republic.
© AfriPics.com / Alamy Stock Photo

The capture of wild parrots to supply international pet markets is a major driver of population collapse for many threatened species. Pioneering work by the WPT has previously exposed the use of social media by wholesale traders to facilitate shipments of parrots to Pakistan, Turkey and other Asian countries by air freight.³ Based on findings regarding the trade in African grey parrots between 2014 and 2017, the study concluded that the expansion of social media presents both challenges and opportunities for regulating the trade of threatened species. Although the internet can facilitate the trade in birds by enabling sellers to connect with customers and stimulate demand, it also offers an opportunity to positively influence consumer behaviour and inform conservation communities.⁴

Markets for pets – and specifically exotic pets – have been seen to expand in response to growing urban middle-class populations, the decreasing cost and availability of equipment to house animals, and lenient legal frameworks. In the United States, the exotic pet trade boomed in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in large populations of invasive reptiles and birds now being seen in several cities.⁵ A similar trend is currently developing in a number of East Asian countries.⁶ In 2018, the GI-TOC published a case study on the online trade in Indonesian parrots as part of its research to understand online bird markets.⁷ The study revealed a new role for courier companies and the rise of online agents boosting the marketing ploys of online traders on social media sites.⁸

The African urban middle class is growing. Despite modest economic growth rates and levels of internet access at present, there is considerable potential for growth over the coming decade. This socio-economic shift should be seen as creating an inherent risk for online live-pet markets to develop across the continent. Furthermore, restrictions on exports of some African parrot species, which have come into effect in recent years, mean that traders in Africa have experienced decreasing access to international markets.

Keeping parrots and other birds is popular in many regions of the world, including in Europe, North America, Latin America and Asia. However, with the exception of South Africa, this practice has historically been relatively uncommon in Africa, despite several highly desirable parrot species being endemic to the continent. In fact, Africa is the global centre of the wild parrot trade: three of the four most traded species listed on the CITES appendices are endemic to the continent, including African

grey parrots.⁹ As increasing international protection has made it more difficult to export listed parrots from African countries, this has the likely effect of increasing local availability, drives down local prices and prompts traders to develop alternative markets closer to home. This cocktail of conditions sets the stage for further growth of this nascent, but already significant, market for pet birds and other wildlife in sub-Saharan Africa.

The research reported here contributes to understanding African countries both as range states supplying international markets and as places where demand can arise for domestic and intracontinental trade.¹⁰ The study is not only a response to specific concerns about populations of African grey parrots but also an attempt to understand the dynamics of the interconnected and complex developments in the trade of these birds, with a view to informing potential action and targeted engagement early on in market development.

The trade in African grey parrots in context

The impact of trade on wild populations

Two species of grey parrot from Africa are recognized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), namely Timneh parrots (*Psittacus timneh*) and the African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*).¹¹ However, both are currently recognized to be a single species (*Psittacus erithacus*) by CITES. The range of Timneh parrots spans several West African countries, from Guinea-Bissau to Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. The range of *P. erithacus* reaches southwards from the eastern parts of Côte d'Ivoire through Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Central African Republic and the northern parts of Angola, and then eastwards

through the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (see Figure 1). Populations in much of West Africa have collapsed and the most significant remaining populations are in the Congo basin. Although trapping for the live bird trade is thought to occur at some scale in all range states, the main centres are in the DRC, Congo, Cameroon and Nigeria.

A number of studies have revealed that these birds – once abundant in forests throughout West and central Africa – have almost disappeared from parts of their range.¹² In 2016, both species were categorized as endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.



FIGURE 1 Range of Timneh parrots (*Psittacus timneh*) and the African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*).

CITES and increasing restrictions on international trade

Globally, there is considerable demand for African grey parrots, which are coveted for their ability to mimic sounds and human speech. This trade in the past has involved large numbers of wild-sourced birds, with over 1.2 million cases reported in legal international trade since 1980.¹³ As populations declined, restrictions on exports from some range states came into effect and major markets banned imports. The volume of wild birds in international trade therefore declined, with captive-bred parrots, largely produced in South Africa from wild-sourced breeding stock, starting to dominate.

International trade in African grey parrots is regulated by the CITES convention. Between 2014 and 2016, more than 80 000 mean gross exports of African grey parrots, both captive bred and wild, were reported to CITES annually, mainly to countries in the Middle East and Asia. Although current legal trade – involving birds bred in CITES-registered captive-breeding operations for international markets – is not of this scale, thousands of parrots are still involved and the black-market demand for wild-caught birds remains. Wild parrots are used as ‘inputs’ in large-scale captive-breeding operations and traders may also pass off wild-caught birds as captive-bred

ones to consumers. The use of wild parrots also presents significant costs savings, as it is cheaper to buy from trappers or middlemen than to raise parrots in captivity, as they can take several years to reach reproductive maturity. Traders operating on the platforms analyzed in this study therefore have an opportunity to secure these cheap black-market inputs, as the platforms are in or near range states.

Illegal trade is of concern in two distinct submarkets in the trade of African grey parrots:

- International trade, involving the movement of wild birds across national borders, typically from range states (or neighbouring countries) to countries in the Middle East and Asia
- Domestic trade, involving sales of parrots within range states, often with links to intra-continental cross-border trade.

In January 2017, African grey parrots were transferred to Appendix I of CITES, meaning that international trade of wild-sourced parrots for commercial purposes was no longer permitted. Before this, the two species had been listed on Appendix II, which allowed for trade accompanied by CITES export permits

within quotas considered 'non-detrimental' to wild populations. Nevertheless, multiple compliance issues were noticed under Appendix II: export quotas were exceeded; permits were misused (e.g. the same permit was used to accompany multiple shipments); and trade in wild-sourced specimens was misreported under CITES source codes for 'bred in captivity'.¹⁴

Under CITES Appendix I, international trade in specimens bred in captivity is permitted only from operations registered with CITES.¹⁵ Approximately 200 such operations are currently registered in South Africa, one in Zambia, one in Singapore and one in the Philippines. Within Africa, no exports of captive-bred African grey parrots for commercial purposes are permitted outside of Zambia and South Africa, and the national CITES authorities in those countries are responsible for ensuring that exported parrots are bred in registered operations. These should be regularly inspected and the birds should be appropriately marked (typically with closed leg rings). Unless accompanied with necessary permits issued by these countries, any exports of *P. timneh* or *P. erithacus* have been illegal since 2017.



