

Bird poachers thrive des

By CHRISTIAN HUGGETT
Regional correspondent

NAGOYA — On Dec. 3, 1989, Toshio Murai, 48, stepped on a rusty nail while searching for bird poachers' nets in the hills of Toyota, Aichi Prefecture. Under the leaves he found 10 planks with nails protruding up. In front of the planks was a trip wire.

The trap was allegedly set by bird poachers to hurt snooping members of the Wild Bird Society of Japan, to which Murai was a member.

The incident sparked the biggest antipoaching campaign in the 35,000 member society's 50-year history. In one year, 390,000 signatures were collected for a petition.

Last Sept. 15, a law was passed making it illegal to buy, sell, own or use mist nets. Conviction carries a fine of up to ¥300,000 or a six-month prison term.

However, poaching with mist nets is expected to continue despite the new law because up to ¥2 million can be earned monthly from the activity.

An estimated 3 million to 4 million birds are netted annually in Japan. Approximately 70 percent are dusky thrush, which are sold as food to "robatayaki" (grilled food) restaurants, for about ¥2,000 apiece. The finches, jays, owls, sparrow hawks poached end up being discarded.

Poaching usually runs from October to December. During

this time, thrush flock from their summer nesting grounds in Siberia to winter in the mountains of Gifu, Aichi, Fukui and Toyama prefectures.

Poachers begin preparations every spring by felling strips of trees on mountain sides on public and private land. When autumn comes, they hang the mist nets vertically on bamboo poles up to three nets high with up to 50 nets at one location.

They use caged thrush or tape recordings of the birds' calls to lure flocks into the nets. Using this method, poachers can catch up to 400 birds at one time. The birds die of strangulation or exhaustion or have their necks broken by the poacher.

The polyester nets measure 1.5 meter by 4 meters and used to sell for ¥1,000. The biggest producer was a fishing net manufacturer in the city of Toyohashi, Aichi Prefecture. The company is now prohibited from manufacturing the nets or selling them domestically or abroad.

It is legal meanwhile to import thrush. Because of the new law, the number imported from Spain is expected to increase. The birds are caught in mist nets that were exported from Japan before the new law went into effect.

Because world supplies of mist nets will last another five years, it will take another

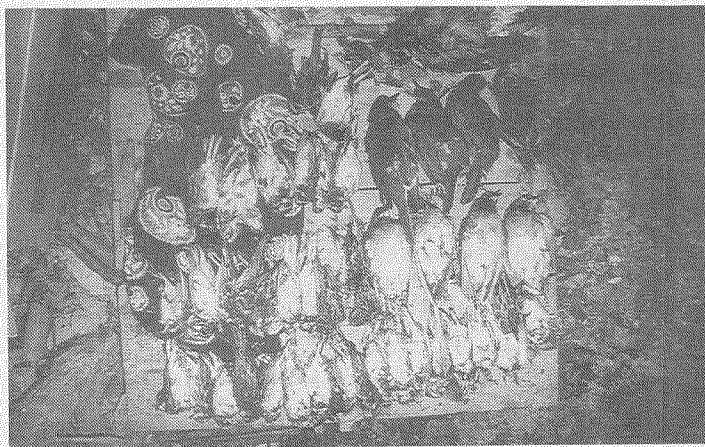


five years for the effects of the new law to be felt, according to society spokeswoman Kimiko Kawamura. In the meantime, the price of thrush at robatayaki restaurants is expected to increase from its present ¥5,000.

In the past, Wild Bird Society members in the city of Gifu received threatening phone calls warning them to "watch their step" or threatening their families.

"Because of the new law, the number of ordinary people poaching thrush will decrease but the number of yakuza poachers will probably increase," says Kawamura. "Some society members have already quit because of the increased danger."

"We will still be going up into the mountains to look for the nets, but we will leave the enforcement of the new law to the police," Kawamura said. "Our most important task now is providing information to the public. We must inform people that they can no longer own mist nets or use them to catch birds."



CAGED THRUSH of Gifu Prefecture Wild Bird Society of Japan (top), su way from Siberia, prized, so ot

WILD BIRD SOCIETY