

animal  
wellness  
action



May 10, 2024

Sheriff Mike Jolley  
Harris County Sheriff's Office  
9825 GA-116  
Hamilton, GA 31811

Dear Sheriff Jolley,

We write to bring to your attention a disturbing and likely illegal event where perhaps thousands of dehydrated, starved pigeons will be imported into your county only to be shot, with many of them maimed or wounded and abandoned. This staged spectacle, which bears no resemblance to responsible hunting, is taking place starting today on the property of Dr. John Waldrop in Cataula, Georgia. Upon first-hand information and belief, the precise location of this event is 2100 Hamilton Mulberry Grove Road.

These birds will not be killed for consumption or management, but simply for use as living targets. We believe that the mistreatment of the animals, the wanton waste and cruelty of shooting these animals for no compelling purposes, the abandonment of grievously wounded animals, and the use of lead ammunition that speckles the abandoned carcasses that will poison bald eagles and other native and protected species amounts to violations of state law. We believe that a prompt and thorough investigation by your office is warranted. If these crimes can be documented, it is warranted to bring charges against those involved for violating Georgia's anti-cruelty law.

During this mass shooting event live pigeons are launched into the air from spring-loaded boxes, only to be shot with lead-based ammunition. The majority of the birds barely rise a few feet before they are blasted, and those that fall on the field still alive will have their heads twisted off or otherwise killed.

Some of the wounded birds will escape the shooting fields and fall some distance away and off the grounds of the range, whether in thickets or in the water. There will likely be no attempt to retrieve these birds, who are then vulnerable to predators. Their ready availability as prey translates into an immediate lead poisoning issue for bald eagles, other raptors, and other predators. These animals are particularly susceptible to lead poisoning, as documented in a [2022 study](#) in Science that examined 1,210 bald and golden eagles across 38 states and found that nearly half of them had "bone lead concentrations above thresholds for chronic poisoning." This amounts to a knowing and illegal taking of eagles under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, which we realize is a federal statute; we share that information for your understanding only.

## **GA Code § 16-12-4 (2022) Cruelty to Animals**

There are several provisions of the state's animal cruelty laws that may be applicable related to the wounding and abandonment of pigeons during its mass shooting events. Most notably, GA Code § 16-12-4(b) states:

A person commits the offense of cruelty to animals when he or she:

1. Causes physical pain, suffering, or death to an animal by any unjustifiable act or omission; or

Subsection (d) also provides:

A person commits the offense of aggravated cruelty to animals when he or she:

1. Maliciously causes the death of an animal;

There is no doubt that the participants in this pigeon shooting event are causing the pain, suffering, and killing of many hundreds of animals in violation of these express prohibitions over the weekend.

While subsection (g) provides an exemption for “conduct which is otherwise permitted under the laws of this state or of the United States, including, but not limited to, agricultural, animal husbandry, butchering, food processing, marketing, scientific research, training, medical, zoological, exhibition, competitive, hunting, trapping, fishing, wildlife management, or pest control practices or the authorized practice of veterinary medicine,” we do not believe that any of these exemptions apply to the activities in question here. GA Code § 27-1-2 defines hunting to mean the “pursuing, shooting, killing, taking, or capturing **wildlife**.” Pigeons are not considered to be wildlife in the United States. And the term “competitive” is not defined, but the likely use of that term is for events, such as dog or horse racing, in which animals compete, not ones in which humans compete to see how many animals they can kill.

### **Waldrop has been indicted by the federal government for wildlife crimes**

Dr. Waldrop, an orthopedic surgeon and part owner of the Hughston Clinic and Jack Hughston Memorial Hospital, is currently under federal indictment for trafficking in protected birds.

He and another man, Toney Jones, were charged in October last year with conspiracy, smuggling, Endangered Species Act (ESA) violations, and money laundering. Prosecutors believe the pair imported protected birds and thousands of eggs into the United States between 2016 and 2020.

Prosecutors allege Jones and Waldrop bought the birds and eggs online. Some of the species discovered were canary, dipper duck, eagle, falcon, grouse, gull, hawk, heron, hoopoe, kestrel, kinglet, lapwing, murre, owl, parrot, pochard, rail, teal, snipe, spoonbill, vulture and woodpecker.

“In addition to the conspiracy, the indictment charges Waldrop and Jones with importing three packages containing birds and eggs in 2020 through John F. Kennedy International Airport in violation of smuggling and ESA laws,” the Department of Justice said in a press release. “The final count of the indictment alleges that Waldrop and Jones conspired to commit money laundering by sending funds out of the United States to finance bird smuggling. The indictment also seeks forfeiture of 779 bird mounts and 2,594 eggs allegedly illegally imported into the United States.”

“This investigation highlights the immense pressure illegal trade places on imperiled bird species around the world and the Service’s commitment to upholding laws and treaties that prevent the exploitation of foreign and domestic species,” said Assistant Director Edward Grace of the USFWS Office of Law Enforcement. “We hope this indictment sends a clear message that our investigators will work tirelessly to seek justice for poached wildlife.”

If convicted, the men could face up to 40 years in prison. A status conference on the case is scheduled for May 30.

The Waldrop pigeon shooting event is not only an affront to decency, it amounts to a collection of violations of federal and state law. This comes on top of the federal laws he’s been indicted for violating. We urge you, as the top law enforcement officer Harris County, to interdict this pigeon-shooting operation and launch an investigation into this form of organized animal cruelty. This sort of event should never again be permitted to occur in Harris County.

Sincerely,



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Scott Edwards  
General Counsel  
Animal Wellness Action