Leg rings are used to indicate parrots bred in CITES-regulated facilities, although the system may be open to abuse. © Surachet Shotivaranon / Alamy Stock Photo

Relevance of domestic legal frameworks for online advertisements

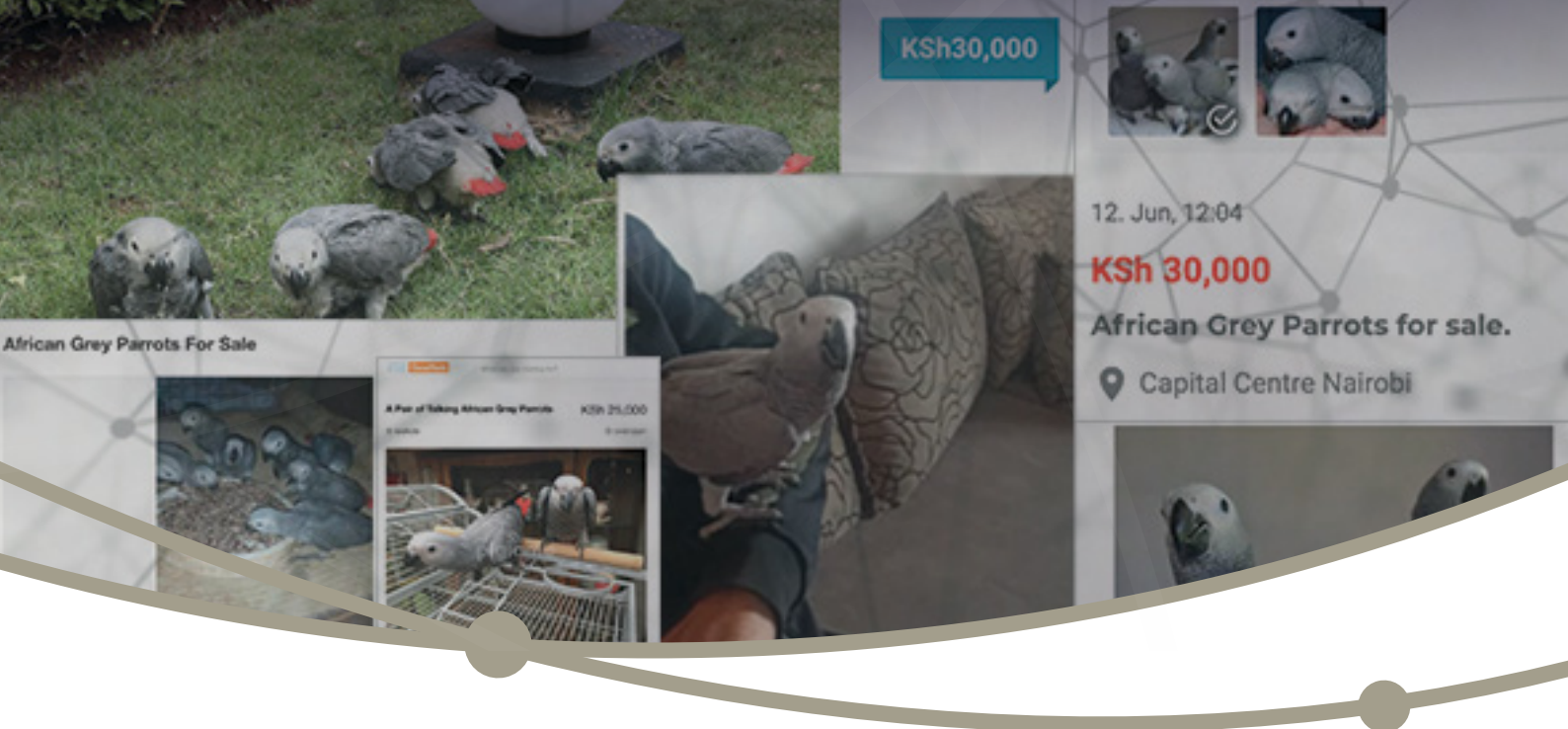
As African grey parrots are both endemic and endangered, strict laws preventing their trapping, breeding or sale exist in several range states, although domestic legal frameworks differ from country to country. In countries where it may be legal to breed or trade birds domestically, permission has to be obtained from the national conservation authorities to do so legally.

In countries where the legal framework allows some legitimate trade, it can be difficult to determine whether laws are broken based on an advertisement alone. A sale or advertisement is generally considered suspicious if birds are sold without leg rings, which are fitted by breeders when birds are young. This is not an entirely tamper-proof marking system, as larger-sized or filed-down rings can be forced over the feet of fully grown birds. However, the presence of closed leg rings is generally a good indicator that birds are captive bred, particularly for lower-value specimens.

In some countries, individually marked rings are provided by conservation authorities or avicultural industry bodies. However, bags of leg rings from a number of countries are advertised for sale in wildlife trading groups on social media, suggesting the system may be open to abuse. Sellers generally also do not post photographs of the birds, with advertisements usually containing very little text beyond inducements to buy (e.g. 'talking parrot, can sing for your home'). In some cases, as noted in WPT's monitoring report, international origins were mentioned, suggesting illegal cross-border trade.¹⁶

Advertisements are therefore useful as a starting point for further investigation by wildlife authorities or the police. They also highlight the role of e-commerce platforms in facilitating the trade.

Advertisements usually contain very little information beyond inducements to buy.



▲
Online advertisements
on Loozap, Jumia and
Chutku.

MONITORING ONLINE ADVERTISEMENTS FOR AFRICAN GREY PARROTS

Methodology

For this study, automated searches for advertisements were conducted over a six-month period (October 2020–March 2021). These were run in multiple languages (English, French and Portuguese) using a combination of keywords derived from machine-learning processes. The list of countries that became the focus of these automated searches developed from an initial set of ‘best guesses’, which was subsequently expanded through trial and error. The original search focused on advertisements originating in Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, countries considered to have relatively developed online markets. Subsequent automated searches also yielded results from another four countries (Angola, Benin, Uganda and Ghana). Results from six countries were therefore included in the final analysis, namely Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Benin, Angola and Uganda (see Figure 2).¹⁷ This automated process was then followed by a manual search, which found advertisements in 10 other African countries. The results discussed in the report seek to provide a window into an evolving phenomenon using both automated and manual processes. They contain the limitations and biases of both, but still provide valuable insights into the use of the internet to stimulate and meet demand for these endangered parrots as pets.

We found 782 advertisements originating in the six countries that were subject to automated searches, all advertising birds for the local market. However, as explained later, it is likely that sellers or their suppliers are engaging in illegal cross-border trade and transactions that are illegal under national laws in several of these jurisdictions.

