

The killing agency: Wildlife Services' brutal methods leave a trail of animal death

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

The day began with a drive across the desert, checking the snares he had placed in the sagebrush to catch coyotes.

Gary Strader, an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, stepped out of his truck near a ravine in Nevada and found something he hadn't intended to kill.

There, strangled in a neck snare, was one of the most majestic birds in America, a federally protected golden eagle.

"I called my supervisor and said, 'I just caught a golden eagle and it's dead,' " said Strader. "He said, 'Did anybody see it?' I said, 'Geez, I don't think so.'

"He said, 'If you think nobody saw it, go get a shovel and bury it and don't say nothing to anybody.' "

"That bothered me," said Strader, whose job was terminated in 2009. "It wasn't right."

Strader's employer, a branch of the federal Department of Agriculture called Wildlife Services, has long specialized in killing animals that are deemed a threat to agriculture, the public and – more recently – the environment.

Since 2000, its employees have killed nearly a million coyotes, mostly in the West. They have destroyed millions of birds, from nonnative starlings to migratory shorebirds, along with a colorful menagerie of more than 300 other species, including black bears, beavers, porcupines, river otters, mountain lions and wolves.

And in most cases, they have officially revealed little or no detail about where the creatures were killed, or why. But a Bee investigation has found the agency's practices to be indiscriminate, at odds with science, inhumane and sometimes illegal.

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