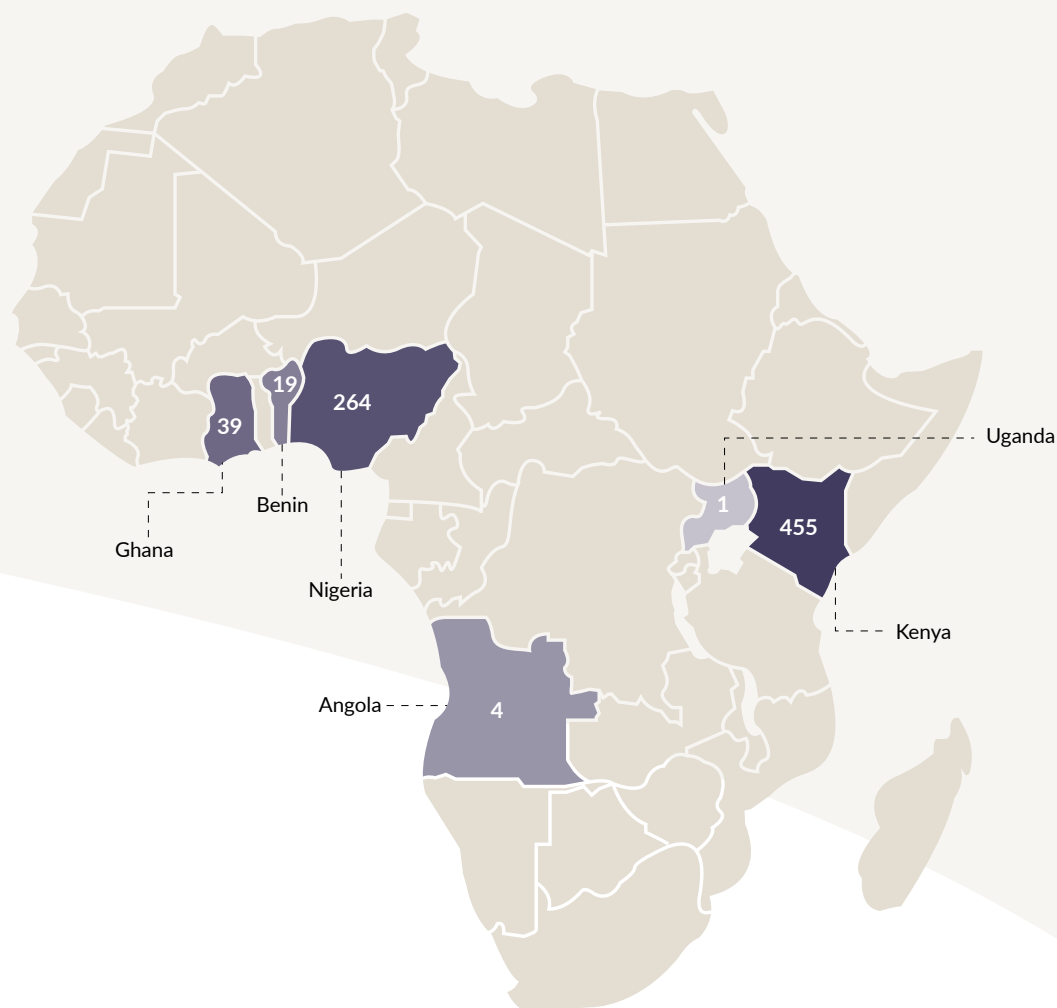


FIGURE 2 Countries where advertisements for grey parrots were detected using automated searches, by severity.

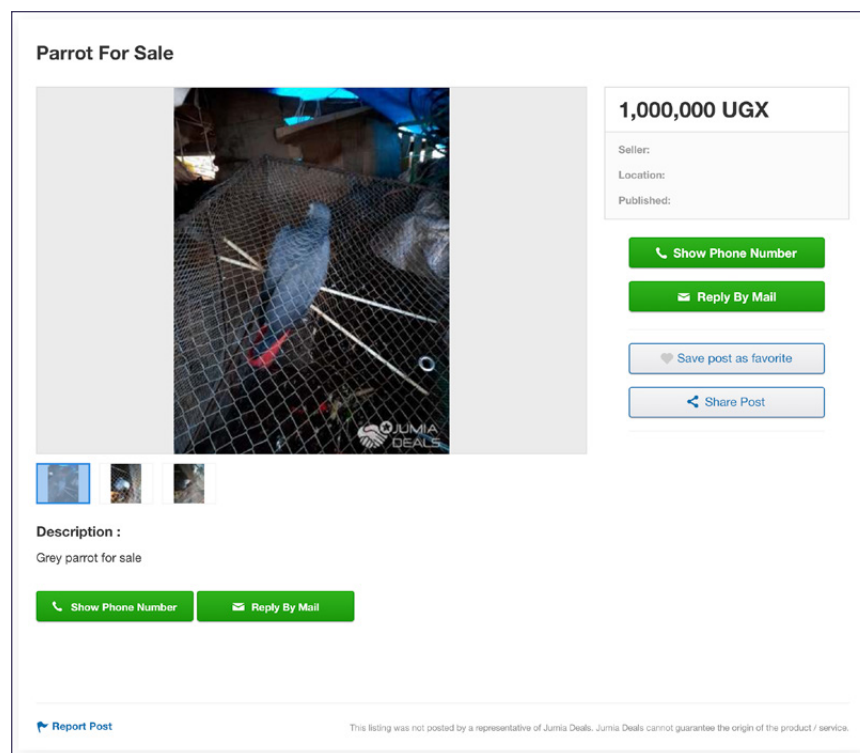
Interpretation of advertisements

To contextualize the results, it is important to consider what can be inferred from the advertisements found during the online searches:

- Each advertisement should be viewed as a seller's attempt to attract the attention of buyers looking for pet birds in general or African grey parrots specifically. In most cases, the intention is to make a sale.
- The buyer's attention is assumed to be specific (a demand for a specific pet, an African grey parrot or a parrot) owing to the nature of the platforms involved: most users browsing online do not scroll through daily listings on a classified site aimlessly. Classifieds sites are usually visited with the intent of searching for specific items.
- The advertised prices of the items give some indication of the sale price, although it can be assumed to be subject to some negotiation. (Advertisements where sellers classified the cost as 'free' generally noted in the text that the parrots are, in fact, for sale at a 'reasonable' price.)
- The advertisements do not give information about how many birds are actually sold, or how many are held in stock. It should therefore not be assumed that advertisements correlate predictably with the number of birds for sale.
- A seller profile or user name should not be assumed to correlate to one individual. In some cases, the same phone numbers were associated with multiple seller profiles, and a single profile may also be used by groups or businesses.

The findings

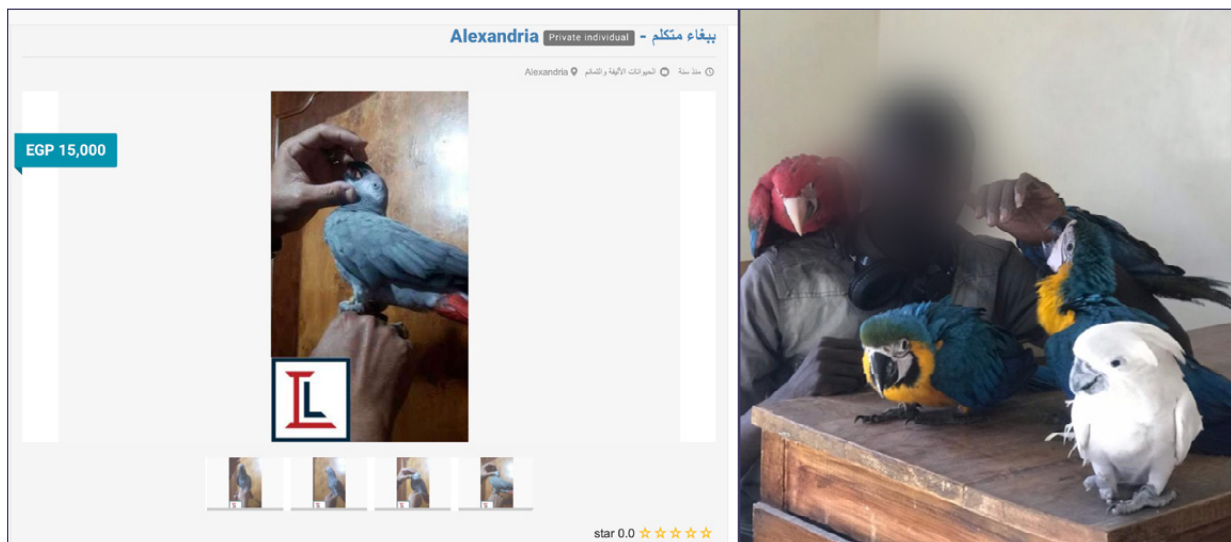
The number and characteristics of advertisements suggest significant online marketing of parrots for the pet trade in Kenya and Nigeria. Considerably smaller, but not irrelevant, potential markets also exist in Ghana and Benin, and at least 12 other countries.



Advertisement found on the Jumia site. © Jumia

COUNTRY	NUMBER	MAIN PLATFORM	PRICES	LOCATION
Kenya	455	Loozap, Star	US\$290-350	Centres in Nairobi and Mombasa, but dispersed locations
Nigeria	264	Chutku, Jumia	US\$65-188 (mostly)	Lagos and Abuja
Ghana	39	Loozap	US\$172-258	Accra
Benin	19	Loozap	'free' but text solicits cash offers/ US\$368	Cotonou, Abomey-Calavi and Porto Nuovo
Angola	4	Jumia	US\$60-100	Luanda
Uganda	1	Jumia	US\$276	Banda
Total	782			

FIGURE 3 Advertisements detected for African grey parrots using automated searches, by country, with platform, price and location.



Advertisements found on the Loozap site. © Loozap

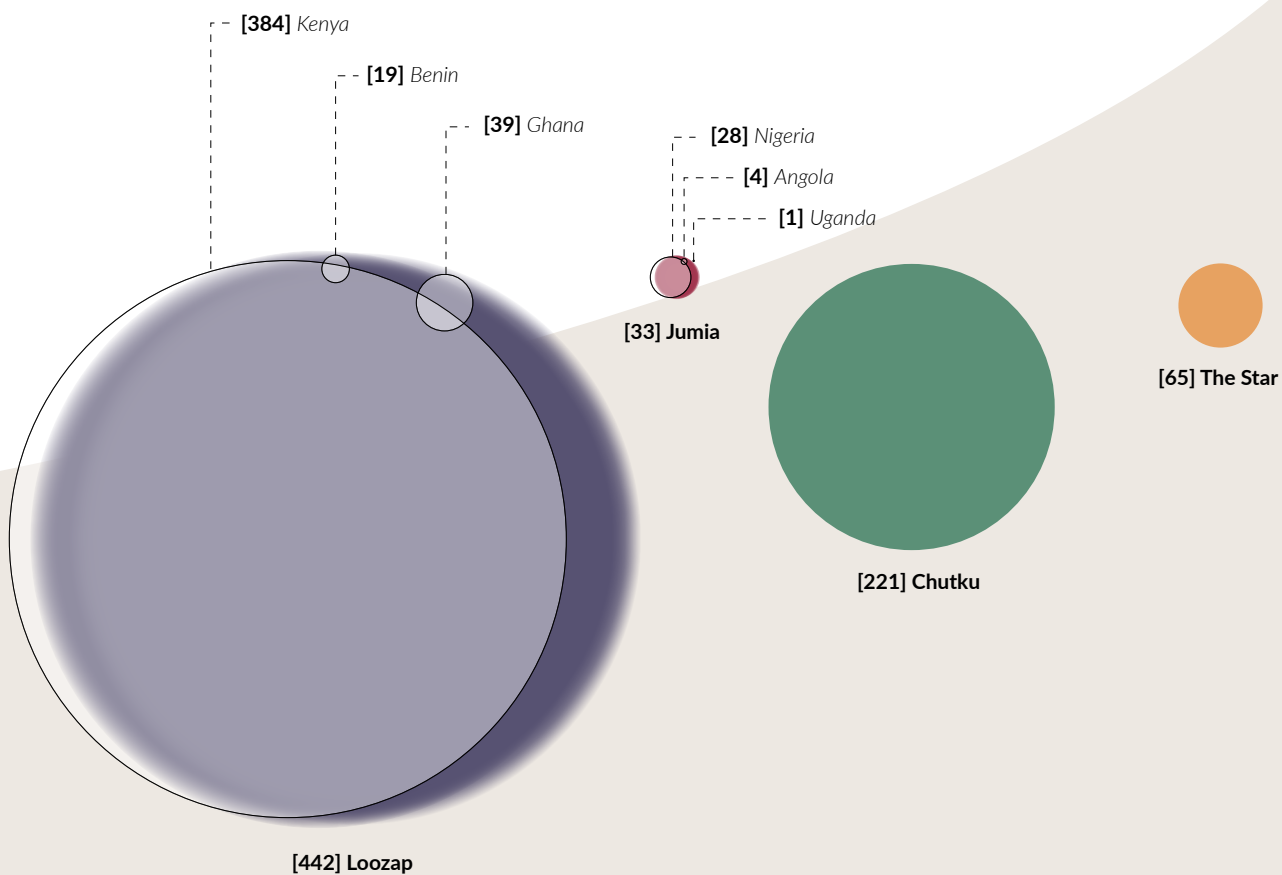


FIGURE 4 Main platforms hosting advertisements and numbers detected using automated searches.

NOTE: Additional platforms hosting significant volumes of advertisements were also detected using manual searches (see 'The wider scope of the market').

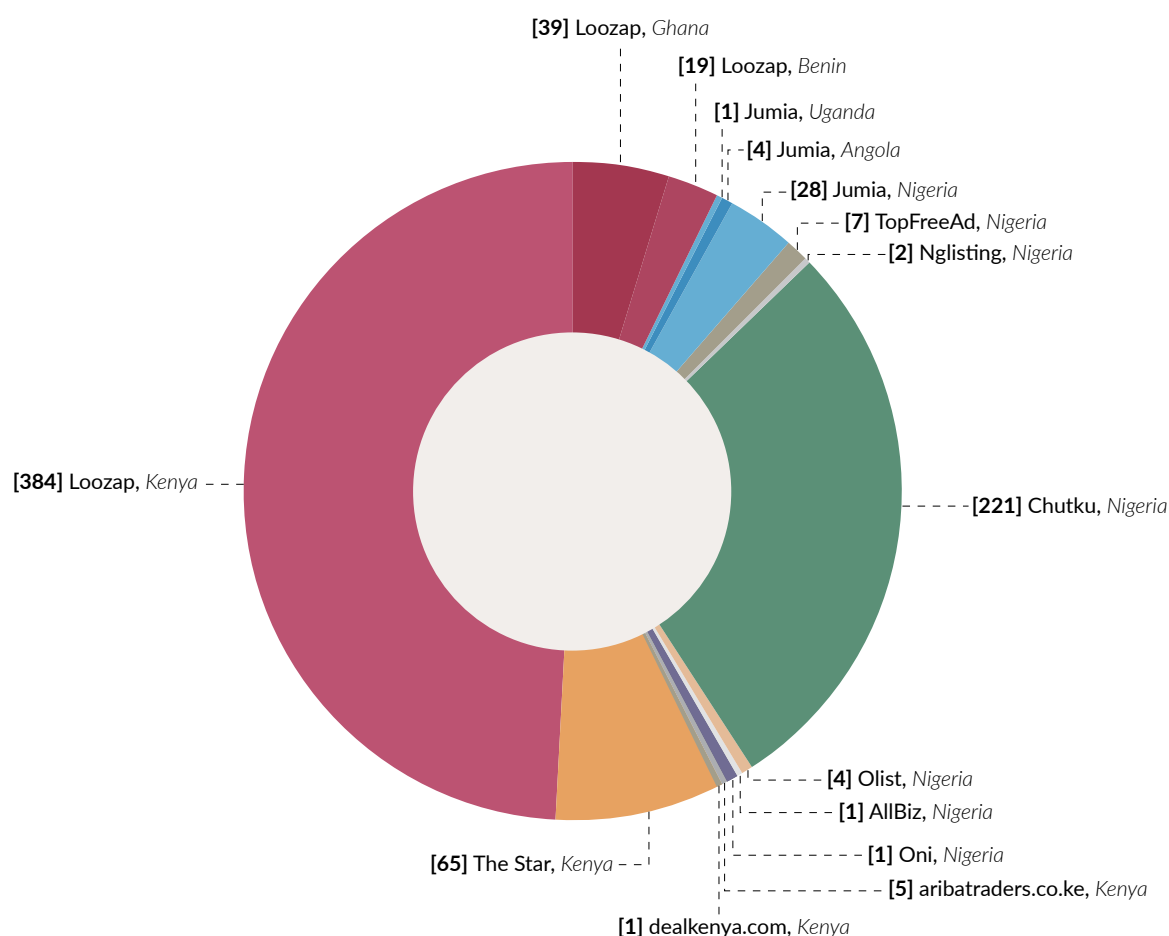


FIGURE 5 Advertisements detected on main platforms by automated searches, broken down by country.

Advertisements from Kenya

Most advertisements originated in Kenya (455) and were concentrated across two platforms, namely Loozap.ke and star.co.ke. However, star.co.ke is an aggregator of other classifieds sites in Kenya and some duplication was noticed between platforms. Although duplications were counted only once, they are insightful of the marketing reach these online platforms offer sellers.

The advertisements suggested a well-established market. There were young birds for sale, birds of one or two years old, and older birds, which looked to be genuine advertisements for re-homing of pets

(e.g. 'Goes by the name of Riley and prefers to be handled by females'). Advertisements were posted by numerous sellers and also by pet stores, and seller locations were diverse, although concentrated in Nairobi and Mombasa. Advertised prices were towards the higher end of the price range seen across the sample (\$290–\$350 per bird).

It is also notable that several advertisements were not for animals but for 'accessories' or services, such as 'parrot medication', cages and parrot training. These advertisements were not included in the final tally, but are indicative of a growing market for pet birds.

Advertisements from Nigeria

The 264 advertisements identified from Nigeria were also concentrated on two platforms, namely Chutku.ng (221) and Jumia.ng (28). Five other sites accounted for the handful of remaining posts (see Figure 5). Apart from a few advertisements from Abuja, sellers were mostly from Lagos and surrounds. Advertised prices ranged from \$31 to \$188, although the prices towards the lower end of the range (\$31–\$35) were found only on one site (TopFreeAd – seven advertisements). Advertised prices on Chutku and Jumia ranged from \$65 to \$188. By comparison, the WPT’s study found that prices in physical markets in Nigeria ranged from \$15 for juveniles in Bayelsa State to \$155 for a ‘talking’ adult bird in Kaduna State.¹⁸ Higher prices noticed in online advertisements may be attributed to their being subject to negotiation, or that richer buyers are being targeted.

The platform Jiji was also identified as a notable centre for trade in grey parrots in Nigeria, judging by the considerable number of advertisements being hosted there. However, the site was not included in this study owing to constraints to the automated detection of adverts. We would nonetheless like to emphasize that advertisements for African grey parrots appear frequently on this site.

Advertisements from other countries

Advertisements from Ghana (39) and Benin (19) suggested a population of five or six sellers in each country. The advertisements were found exclusively on the local branches of classifieds platform Loozap. Seller locations were concentrated in the capitals of these countries

(Accra and Cotonou), although Abomey-Calavi and Porto Novo were also listed as locations in Benin.

In Ghana, some of the advertisements were from a pet store claiming to sell ‘many exotic birds, tamed and untamed’. This language suggests that the store is selling wild-caught, possibly endangered species. In Benin, many advertisements noted parrots as being offered for ‘free’, but the text indicated that cash offers were expected. One seller offered ‘parrots of a minimum of two years of age’ for \$368, including the cage and vaccinations.

The platform Jumia was also used in the few advertisements detected in Angola (4) and Uganda (1).¹⁹

Other characteristics of advertisements

Very few sellers used their own, original images in their advertisements. The use of stock photos or photos that had clearly been copied from other sites initially raised concerns that all advertisements were fake. However, further testing suggested that such photos are used because they present an ‘ideal’ image, which sellers might assume is more attractive to potential buyers (in addition to their own stock of birds perhaps not being in good condition).

Advertisements were found to be largely aimed at a local audience and did not typically indicate international trade; importing birds for local trade would likely be a CITES violation. If birds are bred locally, their sale may or may not be illegal, depending on local laws. In some countries the ownership and sale of African grey parrots (and other wildlife listed on CITES Appendix I) are permissible with the relevant permits. It is notable, however, that we did not find any advertisements containing detailed information about permits; at most, ‘vaccinations’ were mentioned.



▲
A stall selling wild
birds in Bamako, Mali.
© Adrian Arbib / Alamy
Stock Photo

THE SCOPE OF THE MARKET FOR GREY PARROTS IN AFRICA

Market trends in Kenya

African grey parrots are legally protected in Kenya, and legal trade can be conducted only under permit (known as a Certificate for Legal Possession) from the Kenyan Wildlife Service. This certificate is issued only when the acquisition of the parrot has been verified to be from a legal source, and it is attached to the owner, not the parrot. The permit is therefore not transferable and another owner must apply anew. The Kenyan Wildlife Service has confirmed that 12 people currently hold a valid ownership permit (for a total of 18 birds).²⁰

The wildlife authority also confirmed that there are currently no licensed and CITES-registered breeders for this species in the country. Legal importation into Kenya is permissible, using CITES export and import permits, either from the small number of countries where grey parrots are bred in CITES-registered captive-breeding operations or as personal effects. These are mainly imported by foreign diplomats and by Kenyan citizens from licensed breeders in South Africa. In recent years very few of these permits have been issued.²¹ Given the lack of legal breeding facilities and the limited legal imports, all the eggs, chicks and most adult birds advertised for sale online likely derive from illegal trade.

Market trends in Nigeria

In Nigeria, African grey parrots are protected under the Endangered Species (Control of International Trade and Traffic) Amendment Act (2016). The act prohibits all trade in wild-sourced African grey parrots, while trade in captive-bred specimens is permitted only if the seller is registered with the Federal Ministry of Environment. However, no persons are currently registered and therefore no commercial sales of African grey parrots are permitted.²² Any transaction concluded in response to one of the posted advertisements would therefore be illegal. In addition, Nigerian law has recently been updated to explicitly incorporate a prohibition on advertising African grey parrots.²³ This means that by hosting the advertisement, the platforms are providing a service that facilitates a criminal act.

Recent investigations by the WPT into the trade in African grey parrots in physical markets in Nigeria revealed that wild parrots are sourced either within Nigeria, where small wild populations persist in remote areas, or from neighbouring countries, mainly Cameroon (13 of 14 wholesale traders interviewed had sourced parrots from Cameroon). Some of these traders reported selling more than 50 birds a month, depending on the time of year. It appears likely that a significant number of parrots offered for sale online may similarly have been sourced from neighbouring countries, thereby violating CITES restrictions on trade. This is supported by statements in some advertisements such as: 'If you want a good African grey parrot that talks quickly and very intelligent don't miss this. [T]hey were brought in from [C]ameroon. [B]irds are all in good health.'

Ground-truthing through interactions with sellers

To ground-truth the characteristics of the Kenyan market inferred from advertisements, MMFU researchers created fake profiles and engaged sellers in conversations about their wares after the initial six-month observation period. They enquired about price, documentation and origin of the birds, and ended the conversation by saying they were unsure and would probably not buy. Ten sellers were contacted in April 2021 using the messaging system of the platforms, WhatsApp or by telephone. All but one seller appeared to be Kenyan. Only one claimed to have the statutory permit for his parrot; nine others dismissed such documentation as unnecessary. Questions about licences often caused the conversation to peter out.

One of the sellers said in a WhatsApp message: 'It's not a must to av a license if you not keeping them for sale. I av other birds n sina [I don't have a license, in Swahili slang] to some of them [and] still do sell now [in] my 4 yr ... Avoid people's advice kindly if anyone question u about the bird consult me.' Like this seller, several claimed to have a steady supply of birds.

For transport within Kenya, sellers mentioned that birds would be shipped to the customer using

local courier services upon completion of the transaction.

Although Kenya is a range state, it is unlikely that the parrots offered by Kenyan sellers are trapped locally. Firstly, the remaining African grey population in Kenya is extremely small, with the species restricted to Kakamega Forest, a small forest fragment where the population was estimated to be fewer than 10 pairs in 1996.²⁴ The largest groups observed during surveys in 2007 and 2008 were seven birds.²⁵ No trapping incidents have been noted in this forest and the population is simply too small to supply a market of the size the Kenyan market appears to be.

Secondly, it is possible – but unlikely – that sellers could be breeding birds; the economics of hand-rearing parrots are generally not favourable. It is usually far more profitable – and requires considerably less effort – to buy imported birds and sell them on. Claims made by three of the ten sellers that their birds were imported (one from the DRC and two from Ghana) support this assumption. If true, and if other sellers are also importing these parrots, it points to a clear CITES violation.

The wider scope of the market

The manual monitoring component of this study identified results in other African countries, which were not targets in the automated process, in May 2021. This strategy yielded up to five results from each of the following countries: Tanzania, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Togo, Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt. Most of these were found on branches of Loozap but advertisements were also identified on zoomtanzania.com, kugli.com,

businessrays.com, sn.coinafrique.com, marocannonces.com, tnaannonces.com and marocannonces.com. In Nigeria, the platform jiji.ng was identified as a particularly prominent platform, hosting large numbers of advertisements. Positive search results from South Africa were disregarded because of the country's historic and large captive-breeding industry, which rendered distinguishing any illegal trade in wild birds difficult.



FIGURE 6 Countries where there have been detected advertisements using both automated and manual searches for African grey parrots from October 2020 to May 2021.

NOTE: South Africa was not searched due to its large captive-bred domestic market.

A consumer market supplied by global trade routes?

The initial study alarmingly also yielded 'bycatch' results on Loozap – advertisements for other species of endangered parrots, many of them listed in CITES Appendix I or II (see Figure 7).

Although these results were not for the species targeted by the search strings used in the core study, they were not deleted, but instead sorted according to species and CITES listing. They include parrots that are endemic to South America, South East Asia, Australia, West Africa and southern Africa. Species in this bycatch list include Senegal parrots (*Poicephalus senegalus*), brown-necked parrots (*Poicephalus fuscicollis*) and Meyer's parrots (*Poicephalus meyeri*), which, like African greys, are endemic in some African countries. Their presence in online searches is of particular concern, as they are likely to have been trapped in the wild.

Of the total bycatch sample, 69% were advertisements listed by the same seller, seemingly a business (out of a total of 13 sellers). Six seller profiles were linked to Appendix I listings. Some of these advertisements listed one species in the title, but displayed a picture of another. These were often advertisements from sellers who had several listings, for various species.



Crested cockatoos rescued from illegal trading. © Suryanto/Anadolu Agency/ via Getty images





















CITES LISTING	DETECTIONS	SPECIES MENTIONED	
Appendix 1	21 ads	 Hyacinth macaw  Scarlet macaw	 Yellow-headed Amazon parrot
Appendix 2	46 ads	 Blue and gold macaw  Green-winged macaw  Quaker parrot  Hawk-headed parrot  Umbrella cockatoo  Alexandrine parakeet  Eclectus parrot	 Meyer's parrot  'Galah' cockatoo  Mitchell's cockatoo  Solomon Island Eclectus parrot  Senegal parrot  Brown-necked parrot
Not enough information about genus to determine	22 ads	 'Amazon parrot'  'macaw'	 'rosella parrot'  'cockatoo'

FIGURE 7 Summary of CITES-listed 'bycatch' on Loozap.ke.

Only 17 records of registered imports are listed on the CITES database for the period 2011–2021. These include 11 blue-and-gold macaws, three green-winged

macaws, one umbrella cockatoo and two Eclectus parrots. No birds were registered to have been imported since 2019 (see Figure 8).

SPECIES	2014	2016	2017	2018	2019
Blue and gold macaw <i>(Ara ararauna)</i> 		2	4		5
Green-winged macaw <i>(Ara chloropterus)</i> 					3
Umbrella cockatoo <i>(Cacatua alba)</i> 				1	
Eclectus parrot <i>(Eclectus roratus)</i> 	2				

FIGURE 8 Registered imports listed on the CITES database for the period 2011–2021.

As none of these species were directly searched for, the list should be seen merely as illustrative of the diversity of endangered birds for sale in Kenya. This raises the question of a potentially expanding local pet

market, in which traders are, at the least, cultivating a market for parrots from all over the world. Further investigation is needed to understand the origin of these birds in the Kenyan market.



▲
Illegally transported
African grey parrots.
© Shutterstock

THE ROLE OF PLATFORMS IN RESPONDING TO THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES

Our survey pointed to extensive activity on four platforms: Loozap, Jumia, Chutku and *The Star*'s classifieds site (star.co.ke). Other platforms, which could not be surveyed as part of this study, also carried notable numbers of advertisements (e.g. jiji.ng). *The Star* newspaper is specific to Kenya, and Chutku operates only in Nigeria, but Loozap and Jumia have sites catering for several African countries. For readers' context, the reach and existing policy frameworks of the four main platforms identified in this study are briefly described in the appendix.

Addressing the use of platforms for illicit trade goes deeper than platforms simply enforcing their own terms and conditions. As policies generally seem to deal superficially with the rules that govern the trade in wildlife, sites should make it clear that these advertisements may be violations of international and national laws, and become more actively involved in screening advertisements. This would involve actively detecting illicit material instead of simply waiting for it be flagged, and rapid removal of material once flagged. Platforms should also educate their staff, and even their customers, to prevent the sites from being used for illicit trade. In addition, platforms have an ethical responsibility to respond in ways that do not compromise

police investigations and which pass on information relevant to conservation activities to the mandated authorities. This means, for example, that material should not simply be deleted.

Hosting advertisements for exotic pets can heighten the risks of species extinction and zoonotic disease. In addition, advertising the content on the same platforms where people can find used cars, sporting equipment and building supplies also contributes to normalizing the practice of keeping exotic pets such as parrots in societies where this behaviour has not been historically prevalent. These advertisements not only help to connect traders with consumers but may also be serving to develop a market where none existed previously. With grey parrots having recently been included in Appendix I of CITES, trappers and traders of these birds may be actively seeking to develop new markets, and online platforms may be used to facilitate this development.

The trends identified in this report have been shared with the platforms concerned. They have been encouraged to adopt best practices, as identified by the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online, as well as the MMFU's recommendations for how platforms can support a safe, ethical and ecologically responsible internet.

Sites should make it clear that advertisements may be violations of international and national laws.

APPENDIX OF PLATFORMS HOSTING ADVERTISEMENTS

The platforms described here are all based in Africa and are understood to be competing to secure a more domestic or regional market, which some of the larger global platforms such as Amazon and Alibaba have shown limited interest in. However, these platforms differ widely with regard to size, reach and business model. Although some of them do explicitly state their policies on trade in illicit commodities, most are not addressing this problem, as evidenced by material being available for months, and sometimes years, on these sites. We contacted all these platforms to inform them we had detected this content on their site(s), and received replies from Jumia and Loozap. Our engagement with them is ongoing.



Jumia

Founded in 2012, Jumia is a Germany-incorporated company headquartered in Berlin but entirely focused on the African market. Jumia is currently active in 13 countries across the continent. The Nigerian website (<https://www.jumia.com.ng/>) is the flagship service of the company and is one of the most visited websites in the country.

With 1 billion visits in 2019 and 110 000 sellers active on the platform (according to corporate data), Jumia is by far the largest African e-commerce platform. The website has a 'report' function, which allows users to flag content that seems offensive or illegal, or breach Jumia's Terms and Conditions.

Jumia has been keen to engage and respond to the GI-TOC following the findings of the report. Jumia has taken action against existing advertisements and, on the basis of keywords supplied by the WPT, introduced protocols to its compliance mechanism in order to prevent future advertisements. Jumia has also started an internal review of its wildlife trade policy, the details of which are not known at this stage.



Chutku is a Nigerian website where items for sale can be posted. Initially set up as a customer-to-customer site, Chutku is also used by professional traders, businesspeople and service providers. There are no indications of the website's traffic in open source, but corporate data suggests that the platform currently hosts about 380 000 different advertisements, including for animals and pets. Advertisements for many species of parrots, such as red-headed lovebirds (*Agapornis pullarius*) and Senegal parrots (*Poicephalus senegalus*), were detected and

these are assumed to almost certainly be trapped in the wild.²⁶

Chutku has neither a 'report' function nor specific anti-wildlife-trafficking policies, although the rules for posting advertisements specify that advertising 'animals for fight/race/any unauthorized usage' and 'animal skin or body parts that violate local laws or are in the endangered species list' is forbidden. Yet advertisements for endangered species' furs and skins are easy to find.²⁷ The posting rules for advertisements of birds and animals, reproduced in full here, read as follows: 'In birds and animals, we only allow the ones the law permits. Birds and animals used for fighting or racing is strictly prohibited.'



Loozap is a business-to-business/customer-to-customer e-commerce platform that operates in all African countries, most often directly, but in some cases through local proxies for small countries and markets (e.g. Burundi). Its reach varies, but according to company data its best performing branches are the ones in Egypt, Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal. Loozap is owned by Loozap Media, a company whose ownership and corporate structure are not displayed on any website operated by Loozap or its branches.

All Loozap sites use the same page template, which has likely been machine translated. None of them provide information on their terms of use, their point of contact for complaints, or legal notices specific to that jurisdiction. No references to local legislation suggest that most websites operated by Loozap are contravening local laws.

Registering with Loozap directs the user to a page of terms and conditions for Listings360 rather than

Loozap. These include points on illegal content, of which the following apply to this study:

- In the category 'Pets', advertising exotic and endangered animals, such as monkeys, parrots, etc, is prohibited (the list is not exhaustive).
- In the category 'Buy and Sell', advertising furs and skins, turtle shells, fenders and wood is prohibited (the list is not exhaustive).

Listings360 claims it will remove 'any advertisement that is prohibited by law, placed in the wrong category/city or that contains vulgar/abusive content'. Users are further 'encouraged to flag ads that break our terms and conditions and actively report all scams to Listings360'. An MMFU analyst sent reports using this mechanism, but received no response. Several weeks later, the offending advertisement remained accessible on the site.



The Star

The Star is a Kenyan daily newspaper, whose website hosts a classified section that aggregates advertisements from almost all major classifieds sites in the country. It differs from the other platforms described here in that it is not an exclusive e-commerce site, but merely works as a search engine for other platforms. Various advertisements for exotic pets can be found here, with links leading to third-party websites.

The terms of use on this site include a section regarding the trade in pets and animals, but the phrasing suggests that the issue is considered from an animal-control perspective (the text includes a link to the Nairobi City Council's animal control regulations). As *The Star* does not host advertisements directly on its website, it does not seem to have a policy about illicit trade and activities.



Jiji

Jiji is an online classifieds marketplace where almost anything can be bought or sold in Nigeria. It was registered with the Nigerian Corporate Affairs Commission in October 2016 and the platform has since expanded to include Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya.²⁸ This marketplace has become primarily mobile based, and so also caters for users who do not own computers.²⁹

Following its expansion, Jiji has 3 million active advertisements across Africa and allows users to buy or sell anything from real estate to fashion and electronics.³⁰ It has a user base of 400 million people across the countries where it operates and over 5 million application installs in Nigeria alone.³¹ Users can register via Google, Facebook, an email address or cellphone number, and have to agree to the terms of use. Users who opt to register using an email address must also provide a phone number.

The platform does not mention its policy on the trade in endangered species in any of its operating counties, and simply prohibits posting announcements that encourage or portray the illegal use of weapons and dangerous objects, or facilitates the purchase of firearms and ammunition. Products or services advertised must be located in Nigeria and must be legally permitted.

NOTES

- 1 Simone Haysom, In search of cyber-enabled disruption: Insights from the Digital Dangers project, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/in-search-of-cyber-enabled-disruption/>.
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- 6 Rachel Bale, 2017, Young collectors, traders help fuel a boom in ultra-exotic pets, *National Geographic*, 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/wildlife-watch-exotic-pets-popular-china/>; Indah Budiani and Febri Raharningrum, Illegal online trade in Indonesian parrots, GI-TOC, 2018, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/indonesian_parrots/.
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- 9 Rowan O Martin, The wild bird trade and African parrots: Past, current and future challenges, *Ostrich*, 89, 2, 139–143, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2989/00306525.2017.1397787>.
- 10 This has been considered only in Algeria previously. A study in 2020 investigated the trade of grey parrots in Algeria, both online and offline, which highlighted the role of online platforms in the trade and the need to introduce and develop policies that would tackle the advertisement of animals online. Sadek Atoussi et al., The trade in the endangered African grey parrot *Psittacus erithacus* and the Timneh parrot *Psittacus timneh* in Algeria, *Ostrich*, 91, 3, 214–220.
- 11 The two species are collectively referred to as African grey parrots in this report. Timneh parrots (*Psittacus timneh*) were formerly considered a subspecies of *Psittacus erithacus*, but are now regarded as an own species.
- 12 Daniel C Lopes, et al, Combining local knowledge and field surveys to determine status and threats to Timneh Parrots *Psittacus timneh* in Guinea-Bissau, *Bird Conservation International*, 29, 3, 400–412, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959270918000321>; Nico Reinhold, et al. Confirmation of strong declines of grey parrots in the Korup region, Cameroon, between 2002 and 2016. *African Journal of Ecology*, 59, 2, 561–565, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aje.12837>.
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- 14 See Rowan O Martin, The wild bird trade and African parrots: Past, current and future challenges, *Ostrich*, 89, 2, 139–143, <https://doi.org/10.2989/00306525.2017.1397787>; Rowan O Martin, Grey areas: temporal and geographical dynamics of international trade of Grey and Timneh Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus* and *P. timneh*) under CITES, *Emu*, 118, 1, 113–125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01584197.2017.1369854>.
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- dures and exceptions as under Kenyan laws. However, there is one licensed facility in Uganda breeding parrots for sale, but it is not registered with CITES.
- 20 Personal communication with Margaret Mosse, Chief Licensing Officer, Kenyan Wildlife Service, 3 June 2021.
 - 21 In 2017, three import permits were issued for five birds (as personal effects). In 2018, three permits were issued for four birds.
 - 22 Personal communication with Timothy D John, Head of Wildlife and CITES Management Division, Federal Ministry of Environment of Nigeria, 28 May 2020.
 - 23 This information derives from an assessment of 'Legal rules applicable to the trade of African grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) in Nigeria', conducted by Wildlife Track on behalf of the World Parrot Trust.
 - 24 DA Zimmerman, DA Turner and DJ Pearson, *Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania*, Russel Friedman, 1996.
 - 25 I Madindou and R Mulwa R, Conservation aspects of the African Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus* in Kakamega Forest, Kenya, unpublished report, World Parrot Trust, 2008.
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